

# Findings



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Preservation of the Family

## Evaluating Charter Schools

### *Assessing the Charter School Evaluation Report*

By Stephen Daniels



In June of 1996, the North Carolina General Assembly enacted the Charter School Education Opportunity Act.<sup>1</sup> This legislation came at a time when lawmakers faced an increased

demand for choice in education. Thus, one prong of education reform in North Carolina took shape in the form of charter schools—a compromise reached by the legislature in place of more revolutionary approaches like school vouchers.

Charter schools are public schools that are freed from many of the regulations placed upon traditional public schools and are given leeway in the type of curriculum they teach to their students. Only 100 schools may operate at one time in North Carolina because the General Assembly capped the number of charter schools statewide at 100.<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 2001-2002 school year, there were approximately 18,000 students enrolled in 98 charter schools in North Carolina.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Facing the Challenges**

Charter schools are a reform to the traditional approach to public education. They were established to be “incubators of innovation” with the flexibility to respond to educational challenges of the day. Charter schools are also supposed to be freed from the bureaucracy and politics of local school boards. And, as the above description points out, they are not necessarily structured or equipped the same as conventional public schools. As they begin operation, charter schools must find a building, prepare curricula, attract students, buy school books and hire staff. These responsibilities require a great deal of effort from each school’s operators, boards of directors, parents and students. Opening a building is particularly challenging as charter schools must raise

their own funds if they choose to purchase land or build their own structure.<sup>4</sup> All of these responsibilities combined with educating students make the first year particularly turbulent for many charter schools.

Academically, charter schools face great challenges too, as many charter schools intentionally target special populations of students including under-served ones. In fact, 36 percent of charter schools are specifically geared toward special student populations including at-risk ones.<sup>5</sup>

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#### **The Evaluation Report**

In order to monitor the progress of charter schools, the North Carolina General Assembly required a review of the progress of these schools after the first year. After the one-year report was submitted, it was determined that such a short amount of time was not sufficient to adequately evaluate charter schools.<sup>6</sup> The State Board of Education (SBE) recommended a three-year evaluation be conducted and presented by January 1, 2002. The Charter School Evaluation Report was delivered to the SBE in November 2001, and sent to the State Legislature in January 2002. The study was conducted by independent researchers including staff from the University of North Carolina.

Reaction to the evaluation report’s findings was mixed with some pointing out the positive aspects of the report and others focusing on the negative. The League of

Charter Schools hailed the study as a confirmation that charter schools are good for children.<sup>7</sup> Others, including some in the press, were not as positive. Headlines such as “Charters lag behind objectives” and “Charter schools not innovators, study finds” left the impression that charter schools were not achieving their intended purposes.<sup>8</sup>

However, any fair assessment of the Charter School Evaluation Report must keep several things in mind. First, the report only studied a fraction of charter schools over a short period of time. Second, any evaluation of charter schools is complicated by the fact that every charter school is unique in its mission and structure, making it difficult to compare these schools to each other and to the broader educational system. The report itself made this point when it stated:

*“An important preliminary lesson learned in this research is that charter schools in North Carolina are not a uniform entity and any generalization masks the complexity of their experiences. Charter schools serve a variety of purposes for a variety of stakeholders (including students, staff, and parents) and attempts to describe themes found among 30 charter schools necessarily mutes the complex and compelling story each charter school has to tell.”<sup>9</sup>*

