

Evaluation of the Delaware Charter School Reform Year 1 Report

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Executive Summary

The Delaware charter school reform dates back to 1995 when legislation was initially passed that allowed the creation of charter schools. Two schools opened in 1996, and 13 charter schools are currently operating in the state. They enroll more than 6,200 students, which accounts for nearly 5.4 percent of all public school students. Another charter school is slated to open in the autumn of 2005. Thus far, 2 schools have closed due to financial and other organizational difficulties.

The students enrolled in the charter schools vary extensively in terms of demographics. This is largely due to the location of the schools and the schools' profiles and marketing strategies. In a number of instances, the demographic characteristics of the charter schools differ greatly from the surrounding communities. In some cases, the charter schools are enrolling more disadvantaged students. In other cases, they are enrolling students who are substantially less disadvantaged.

Comparing Delaware's Charter School Law With Laws in Other States

Delaware's charter school law is considered by some to be very permissive or "charter school friendly" because of the extensive autonomy charter schools are granted. However, regulations put in place over time and the manner in which they have been enforced have led many charter school leaders to believe that Delaware's reform is very restrictive and "unfriendly" to charter schools.

Delaware's legislation has many areas of strength for charter school applicants and charter holders. Among the most prominent strengths that became apparent after comparing Delaware's legislation with other states are the following:

- no cap on the number of charter schools
- multiple charter authorizers (although more are allowed, there are currently only 2 authorizers)
- wide range of eligible charter applicants
- no requirement of evidence for local support for new start-up charter schools

- full funding
- transportation funding
- collective bargaining exemption
- teacher access to state retirement system

While the examination of existing legislation did not reveal any serious weaknesses, a few areas might be looked at more closely for possible revision:

- longer term of the initial charter (this was extended to 4 years in the summer of 2004, but most states have an initial contract for 5 years)
- additional start-up funds and financial support for facilities
- longer leave of absence for public school teachers to work in charter schools

Regardless of whether a charter school law is deemed permissive and charter school friendly or restrictive and unfriendly to charter schools, it is important to keep in mind that a “strong” charter school law is one that results in the accomplishment of anticipated outcomes. The findings uncovered in this statewide evaluation suggest that Delaware does indeed have a strong charter school law.

Delaware Charter School Teachers

In the first year of this 3-year evaluation project, a considerable amount of attention was given to charter school teachers. Questionnaires were administered to all teaching staff and key administrators in the charter schools. These questionnaires focused on teacher characteristics and qualifications, reasons for choosing to work at a charter school, and teachers’ perceptions regarding their school and the extent to which it is able to fulfill its mission.

Teacher background characteristics. In terms of gender and race/ethnicity, Delaware charter school teachers are similar in many respects to teachers in traditional public schools. There are slightly more minority teachers in charter schools, but large differences exist among the schools in their percentage of minority teachers. The age distribution for Delaware charter school teachers indicates that they are younger than teachers in traditional public schools.

Teacher qualifications. On the average, Delaware charter school teachers had more than 7 years of experience as educators versus 14 years of experience for traditional public school classroom teachers. The charter school teachers appear to be well qualified in terms of education but are less likely than teachers in traditional public schools to have graduate degrees.

Reasons for choosing to work at a charter school. Based on charter school teacher surveys, important factors influencing their decision to work at a charter school were the opportunity to work with like-minded educators, safety at school, committed parents, and the

academic reputation (high standards) of the school. Teachers also appreciated small class size, autonomy, and involvement in curriculum.

Teacher attrition. Teacher attrition is high in the charter schools; for example, more than 30 percent of certified teachers and more than 48 percent of noncertified teachers left during or immediately following the 2002-03 school year. There were large differences in attrition rates across charter schools, and the highest staff turnover rates occurred in those run by for-profit management companies. While teacher attrition can be damaging for charter schools, it is also important to keep in mind that some of the attrition can be deemed as “functional.” In other words, charter schools have greater ability to hire and fire teachers; in order to build a more focused learning community, they sometimes have to fire and not rehire teachers that do not fit a school profile.

