

EVALUATION
OF CONNECTICUT CHARTER SCHOOLS
AND THE CHARTER SCHOOL INITIATIVE

FINAL REPORT

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Executive Summary

In June 1997, The Evaluation Center (EC) at Western Michigan University was awarded a contract by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to evaluate the charter schools and the charter school initiative in Connecticut over the period October 1, 1997, to September 30, 2002. In conducting this study, the EC was expected to use existing databases; develop, adapt, and administer surveys; and conduct site visits and focus groups to gather data regarding the effectiveness of the charter school initiative in Connecticut.

The major objective of the evaluative study is to determine the effectiveness, progress, and impact of the charter schools in Connecticut. Further, it is intended to provide objective, unbiased feedback to the schools, the Connecticut State Department of Education, and other stakeholders about the operations and effectiveness of the schools and the initiative.

The following questions are central to the evaluation within the context, mission, and goals of each charter school and under the overriding goals of the study.

- To what extent are all students being served?
- To what extent are the stated specific goals and objectives of the schools being met?
- What unique and common shortcomings and barriers to meeting student needs can be identified?
- What successes and shortcomings in the development of the school governance procedures and policies exist or have been developed?
- What are the long-term (positive and negative) effects on students and parents that are associated with attending or sending children to a charter school?

Several supplemental questions are related to those above:

- What innovative and creative practices that lead to greater effectiveness or efficiency in meeting the needs of students and the operations of the school have been developed by the charter schools?
- What is the form and extent of parental involvement in the schools?
- What is the impact of the charter schools on the local school district(s), and what is the perception of the worth and merit of the charter school within the context of the broader community?
- What professional opportunities, benefits, and/or problems have educators encountered in their work in the charter schools?
- What major problems and barriers were commonly observed in the development of the charter schools during the evaluation period?

In addition to the evaluation activities, The Evaluation Center has also provided technical assistance to the charter schools related to the accountability plans and use of evaluation.

Methodology and Data Collection

Over the course of this five year project, we have used mixed methods of data collection, including surveys, interviews, document reviews, focus group meetings, results of existing tests, direct observations, review of work samples and, as appropriate, school portfolio reviews and case studies.

In the data collection plan, an explanation of the sampling procedures was provided. The purpose of our sampling was to build an accurate composite picture of the target population of staff, students, and parents across all charter schools in the state. Our strategy was to achieve a high response rate among students, teachers, and staff. It is usually difficult to obtain a high response rate from parents. Thus, we identified appropriate samples of parents and, with procedures to assure anonymity, elicited the assistance and cooperation of the local school for follow-up of nonrespondents to the initial mailed administration of each survey.

Listed below are surveys that were administered:

- Teachers/staff charter school survey (1997-98 and 1999-00)
- Student charter school survey (1997-98 and 1999-00)
- Parent/guardian charter school survey (1997-98 and 1999-00)
- School Climate Survey for teachers/staff, students, and parents/guardians (1998-99 and 2000-01)

The charter school surveys were administered during years 1 and 3, while the School Climate Survey was administered during years 2 and 4. The response rate on the teacher and student surveys exceeded 90 percent, and the parent survey yielded a response rate of 64.2 percent in 1997-98 and 54.1 percent in 1999-00. The school climate survey response rates were 87 percent or higher for teachers and students (5th grade and higher), and 51 percent for parents in 1999 and 40 percent in 2000. The schools were given the opportunity to administer optional surveys in the off years or in year 5 when no surveys were scheduled. While many schools took advantage of this, we have not aggregated or analyzed the results from these optional surveys in this report.

Additional data collection methods were employed during the initial three years of this study:

- Interviews and site visits
- Document review
- Analysis of the Connecticut Master Test (CMT) and Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT)
- Analysis of other centrally collected data on charter schools

The quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed according to professionally acceptable standards of practice. The survey results were scanned by machine in order to enter the quantitative responses to closed-item questions. After processing and scanning the surveys, the data were disaggregated and sorted by school. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data (i.e., largely frequencies, means, standard deviations). Templates were developed for reporting the results

back to each school. After compiling profiles from the surveys, the results were formatted and printed. All the results were shared with the schools and with CSDE.