Thirdly, charter schools are still in the early stages of implementation. Even the oldest charter schools in North Carolina were only beginning their fifth year of operation at the start of the 2001-2002 school year. The Charter School Advisory Committee, a committee appointed by the State Board of Education to assist the board and offer recommendations regarding charter schools, recognized this fact and even passed a motion stating that the “recent evaluation report was too narrow in focus”

and that “there were too few schools involved with the evaluation and those schools that were involved had not been in operation long enough to draw any specific conclusions.”<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that making concrete decisions based on the Charter School Evaluation Report would be incomplete and premature at best. Just as charter schools are new in their approach to solving specific education problems, so the evaluation procedures for charter schools must use new approaches too. This report is a limited snapshot of charter schools and is—by its own admission—studying a complex array of schools. Even the author of the report, Dr. Dickson Corbett, told the State Board of Education that it was remarkable that there was anything for the evaluation to study because charter schools are such new institutions.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to understand the truth about these schools, how they are meeting the education needs of children and just what kind of impact they are really having. Keeping in mind the limitations, challenges and newness of these schools will provide a more realistic framework to assess the evaluation report. Following is a discussion of the major topics studied by the report. In addition to its findings, further information has been added in order to offer a clear understanding and context to this issue. This information will offer a better perspective on the status of charter schools, how well they are doing and how they should be expected to perform.

## **Incubators of Innovation**

The idea of charter schools as innovators is key to their existence. If these schools did not depart in some way from traditional public schools, there would be no reason to have them in the first place. When charter schools were first considered in North Carolina, they were touted as “incubators of innovation,” created to inspire competition among schools and improve education. To date, their innovations have been manifested strongly in some ways and not as much in others.

It is important to point out that charter schools themselves are an innovation. A departure from traditional public schools where curriculum, structure and attendees are determined by the local education authority and the State Board of Education, charter schools represent a new and less restrictive approach to designing a school. This was evident in the evaluation report’s discussion about the characteristics of these schools. Pointing out that charter schools are not “a uniform entity,” the report

explains that different schools serve different types of students.<sup>12</sup>

The evaluation report considers the primary innovation of charter schools to be the smallness of the schools and their classes. Reducing class sizes has become a major initiative in North Carolina, gaining the attention of top education officials and the governor.<sup>13</sup> Class size reduction is a major component to North Carolina’s “First in America” education initiative<sup>14</sup> and is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as a contributor to the increased academic achievements of students.<sup>15</sup> According to the evaluation report, charter school classes “tend to be substantially smaller than other public school classes,” resulting in students feeling a sense of belonging and teachers being able to develop closer relationships with the students while attending to their individual needs.<sup>16</sup> The average student/teacher ratio is 15 to 1 (compared to traditional public school’s 21 to 1 ratio) and the schools themselves are smaller with a large majority of charter schools serving under 200 students.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, charter schools also have a higher percentage of minority students than traditional public schools, 47 percent<sup>18</sup> versus 39 percent respectively.<sup>19</sup> This is contrary to early concerns that charter schools would become a source of “white flight” where a large majority of white student would leave traditional public schools and flock to charter schools.

Another benefit of the smaller size is increased parental satisfaction and involvement with their child’s education. Remarkably, more than half of the charter schools in North Carolina report that over 75 percent of their parents play a significant role in helping to educate their child.<sup>20</sup> Successive North Carolina governors, including Governor Mike Easley have emphasized the need for parental involvement in schools calling it “critical” and saying that “as parents, we must make it a priority to be a part of our child’s education.”<sup>21</sup> The overwhelming level of parental involvement in charter schools is evidence that these schools are accomplishing what parents are looking for in an educational experience for their children.

Unfortunately, many charter schools cannot extend beyond the innovations mentioned above to try new educational approaches for fear that by deviating too much from North Carolina’s standard course of study they may not perform well on state evaluation tests. This is because the state effectively requires them to be held accountable under North Carolina’s ABCs

of Public Education program—the accountability standards used to evaluate traditional public schools. Charter schools can create their own accountability standards, but most are unable to because of the cost and difficulty involved. This tension is felt strongly by charter schools that are trying to be innovative, while being held to the same standards as other public schools. It is particularly felt by schools that are trying new approaches to educating at-risk students.<sup>22</sup> Being held to the same standards as traditional public schools may prevent them from truly becoming the “incubators of innovation” they were intended to be.