Teachers’ perceptions of their schools. In general, teachers were content with their schools and satisfied with the services they provide. A large proportion of teacher reported that they are autonomous and creative in their classrooms and that the school supports innovative practices. Student discipline, teacher salary, quality of facilities, leadership/administration issues, and availability of resources were frequently noted as concerns of teachers; but responses varied widely among schools. In the questionnaires, the teachers and staff were asked to rate a number of items in terms of their initial expectations before coming to a charter school. In connection with this, the teachers/staff were asked to rate these same items with respect to what they were currently experiencing at the school. While the teachers were generally satisfied, it was apparent that the expectations of teachers and staff were still not being met over time.

Accomplishment of Mission

Charter schools are intended to have unique missions and educational approaches. As part of the charter schools’ “autonomy in exchange for accountability” bargain, the schools must effectively demonstrate progress toward accomplishing these unique missions. Distinctive missions, goals, and benchmarks, as well as specified means of measuring success should all be a part of a school’s charter or binding performance agreement with its authorizer. The performance agreements made between the Delaware Department of Education (DOE) and the 11 schools it sponsors are exemplary in that they contain clear and measurable objectives, specific benchmarks, and rigid reporting requirements.

The structure of the DOE performance agreement calls for objectives to be set in the following areas: academic achievement, behavior of students, market accountability, and parent satisfaction. The results presented in Chapter 5 of the technical report indicate that the charter schools are doing a rather good job of living up to their performance agreements. More work is needed with some schools, however, to ensure that they report fully on their

academic achievement. Nevertheless, the results regarding behavior goals, market accountability, and parent satisfaction were complete and—for the most part—satisfactory.

The goals and objectives specified in the charter schools' performance agreements are unique from most other states in that they also include indicators of market accountability. The use of market indicators in the performance agreement can help provide early warnings regarding a failing charter school. Early warnings mean that steps can be taken to assist schools at risk of closure or to buffer the impact on district schools from the closure of a charter school.

On the teacher/staff questionnaires, we included a number of items that looked at teachers' satisfaction with their charter school's mission and their perception of whether or not the school could fulfill the mission. Nearly all teachers and staff indicated that they were familiar with the unique missions of their schools. Teachers and staff also indicated that they were very satisfied with the missions of their respective schools; however, a lower proportion of the teachers and staff were satisfied with their schools' ability to fulfill the mission.

Student Performance on the Delaware Student Testing Program

Reports and Web-based documents prepared by the Department of Education provide extensive data on school performance for charter schools and traditional public schools alike. The nature of the data and indicators presented, however, does not allow us to calculate accurately the impact of charter schools on student learning. To do so, we need to track individual students and measure growth of these students while enrolled at a charter school relative to growth of demographically similar students enrolled in traditional public schools during the same time period.

The Delaware Department of Education provided extensive student level data to members of the evaluation team. The data did not contain personal information, although they did have unique identifiers that allowed us to track individual students over time and to link students with background demographic information.

During year 1 of the evaluation we analyzed the results from the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP) math, reading, and writing tests, which are administered at grades 3, 5, 8, and 10. The scope and nature of these data allowed us to use a matched student design to examine the impact that charter schools were having on student learning. The matched student design is a quasi-experimental design in which students in the experimental group (i.e., charter schools) are matched according to all relevant background and demographic indicators with students in the control group (i.e., traditional public schools). Students are followed over time, and we track and compare relative gains.

Six panels were created and tracked over time. In order to be included in the panels, students had to have valid test scores for both the pretest and posttest. This, unfortunately, removed students who repeat a grade or students coming from private schools who did not take the state assessment at the designated pretest time. The largest panels included more

than 500 students, and the smallest panels (tracing students from grade 8 to grade 10) had just under 200 students.