Development and Overview of Connecticut Charter Schools

Recognizing the need for improvement in public schools, Connecticut responded to the ever growing interest in public school choice and charter schools by adopting charter school legislation. This legislation was adopted based partly on the premise that this type of school reform would have a positive impact in the following areas:

- restructuring of traditional schools
- creation of innovative instructional practices
- diversification of learning environments
- reduction of racial isolation

These focus areas were considered in the development and implementation of an application and review process used to approve new charter schools. Applications for these schools came from a variety of stakeholders including teachers, parents, students, community activists, civic and business leaders, attorneys, and scholars. The first 12 schools were approved and became operational in 1997, with 4 additional schools opened in 1998, 2 in 1999, and 1 in 2002. Four of the original 12 schools have since closed, one closed in 1998 because it did not technically qualify as a separate charter school and another closed in 1999 because of issues related to the operation, governance, and performance of the school. Two other schools closed after operating for 4 years. In the summer of 2002, the two charter schools that were initially chartered by the Hartford School District were converted to magnet schools. As of the 2002-03 school year, only 13 charter schools are still in operation.

The physical location of charter schools ranges from downtown urban areas to the fringe of environmentally protected natural areas. A wide range of facilities are used for these schools, from rented facilities that test the teachers' mettle to create minimally productive learning environments to nicely remodeled spaces with seemingly effective learning environments. Probably the most notable differences in these school facilities and what one would expect to find in a public school are the lack of spacious and well-equipped playgrounds, gymnasiums and sports facilities, auditoriums and other specialized rooms/laboratories, convenient and adequate parking, and automobile access roads.

School Mission

The charter schools have a wide variety of mission statements that reflect each school's unique goals and objectives. The mission statement illustrates the vision for the school, describes what it hopes to accomplish and, through its development, provides an opportunity for stakeholders to build consensus and common goals. Below are listed some of the key elements found in mission statements:

- rigorous academic programs
- development of responsible citizenship
- alternative educational experience for at-risk students

- development of leadership
- global studies/world view
- early intervention/parental involvement
- multicultural learning environments
- safe and orderly school community

Parents who choose to send their children to charter schools do so for a variety of reasons, one being the school's overall mission. Parents' survey responses in 1999-00 indicated that 91 percent of parents were aware of their school's mission, and slightly more than 80 percent thought their school followed the mission well or very well, similar to previous years' findings. Students, on the other hand, were not as familiar with their school's mission, with only about half of students surveyed indicating they were aware of their school's mission.

Teachers/staff are generally satisfied with their school's mission and think that it is being followed; however, the level of satisfaction has declined slightly between year 1 and year 3 of the evaluation. After several years of operation, one would expect to find a positive trend in teacher/staff belief in their school's ability to fulfill its mission; however, we did not find this trend in the data.

Financial Conditions of Charter Schools

Start-up costs, limited time between approval and opening, and the inexperience of many school directors and boards resulted in problems in obtaining needed funding for some of the schools. However, as personnel in local and state funding agencies and schools have gained knowledge and experience in this area, the problems have lessened.

From a financial standpoint, there is little difference between the per-student expenditures for the state charter schools (\$8,997 in 1999-00) and the districts in which they are located (\$9,141, note that this figure is for 1998-99). For the two schools that were chartered by the local district, the difference is greater, with a per-student expenditure of \$10,625 for the district and \$9,227 for the charter school. When considering the expenditures by function, a somewhat higher amount is used for administration in the charter schools (14.8 percent) in comparison with the districts (9.5 percent) in which they are located. This difference can likely be explained by the relatively small size of charter schools in terms of enrollment as compared with the typical public school.

Funding for charter schools comes from a variety of sources including state enrollment-based grant, state and federal competitive grants, federal start-up grant, local district(s) in-kind support, and private sources. In 1999-00 charter schools received 74.6 percent of their revenues from state sources, while federal sources accounted for 12 percent of the revenues and private sources provided 10.6 percent of the total revenues. Revenues from local sources accounted for the remaining revenues.

The two local charter schools (both in Hartford) received funding from the district in which they are located. The total per-pupil amount these two schools received is substantially higher than what the state-sponsored charter schools received. In-kind services provide the largest difference in revenues

between the local and state charter schools, since Hartford school district has covered the building costs for its two local charter schools.

While there have been noticeable increases in revenues for charter schools, many charter school administrators/leaders are still concerned that there is insufficient funding for charter schools, particularly for facilities.