Despite these constraints, many schools are finding ways to innovate. Here are some examples:

- Sally B. Howard Charter School utilizes a project-based curriculum emphasizing research over lectures. All students wear uniforms and participate in drama, art, music and computer classes.<sup>23</sup>
- Maureen Joy Charter School greatly improved their student’s writing skills by implementing a program called the Formula-Three Learning Processing Chain.<sup>24</sup>
- Grandfather Academy Charter School, a residential school, has every teacher certified as Behavior Health Assistants, and every student has individual lesson plans and goals.<sup>25</sup>
- Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy requires that all students between eighth and eleventh grade take the PSAT. The school pays for the test and the results are used to measure each student’s progress through high school. As a result, average scores on the PSAT have risen above the state average.<sup>26</sup>

The charter school record on innovation is promising despite current constraints. Although the evaluation report accurately describes charter schools’ uniqueness in size and parental involvement, it does not stress clearly enough the struggle to innovate while still being held to the same standards as other public schools. The fact is that charter schools are already accomplishing some of what the traditional education community is still striving to achieve.

## **Impact on Education**

Charter schools were created to promote new and innovative methods of teaching and learning and to expand the educational opportunities for parents and students.<sup>27</sup> As a result, charter schools could have a profound impact on traditional public schools. However, according to the

evaluation report, charter schools have had a minimal impact on the local school districts, noting that the interaction between them has been strained but has been “thawing” over time. Instead, charter schools appear to be operating autonomously without any real influence on other public schools.<sup>28</sup>

Charter schools’ influence on other traditional public schools will take time. It will begin to happen when it is clear that charter school students are outperforming their public school counterparts using innovations that are measurable. Furthermore, it is not hard to imagine why such a small number of schools would not be impacting the thousands of other public schools statewide. With a cap of 100, there are not enough charter schools to inspire any significant innovation on the part of traditional public schools. Nor are there enough charter schools to compete with other public schools so that those schools would work harder to retain their students by improving their own methods of education.

Of the 117 school districts in North Carolina, only 38 percent have at least one charter school located there,<sup>29</sup> and only 15 percent have two or more schools within their borders.<sup>30</sup> Overall, just over one percent of the public school population statewide attend a charter school.<sup>31</sup> According to the League of Charter Schools, North Carolina will need to allow at least 10 percent of the student population to have an opportunity to attend a charter school before any real impact could be felt. This would mean at least 800 charter schools operating in the state.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile all 100 charter school slots have been filled by the State Board of Education leaving only the occasional vacancy to allow for more charters. Therefore, any efforts to increase momentum in the charter school movement is stifled. If there is to be any real impact on the broader educational system, the cap on the number of charter schools must be raised. Once that happens, and the number of charter schools increases substantially, it is very likely that more traditional public schools will begin to take notice and improve themselves.

## Evaluating Achievement

Among the greatest concerns about charter schools is the way their students perform academically. Nothing about them receives more scrutiny than how their students stack up to other public school students. In analyzing the performance of charter schools, the evaluation report concluded that “generally, charter school

students under-perform other public school students on End-of-Grade (EOG) tests in reading and mathematics.”<sup>33</sup> The report also found that students in charter schools were less likely than students in other public schools to score at or above grade level in reading or math;<sup>34</sup> that 17 percent of charter schools fell into the low performing designation, as opposed to the one percent of other public schools;<sup>35</sup> and the percentage of charter schools showing exemplary growth decreased each of the four years studied.<sup>36</sup> But there are problems with taking these statements at face value and out of context.

The report does point out the diversity that exists among charter school performance, noting that some perform exceptionally well while others perform poorly. It further stated that “these wide variations in performance render any analyses that combine all charter schools together for the

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purpose of making comparisons largely unhelpful in estimating the ‘effects’ of charter schools on student achievement.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, concrete conclusions cannot be made about how charter schools are doing academically because of the vast differences among them.