To address the central reform question—Is there a difference in achievement between students attending charter schools vs. students attending noncharter schools?—an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted on the last DSTP assessment with the previous DSTP assessment score as the covariate. Separate ANCOVA analyses were examined for DSTP scaled score and SAT-9 normal curve equivalents for the reading and math assessments and with the writing raw score for the writing assessment. The findings presented in the report focused on the reading and math results because of the inherent weaknesses in the measure available for the writing assessment.

The results outlined in detail in chapter 6 indicate that charter school students often perform better than matched traditional public school students in the upper grades. There were small differences between the charter school students and comparison students between grades 3 and 5. Only two differences were statistically significant; one of these differences favored traditional public schools, and one difference favored charter schools. At grade 8, two of the four comparisons proved to have large differences that were statistically significant and both of these differences favored charter schools.

The largest differences between charter school students and matched students in traditional public schools were at grade 10. Three of the four comparisons showed that the differences were statistically significant, and all these differences favored charter school students. In other words, the charter school students included in the panels were gaining more on the DSTP between grade 8 and grade 10 than demographically matched students in traditional public schools. One serious limitation to keep in mind here is that many students in the grade 8 to grade 10 panels did not actually enter a charter school until grade 9. Also, many students were dropped from this panel because they did not have a grade 8 DSTP score. This is likely because they were enrolled in private schools or were coming from out of state.

The findings indicate that the panels ending in 2004 had more differences that favored charter schools than the panels ending in 2003. This provides some tentative evidence that charter schools are improving over time. However, this may also be explained by the fact that the more recent panels include more schools, some of which have fewer years of operation. The results varied extensively by school with some schools performing especially well, while other are struggling. The findings in chapter 6 also highlight results by individual schools.

Creaming the best or serving the neediest? While many charter schools establish curricular profiles and marketing materials that make them most attractive to students failing in traditional public schools, some charter schools also have profiles and marketing practices that help them attract high performing students. In addition to calculating gain scores for students over time, our analysis of student achievement also yielded interesting findings with regard to whether charter schools were attracting and enrolling high performing students or at-risk or low performing students. The covariate means that we calculated for our analyses

represent the pretest scores of students that are matched by race, gender, free and reduced lunch status, English Language Proficiency status, and Title I status. A comparison of the covariate means at grade 4 illustrates that the charter school students and demographically similar students in the control group have similar pretest performance levels. This means that at lower elementary levels, the charter schools were serving students that were similar in performance levels to the traditional public schools. At grade 8, however, the charter schools are clearly attracting and enrolling higher performing students. This difference is further exacerbated in grade 10, where the charter school students have substantially higher pretest scores than their demographically similar peers. These comparisons suggest that while the charter schools on the whole are not “creaming” or attracting the best performing students in the lower elementary grades, they clearly are doing so in the lower and upper secondary levels. [Because our analysis controls for pretest scores, this finding should not discount the fact that charter school students still were gaining more on the state assessment than matched students in the upper grades.]

Limitations and future analyses. While the findings have a number of limitations, which are spelled out at the end of chapter 6, we hope and expect that some of these limitations can be addressed in future analyses of the data:

- Conduct more specific analyses of subgroups, including characteristics of “stayers” and “leavers.”
- Apply and compare other study designs.
- Include additional years of test data and additional subjects (i.e., science and social studies).

Dilemmas and Issues Related to Overseeing a Successful Charter School Reform

The final chapter of the technical report contains a summary of the relevant findings and a discussion of issues related to the oversight of Delaware charter schools. Among the questions that are addressed are the following:

- How do authorizers differ in terms of oversight practices?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of rigorous oversight?
- What factors or conditions facilitate rigorous oversight?