Teachers and Staff at Connecticut Charter Schools

There are noticeable variations in teachers' qualifications and years of experience among the Connecticut charter schools. In 1997-98 and 1999-00, we administered the Charter School Survey to teachers and staff in all schools. This survey focused on satisfaction with various aspects of the school, background characteristics of staff, reasons for choosing to work at the charter school, and a comparison of initial expectations with current experience.

The full evaluation report includes summaries of detailed analyses and comparisons of the teaching staff in the 12 schools that opened in 1997-98 with the 16 schools that were operational at the beginning of 1999-00. This comparison provides an opportunity to examine change in the schools over time, since 2 of the original schools closed and 6 new schools were opened. Therefore, when we examined change over time, we used both a trend analysis and a cohort analysis. In order to exclude any teachers/staff that were not included in the 1997-98 sample, this cohort comparison includes only teachers and staff who reported working for 2 or more years in the 10 cohort schools in 1999-00. This essentially allowed us to compare the same group of charter school staff at 2 points in time. Changes in survey results were, therefore, likely to be due to change in the school rather than a change in the persons completing the surveys.

A summary of some of the key findings from the teacher/staff survey are presented below (this included 285 teachers and staff from 16 charter schools):

- ❑ School staffs in 1999-00 were comprised of 53 percent teachers, 14.7 percent teaching assistants, 6.3 percent specialists, 7 percent school administrators, and nearly 18 percent in a variety of other positions.
- ❑ 86 percent of surveyed teachers in 1999-00 reported that they are certified to teach in Connecticut. The proportion of certified teachers is actually much higher since this self-reported data does not include teachers with temporary certificates.
- ❑ 40.3 percent of teachers are in their 20s, 24.2 percent in their 30s, 22.1 percent in their 40s, and 13.4 percent are 50 or older.
- ❑ Teachers and staff members are 66.8 percent white, 19.8 percent black, 12.7 percent Hispanic, and just under 1 percent Asian or Pacific Islanders (none were Native American/American Indians).
- ❑ 71 percent of teachers/staff are female and 29 percent are male.

The teachers/staff who responded to the survey in 1999-00 also indicated

- They had average experience of 4.9 years in the public schools, 0.43 years in private schools, 0.16 years in parochial schools, and 0.49 years in other forms of teaching.
- They had an average combined total of 7.29 years of experience in education
- 42 percent of teachers had a BA as their highest college degree, 50 percent had an MA, 6.7 percent had a 5-6 year certificate, and 0.7 percent had a Ph.D.

Attitudes and perceptions of working conditions were also reported from the 1999-00 surveys:

- 38.7 percent of teachers/staff were satisfied or very satisfied with the school buildings and facilities, and 34.9 percent agreed or strongly agreed that physical facilities were good.
- 43.7 percent of teachers/staff were satisfied with their salary (this is higher than what we have found in other states).
- 37.8 percent perceived a secure future at their school, 36.2 percent perceived an insecure future at their school, and the rest were neutral (a significantly negative change from 1997-98 when 52.5 percent perceived a secure future at their school).
- 44.7 percent indicated they have many noninstructional duties in addition to their teaching load.

In addition, the survey data provided information regarding teachers'/staffs' initial expectations when first hired and what they had actually experienced working in a charter school. The findings indicated that teachers had much higher expectations when first hired compared with their actual experience. In 1997-98, teachers'/staffs' expectations in terms of student performance, quality of instruction, and operation of the school were significantly higher than what they experienced. In 1999-00, teachers'/staffs' expectations in terms of student performance, parental involvement and communication, and leadership were still higher than what they were currently experiencing. For example, in 1997-98 teachers indicated large differences between expectations and experience in areas related to products such as support services and technology and communication with parents; in 1999-00 teachers had much higher expectations for teachers and parents to influence the schools' direction and for effective leadership than they experienced.

A greater number and quality of professional opportunities were among the promises of the charter school initiative across the country and something that the 1997-98 teachers expected. In 1999-00, 68.6 percent thought this would be true as compared with 74 percent in 1997-98. A slightly lower percentage of teachers (53.3 percent) perceived that this was actually happening in 1999-00. In reviewing documents and interviewing school personnel, it is clear that a broad spectrum of professional development opportunities is offered by the schools or made available to teaching personnel, including a focus on educational technology for instruction, methods of teaching in the field, student assessment, curriculum, developing a multicultural curriculum, and cooperative learning.