Meaningful academic comparisons between charter schools and traditional public schools are limited at best, especially if you consider that charter schools are start-up institutions—the oldest schools only entered their fifth academic year of operation in 2001-2002. Also, some charter schools are comprised of a large number of at-risk students—many of whom came from traditional public schools that could not adequately educate them. In fact, the test results from traditional public schools often do not include many of their troubled student’s scores because any student who is sent to an alternative school does not have their scores included in the end-of-grade numbers. Charter schools, however, include every student (including their particularly high at-risk student population) in their test results.<sup>38</sup>

Charter schools also struggle with their mandate to be innovative while adhering to

the state’s ABCs of Education evaluation program. This often hampers charter schools from attempting new teaching methods because they fear that straying from the standard course of study will hurt their chances on state tests. All of these factors mitigate the evaluation report’s claim that charter schools are underperforming traditional public schools. If anything, they show that charter schools should be commended for performing as well as they do despite the challenges they face.

In any case, charter schools are held to the ultimate accountability if they do not perform academically—parents who “vote with their feet” and can pull their children out of the school. Furthermore, the SBE can revoke a charter at any time if it does not perform as promised. Either way, charter schools face an accountability that traditional public schools do not.

Contrary to the report’s findings, a closer look at the data reveals some very good news for charter schools. For example:

- From a year to year basis, charter schools have experienced more growth in some areas after their first year of operation. Charter school students in all four classes studied by the report (grades 3 through 8) showed more growth than other public school students in their end-of-grade scale score in their second and third year. In addition, three of the four classes studied showed greater improvement in reading in the third year than other public school students.<sup>39</sup>
- Examining the performance of the schools that opened the first year shows that of the schools that had been operating for four years, the percent of charter schools classified as “low performing” (a school that does not meet their expected growth and less than half of the students are performing at or above grade level) dropped from 25 percent in the 1997-1998 school year to zero percent in the 2000-2001 school year.<sup>40</sup> In other words, none of these schools were underperforming.
- An evaluation of the ABCs results combining the scale scores of charter and noncharter students into respective groups or “cohorts” showed that charter schools that did not make expected or exemplary growth in the 1997-1998 school year met both at a higher rate than other public schools the following year. In the 1999-2000 school year, charter schools not only met both

expected and exemplary growth, but did so at a time when other public schools only met expected growth.<sup>41</sup>

What all of this information indicates is that the longer charter schools operate, the better they perform, especially considering that the first year for a charter school is so turbulent. Charter schools need more time before being compared to the vast majority of traditional public schools that have been open for many more years and before a more accurate evaluation can be conducted in many areas.

## Conclusion

The North Carolina Charter School Evaluation Report is a premature and limited review of an educational reform that has great potential for improving education in this state. A more complete study of the achievement and impact of charter schools should be conducted no earlier than 5 years from the time they began, when these schools have had a chance to become more structurally and academically established. As the data seems to indicate, charter schools improve as time goes on, and early comparisons with longstanding public schools unfairly paint charter schools as underperforming when they are not.

What this report does do is reveal what must be done to make charter schools more successful. The question for the education community and, more importantly, the General Assembly is not whether to continue charter schools, but how to better assist them. Legislators should not be afraid to raise or eliminate the cap on charter schools because the law of supply and demand will allow the appropriate number of charter schools to develop, as failing schools will close down and productive schools will continue to move ahead. The data showing that the oldest charter schools are improving should encourage legislators that the law they passed in 1996 is working well and is achieving laudable goals.

Meanwhile, charter schools remain an innovation while still being held to the highest level of accountability, as parents may choose to remove their child should the school not meet their expectations. With this understanding, charter schools know that their survival depends on their ability to

retain students by providing a better education. So far, the enthusiastic response and high involvement from parents is evidence of their satisfaction. What is needed now is a concerted effort on behalf of everyone interested in quality education to help charter schools excel so that all public schools can become more successful.

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## Endnotes

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