Differences in authorizers. The Delaware charter school law allows only the Department of Education (with consent of the State Board of Education) and local district boards to sponsor charter schools. While the state has sponsored 11 schools, only 1 local district—the Red Clay Consolidated School District—had gotten involved by sponsoring 2 charter

schools. The 2 authorizers are similar in that they have set the bar high for new applications (the DOE has increased its expectations for new applications over time). The authorizers differ, however, in the amount and nature of oversight they undertake. The local district engages in very little oversight of its 2 charter schools and does not appear to have a rigorous performance agreement or reporting mechanisms in place. The local district indicated that it will engage in oversight at the time the charter needs to be renewed. The Department of Education, on the other hand, conducts extensive oversight of the charter schools it sponsors, even though the charter schools complain loudly about the extensive oversight. With respect to the work of DOE, Delaware provides much more careful and rigorous oversight of its charter schools than most other states.

Advantages and disadvantages of rigorous oversight. Many issues need to be considered and balanced when it comes to rigorous oversight of charter schools. Below is a brief list of some of the primary advantages and disadvantages of rigorous oversight, such as that pursued by the Delaware Department of Education. The main advantages include the following:

- More likely that only the best applications for charters are approved
- More likely that poor performing charter schools will close
- Less likely that less serious management companies with high cost structures will remain
- Less likely that children and communities are negatively affected by poor performing charter schools or untimely closure of charter schools

On the other hand, the main disadvantages of rigorous oversight and regulation include the following:

- Charter schools are less free to innovate.
- Charter schools have less autonomy and flexibility that may be necessary to ensure a more efficient and effective use of limited resources.
- Human and financial resources of the Delaware State Board of Education and Delaware Department of Education are disproportionately directed to charter schools that serve a small portion of the states' public school students.

Factors or conditions that facilitate rigorous oversight. The Delaware Department of Education is able and willing to monitor closely the performance and viability of the charter schools and hold them accountable to regulations and their specific performance agreements. The capacity for this type of oversight can be attributed to a number of factors including (i) small size of the state and scale of the reform, (ii) detailed and centralized accountability system, (iii) devoted and effective DOE staff, and (iv) timely and well targeted technical assistance. These factors are elaborated in chapter 7.

Conclusions

It is clear from the findings that the charter schools in Delaware are highly accountable, and their performance—in terms of student achievement—is similar or better than what we find in traditional public schools. The strong accountability and the relative positive performance of these schools can be attributed to a number of factors. Key factors that are likely to explain the positive outcomes include the following:

- Rigorous approval process
- Rigorous oversight
- Clear and measurable expectations
- Comprehensive and valid data that are readily available
- Provisions of extensive technical assistance
- Relatively strong funding
- Bipartisan support

Each of these factors is described and discussed in detail in chapter 7.

Delaware charter schools and their authorizers have benefited from their collective experiences over time. The DOE has strengthened its capacity to screen charter school proposals, set high expectations, train new charter school operators, and manage data. Charter schools have learned to operate in the challenging environment in which much is expected of them. In the next phase of the charter school reform in Delaware, progress can be made in several areas including the streamlining and systematization of data collection by the DOE, further development of a supportive charter school network, and support organizations that can shift some responsibility for technical assistance away from DOE.

The Delaware charter school reform is among the more closely monitored and regulated reforms in the nation. We say this based not only on our evaluation of charter school reforms in five other states, but also on what we have learned from the literature. This said, it is important to point out that more rigorous regulation and oversight of charter schools is not necessarily bad. Although the charter schools complain of too much interference, and although staff and resources at the Delaware Department of Education are taxed with extra work, it is likely that this more rigorous regulation and oversight has led to more stable, viable, and better performing charter schools.

While moderate success is obvious in the charter schools, a number of negative or unanticipated outcomes need to be watched and considered carefully. These include accelerating the resegregation of public schools by race, class, and ability and the disproportionate diversion of district and state resources (both financial and human resources) to the more recently established charter schools. These possible unanticipated outcomes will be addressed in year 2 of the study, along with further examination of the original outcomes that were the intent of the state's charter school law.