

# Chapter Two

## Methods

The wide variety of evaluation questions outlined in chapter 1 required a multi-method approach to data collection and analysis. Our aim was to collect enough information to analyze all charter schools individually as well as among groups of schools with similar characteristics. The data collected allowed us to provide feedback information to individual schools to help them make improvements as well as to address the evaluation questions regarding the charter school reform as a whole. Since our mandate was to evaluate the charter school reform, rather than individual schools, this interim report focuses on generalizations across the charter schools and does not make judgments about individual schools. Decisions regarding the nature and type of data to be collected were made in consultation with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to ensure that they are worthwhile and of interest to decision makers and other interested parties. All final decisions about evaluation methodology, findings, and interpretation were made by the evaluation team alone.

### **2.1 Approach and Strategies for Data Collection**

The following data collection methods were employed:

- Surveys of staff, students, and parents (charter school surveys developed by The Evaluation Center and nationally normed school climate surveys)
- Reviews of student work samples (when available)
- Interviews
- Document review
- Portfolios (if available)
- Direct observation
- Focus group meetings
- Analysis of test scores and available demographic and financial data

The general strategies for collecting information are summarized in Table 2:1. Table 2:2 is a matrix of the evaluation questions and sources of data/information for each question.

Table 2:1 Data Collection Strategies and Information Sources

Strategy/ Source	Question- naires	Interviews	Document Review	Focus Groups	Achievement Data	School Profiles	Direct Observation
Students	X			X	X		X
Teachers	X	X		X			X
School CAOs/ Directors	X	X					X
Parents	X	X		X			
Local School Districts that Charter		X	X				
Community Members		X					
PDE Personnel		X	X				
School Records			X				
Schools			X		X		X

Table 2-2 Matrix of Study Objectives and Sources of Information

General Objectives of the Study	Charter School Surveys (for teachers/staff, students, and parents/guardians)	School Climate Survey (for teachers/staff, students, and parents/guardians)	Interviews	Document Review	Focus Group	Achievement Data (PSSA)	PSSA School Profiles/Indicators	Direct Observation
What are promising practices in charter schools that could be included in district systemic reform?			X	X	X		X	X
Is there evidence that, over the term of the charter, student learning has significantly improved?	X	X	X	X	X		X	X
Does increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability result in improved pupil results?	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Are opportunities offered to charter school teachers, parents, and students to influence classroom and school policy significantly different from those offered at traditional public schools?	X	X	X	X	X			
Are opportunities (i.e., professional growth, salaries, benefits, employee rights) for teachers and other employees significantly different at a charter school than from a traditional public school?	X	X	X	X	X		X	
What happens to students who leave charter schools?	X	X	X	X			X	

We are aware of the fact that charter schools are of considerable public interest and that they are bombarded with requests for information and to serve as subjects for a variety of studies. In addition, we know that they have been targeted by the public media for stories related to an array of topics. While this attention may be complimentary and initially well received, it can become a considerable drain on the resources of the relatively small staffs of charter schools. Usually, those in administrative roles at charter schools are unaccustomed to these requests and do not have the support services to maintain a responsive position.

These conditions posed potential complications for this study; therefore, we made efforts to use existing data that may be required for other reports. We also focused on only those issues that are important and necessary for this study and selected respondents who were considered to be knowledgeable about the issue(s) being addressed and who could contribute to the quality of the information/data that we collected. The planning and coordination of the data collection in the schools were much improved over time, and we hope the process of obtaining information was viewed as time well spent by the participants and useful by stakeholders.

As noted in the matrices, some of the data we collected are quantitative in nature and some are qualitative. Sources of information for answering the key evaluation questions often included a combination of qualitative and quantitative data/information. Likewise, a variety of sources were often used to provide a basis for responding to a question. We often use the term “triangulation” in our data/information-gathering efforts. While this implies three indicators or sources, we often employed more than three sources to provide a more detailed and dependable explanation.