Students and Parents in Connecticut Charter Schools

A total of 741 charter school students from 16 schools were sampled in 1999-00, compared with 288 students from 11 schools in 1997-98. Rather than conduct a random sample of all enrolled students in grade 5 and above, we attempted to sample 2 or more classes in each school or 1 class at each grade level. More students from the lower grades were included in the survey, with 63.2 percent representing grades 5 to 7 and 36.7 percent from grades 8 to 12.

The following items summarize our findings with regard to recruitment and selection of students, school attended prior to charter school, and gender and ethnicity of students.

- ❑ Recruitment most often involves advertisements and flyers; however, open houses and booths at fairs were also used to recruit families.
- ❑ Charter school students come primarily from traditional public schools (89 percent), with 4 percent coming from parochial schools and 1.9 percent from private schools.
- ❑ The distribution of students by gender was fairly even, with 50.6 percent boys and 49.4 percent girls.
- ❑ Minorities were highly represented in the charter schools in 1999-00 with 41 percent black, 26 percent Hispanic, 1.1 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4 percent Native American Indians.
- ❑ The proportion of white students has significantly declined as the number of charter schools has increased: from 41.1 percent of the total charter school enrollment in 1997-98 to 27.5 percent in 1999-00.

The following items summarize some of our relevant findings regarding parents and families, such as household income and education, amount of parent volunteering, and distance to charter school.

- ❑ Overall, the trend among charter school parents has been toward lower household income, increased single parent households, and decreased education levels. This shift over time is largely due to the addition of new schools rather than shifting enrollments in existing schools.
- ❑ The majority of parents reported that they did not volunteer at all or had limited volunteering involvement at their school.
- ❑ The average distance to the charter school was 4.78 miles, while the average distance to the nearest applicable traditional public school was 2.18 miles.

On several survey items parents indicated some changes from their initial expectations and what their perceived actual experience and the time they were surveyed. In 1999-00, the largest disparities in terms of high initial expectations and lower perceived actual experiences were in the areas of school leadership/administration and the availability of individualized attention for students. While the differences were significant for these two items in 1999-00, they represented a slight improvement from 1997-98 when there were even larger differences between initial expectations and current experience.

Other items where there were large discrepancies between higher expectations and lower perceived current experiences include “quality of instruction,” “influence on the direction of the school,” “good communication between school and my household,” and “accountability of school personnel.”

Innovative Practices in Curriculum, Instructional Practices, Technology, and Organization/Governance

One of many commonly expected outcomes of charter school reforms is the development of innovative practices. However, a number of common factors affecting charter school reforms suggest that it will be difficult for these schools to be innovative. Among these factors, the following are most noteworthy: (i) less per-pupil funding than other public schools and limited funds for capital investments, (ii) relatively young and inexperienced teachers, and (iii) the expectation that these new schools meet already prescribed state standards.

Charter school staff in Connecticut were asked to list three or four innovations at their school in three different areas: (i) curriculum, (ii) instruction, and (iii) organization/governance. Reported innovations related to the integration of technology were also collected and summarized separately. Additionally, we considered data and information from annual reports, interviews with other stakeholders, and surveys. A summary of the key findings are listed below according to specific area.

Innovations in Curriculum and Instruction

- ❑ Charter school curricula ranged from original, staff-created programs to prepackaged commercial programs.
- ❑ Many schools focus the curriculum on one particular area, such as career-to-work or a global studies-based curriculum, or they focus on meeting the needs of one particular group of students.
- ❑ Most charter schools are adopting interdisciplinary curricular and instructional approaches that are in line with the state’s curriculum framework.
- ❑ Charter schools have implemented instructional and assessment techniques that are different from those used traditional public schools. The incorporation of specific themes, such as community involvement, environmental conservation, or sports and physical fitness, have also provided opportunities to provide new curricula, instructional approaches, and means of assessment.

Innovations in Technology

- ❑ Integration of technology across the curriculum is a goal of many of the charter schools. Charter schools have fewer students per computer than is the average for district schools across the state.
- ❑ For the most part, however, computers are used as tools for writing, for remedial instruction, and for records maintenance, which is similar to traditional school usage.

Innovations in Organization/Governance

- ❑ Teachers are involved in decision making about budgets, professional development, school policies, class assignments, peer evaluation, and other issues that affect the everyday operations of the classrooms and schools.
- ❑ Teachers' daily schedules are designed to permit more interaction and dialogue between and among teachers and school administrators.
- ❑ Block scheduling and other types of scheduling for instruction are intended to accommodate student learning.
- ❑ Parents and more involved stakeholders are included on the board.

Overall, organization and governance are seen as the two most innovative aspects of charter schools. Granted, the differences may be mandated or at least authorized by law or regulation by the state. However, the schools have developed compatible practices and implemented procedures that provide for important decisions to be made at the school level. Charter schools appoint rather than elect school boards. They also have made efforts to encourage and facilitate communication among stakeholders and they have encouraged parental involvement. Finally, charter schools have attempted to create real choice opportunities to parents and students.

We have evaluated charter school reforms in several states and have found that the charter schools in Connecticut have been more successful than charter schools in other states in creating curricular and instructional approaches that are innovative or unique from what might be found in other public schools.

Extent to Which Goals and Objectives are Being Met

To answer the question "Are Connecticut charter schools meeting their own goals?" we examined each school's annual report for the 1999-00 and 2000-01 school years. To maximize the consistency and fairness of the comparisons, we restricted our analysis to the sections of the annual reports that address the four state-mandated areas where the charter schools are expected to elaborate goals and measurable objectives: (i) student progress; (ii) accomplishment of mission, purpose, and specialized focus; (iii) organizational viability: financial status and governance; and (iv) efforts to reduce racial, ethnic, and economic isolation. The following summarizes our analysis of the annual reports.

- ❑ Across all four areas, Connecticut charter schools met 50 percent of the measurable objectives identified in their 1999-00 annual reports. The success rate was highest (57 percent) for objectives related to the schools' specific missions and foci, where the schools have the most flexibility in defining goals. The success rate was lowest (39 percent) in objectives related to the educational progress of students. In 2000-01, the schools met 53 percent of their measurable objectives.
- ❑ All of the school mission statements we examined contained educationally meaningful goals, with most common themes in mission statements centered around academic and curricular goals.
- ❑ All school mission statements contain statements about such issues as academic rigor, emphases in particular academic subjects, communication skills, and so on.

- ❑ Approximately 80 percent of the schools have adequately represented their missions in goals and measurable objectives.
- ❑ There is considerable school-to-school variation in the quality of objectives and accompanying data.
- ❑ The overall strength of the charter schools' accountability plans and the quality of the annual reports has improved with each passing year.

In summary, the schools have established meaningful goals and have met slightly more than half of their measurable objectives. However, there is considerable school-to-school variation in the quality of the objectives and several cases where schools did not report sufficient data to make judgments. While the annual reports have indicated from one year to the next continuing efforts to improve accountability plans, there is still room for all of the schools to make improvements in both their accountability plans and in their reporting procedures. Relative to other states, Connecticut has succeeded in turning the charter school annual reports into an effective accountability tool. In earlier years, these annual reports were posted on the state's department of education Web site, which insured that a wide variety of stakeholders, including parents, could easily access the reports.

Performance on State Achievement Tests

While charter schools have been in operation for a limited number of years, one question on the minds of policymakers and the general public concerns whether or not charter schools can raise student performance on standardized tests. An analysis of scores from the Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT), administered to students in grades 4, 6, and 8, and from the Connecticut Academic Performance Test (CAPT), which is administered to students in grade 10, resulted in the following findings.

- ❑ In terms of absolute scores, charter schools initially were performing lower than the state average and lower than their host districts. This information suggests that the charter schools are attracting students whose performance levels are generally lower than students in the host districts. This could also imply that students in charter schools perform poorly in their initial years at the charter school due to the start-up nature of the school or other related factors. Currently, the charter schools are performing at levels similar to their host districts and slightly lower than the state average.
- ❑ In terms of gain scores or value added, the charter schools are outperforming their host districts.
- ❑ Charter schools do better on the CMT than on the CAPT. In other words, the charter schools catering to elementary and middle school students are showing more positive gains as measured by the state's standardized tests than are the charter schools at the high school level. In part, this can be explained by a larger proportion of the charter high schools catering to students at risk. Readers should be reminded that there are a finite set of charter high schools (one of those considered in our analyses has since been closed in the summer of 2001) and that the number of test takers varies extensively between the charter high schools and the district high schools.
- ❑ The results for both our trend analysis and cohort analysis indicated that charter schools were making larger gains than their host districts. The results on the cohort analysis—which we consider a stronger design—are more positive than the trend analysis.

- ❑ Thirty-one percent of the trend analyses were positive, while only 4 percent were negative and 65 percent were mixed. Among the stronger cohort analyses, 72 percent of the trends were positive compared with 17 percent that were negative and 11 percent that were mixed.
- ❑ Charter schools that have been in operation longer show larger gains on both trend and cohort analyses relative to their host districts.
- ❑ If we had analyzed the data with only two years of data, the findings would have been negative. If we had analyzed the data with only three years of results, the findings would have been mixed. However, after four and five years of test data, we can see that charter schools have been outperforming their host districts.

Readers are encouraged to compare the results outlined in the tables and exhibits in this chapter with the data tables presented in Appendix I, which provide complete school-by-school results.

We have analyzed student achievement in charter schools in a number of states and are well aware of the variation in performance that occurs from year to year. We are also aware of the many limitations in the findings and have attempted to clearly spell them out in this chapter. Even though we now have five years of test data to examine in Connecticut, we think it still may be too early to make clear inferences about the causal impact of charter schools on student achievement. On the other hand, compared with the results in other states (see the meta-analysis of student achievement studies in Miron & Nelson, in press), the results we obtained for Connecticut are clearly the most substantial and the most positive that we have found in terms of student achievement gains made by charter schools. Also, given the strength and consistent direction of the trends over time, we conclude that charter schools in Connecticut are having a positive impact on students' achievement.

Indicators of School Quality

Student achievement is a universally recognized indicator of school quality; however, secondary indicators should also be considered. The data that provide the basis for these considerations came primarily from surveys of charter school students, parents/guardians, and faculty/staff. The surveys that we administered include some that were specifically designed for this evaluation as well as the School Climate Survey (SCS) from the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Additional sources of information include data provided by CSDE and archives of charter school documents generated and maintained by the evaluation team.

Inclusion of these indicators of school quality serve to

- ❑ supplement the results of the CMT and CAPT with the assessments of charter school students, parents, and teachers
- ❑ address the “market accountability” viewpoint by examining the extent to which educational “consumers” have “voted with their feet” for or against charter schools
- ❑ examine a number of intermediate or “nonachievement” outcomes, including attendance, discipline, and various elements of school culture and climate

There is legitimate debate about precisely what types of student outcomes charter schools should be held accountable for. While most stakeholders seem to agree that student achievement is an important (if not the only) goal of charter schools, others argue that schools should also be judged on their ability to satisfy their customers.

The following items summarize some important findings related to alternative indicators of school quality in Connecticut charter schools.

- ❑ Seventy-three percent of students judged their performance as “excellent” or “good” at their charter school compared with 65 percent who reported that their performance was either “excellent” or “good” at their previous school.
- ❑ In 1999-00, 55 percent of those teachers surveyed thought that student achievement was improving at their charter school—up slightly from 53.9 percent in the previous year.
- ❑ The average charter school reported that it had 68 students on its waiting list as of the 1999-00 school year (based on data from 11 of the 16 charter schools).
- ❑ As a group, 12 charter schools reported that they had a student return rate of 75.5 percent.
- ❑ Approximately 72 percent of sampled parents reported that the quality of instruction in their charter school is high.
- ❑ Slightly more than 71 percent of parents reported that their child’s achievement level had improved.
- ❑ Approximately 66 percent of the sampled parents said that their child received sufficient individual attention.
- ❑ Approximately 57 percent of students surveyed indicated they would recommend the school to a friend, while 18 percent said they would not and another 25 percent were not sure.
- ❑ It appears that students’ perceptions of safety in charter schools have remained relatively stable, with perhaps a small decline over the years.
- ❑ Some 82 percent of teachers and 85 percent of parents agreed with the statement that “students feel safe at school.”
- ❑ Approximately 78 percent of parents and 73 percent of teachers surveyed in 1999-00 agreed with the statement that “This school has high standards and expectations for students.”
- ❑ The findings from the nationally-normed School Climate Surveys administered to teachers/staff, parents, and students charter schools were particularly positive (above national norms) in teacher-student relationships, administration, and student academic orientation. Several areas such as security and maintenance, student behavioral values, parent and community-school relationships were below national norms among all three groups.

Governance of Charter Schools

The one evaluation question for this project that specifically mentions school governance is: What successes and shortcomings in the development of the school governance procedures and policies exist or have been developed? One clear success in charter school governance is the involvement of

community members on charter school boards. Board members include attorneys, bankers, clergy, university officials and other professionals. However, involvement by community members who do not serve on charter school boards is minimal. Most board decisions are made without outside influence.

While all boards include parent members, the parents' influence varies among the schools. Only two schools include student representatives on their boards. All boards involve parents, students and teachers in school governance through ad hoc committees. These committees address issues such as curriculum development, technology, and facilities.

About half of the charter school boards clearly view involvement in day-to-day administration of the school as a violation of their role as board members. These boards prefer to leave these administrative issues to the schools' professional staffs. On the other hand, a number of boards are clearly involved in all aspects of their respective schools. This involvement often becomes a barrier to providing more effective service to the school.

Strong, effective boards are able to collaborate and make tough decisions without micro-managing. All the charter school boards have a strong commitment to the school's mission. Most include an excellent cross section of the community and members with diverse skills and world views. All board members share the excitement of participating in an educational experiment.

The Impact of Charter Schools on Local Districts and Communities

Over the course of time, the relationships between charter and noncharter public schools has improved. This may be due to the realization that the charter school reform is not growing rapidly and is unlikely to be a threat to local districts. Even in states with large numbers of charter schools, however, there is a tendency for relations between charter and noncharter schools to normalize over time.

- A number of instances suggest that individuals or groups are not pleased with the existence of charter schools.
- Most of the charter schools could cite instances where the local districts went out of their way to assist them at some point in time.
- Two specific areas in which charter schools and local districts are required to cooperate are special education and transportation.
- A third area where services could possibly be shared is through professional development opportunities.

It was apparent that the charter schools were not having an easily discernible positive or negative impact on traditional public schools, although there did appear to be a relationship between reported positive impacts and positive relationships between charter and host district schools. There were some reports that—due to competition with charter schools—local districts were making efforts to improve their programs and raise test scores. Among the most commonly cited negative impacts were the loss

of students, involved parents, and effective teachers to charter schools. Again, it is important to point out that we found no concrete evidence that the charter schools were having any kind of impact on local districts, although charter school representatives and a few district officials noted some changes that could be due to the presence of charter schools. For the 2002-03 school year, the charter schools received federal dissemination grants (\$25,000 for each eligible school) which are intended to help promote the sharing of ideas among charter schools and between charter schools and traditional public schools.

Conclusion

Charter schools in Connecticut have provided an opportunity for small groups of educators and community leaders to be creative and do something different. A number of inspired and highly motivated educators have taken advantage of this opportunity and started charter schools. They have had the opportunity to fulfill their ideas, take risks, and have public money to support their endeavors.

The charter schools in Connecticut provided us with a number of interesting stories as we followed the development of these schools. In some instances these schools have been initially isolated by their surrounding communities and criticized for their performance, even as they struggled to establish their schools and overcome a list of start-up obstacles. Many highly motivated school leaders have been embroiled in learning how to run a school while their lofty visions have had to wait to be implemented. Even while some of the schools have struggled and have not yet developed the schools they envisioned, others have excelled and established exciting learning communities.

Only 13 charter schools remain in operation in Connecticut as of the 2002-03 school year; four schools have closed and two converted to magnet school status in the summer of 2002. The schools that have remained open, are very strong and successful. On the whole, these schools are targeting students with needs not well met in traditional public schools. Because of the selective application process and the closure of struggling schools, those that remain in operation are both highly accountable and provide unique programs that differ from the surrounding public schools.

In terms of performance accountability and regulatory accountability, charter schools in Connecticut are among the very best in the country. This judgement is based on our work in evaluating charter schools in four other states as well as the extensive literature reviews and the metaanalysis of results from studies of charter schools across the country that we have conducted. Some reasons for the exceptional performance of Connecticut's charter schools are that these schools have received relatively better funding and more technical assistance than charter schools have received in other states. Perhaps the most important factor is that the demands for accountability in Connecticut are more rigorous than in any other state we have studied. One should be cautious in generalizing the positive results of charter schools in Connecticut to charter schools in other states because of the large differences in how charter schools are approved, supported, and held accountable.

The small size of the reform has made it possible for the State to provide effective assistance and oversight. At the same time, the very small size of the reform suggests that the greatest hope for positive impact will be the examples these schools set for others, rather than the competitive effect that would put pressure on districts to improve. For this reason, it will be important to continue to monitor and learn from both their successful and unsuccessful experiences.