For example, we examined the level of satisfaction with the schools from the vantage point of students, teachers, administrators, and parents. We considered evidence of academic achievement from test scores, as well as self-rated performance by students and parents’ opinions about their children. In addition, we asked teachers about other types of achievement that reflected the mission and goals of the school. Input about the role and effectiveness of the local school districts that granted their charter was supplied by charter school representatives, appropriate Pennsylvania Department of Education personnel, and others identified by the authorizers themselves.

## **2.2 Specific Methods for Data Collection**

This section contains brief descriptions of the data collection methods. Further details on these methods are included in the sections that contain the respective results.

### ***Surveys***

Four different surveys were used in the course of the study. Charter school surveys developed by The Evaluation Center were administered to teachers/staff, students, and parents/guardians. A school climate survey from the National Association of Secondary School Principals was also used. While the questions in

the charter school surveys were targeted to each group (i.e., parents, students, and charter school staff), the same school climate survey was administered to all three stakeholder groups in the charter schools.

All schools were visited during the spring of 2002 for the purpose of administering surveys. We visited each of the 31 schools that opened in either 1997 or 1998 twice prior to 2002. The first round of these visits occurred in May and early June 1999. The second round occurred during March and April 2000. The fieldwork went rather smoothly, and most schools were prepared and eager to work with us. At a few schools, however, the level of cooperation from school representatives was minimal. During these visits, questionnaires were administered to students. Before the site visit, survey packages were prepared and mailed to all instructional staff and key administrators as well as for a random sample of between 25 and 35 parents. During the site visit we picked up the completed staff surveys, from an assigned contact person. The parent surveys were returned to us by mail. Interviews were also conducted; and documentation, where available, was collected about the school.

Below a brief description of the questionnaires and targeted stakeholder groups is included as well as information about the timing of the administration of the questionnaires and the actual data collection process. Appendices A, B, and C contain the survey questions and results.

*Teachers/staff charter school survey.* All teachers and school personnel who work more than 5 hours per week and who are involved with instruction, including administrative and professional support personnel, were asked to complete this questionnaire. The respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire, enclose it in an envelope, and then return it to a designated person at the school. Teachers were instructed not to place their names on the questionnaire, although they were asked to check their name off a list so that we could trace and follow up with missing respondents. Since the completed forms were to be collected, sealed, and returned or mailed to the external evaluator by a designated person at each school, ample assurance was given that the responses would be anonymous. A cover letter explained the purpose of the survey, and each teacher received an envelope in which to enclose the survey.

*Student charter school survey.* This questionnaire was used only with students in grades 5-12. This meant that a few schools that catered only to lower elementary grades were not included. Three classes of students were selected at each school. These questionnaires were administered by a member of the evaluation team, and all of the students in these classes were asked to complete a questionnaire. The purpose of the survey and the manner in which the results would be used were explained to the students before they began completing the forms. After initial instructions, students in grades 7-12 could typically complete the questionnaires on their own. More instructions for individual items were provided to students in Grades 5 and 6.

*Parent/guardian charter school survey.* Depending on the size of the school, between 25 and 35 families at each school were selected to complete the survey. Families were randomly selected from a roster of all students by a member of the evaluation team. Additional details regarding the sampling can be found on the

evaluation Web site (<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/>) in the document entitled "Instructions for Administering the Parent/Guardian Survey." A cover letter explained the purpose of the survey, and each parent received a self-addressed, stamped return envelope in which to enclose the survey. School participation on the survey was optional during the first round of data collection (May 1999). This was because of the short space of time available to administer the survey and conduct a thorough follow-up before the end of the school year. During the second and third rounds of data collection, two dollars were enclosed in each envelope going home to selected parents. This served as a means to express our gratitude for the time parents took in completing and returning the survey.

*School Climate Survey for teachers/staff, students and parents/guardians.* This is a commercial instrument developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals. The administration of this instrument was coordinated by the external evaluators or by field researchers who worked as part of the evaluation team. One advantage of the School Climate Survey is that national norms are available so that charter schools can see how they rate compared with other public schools across the nation.

The summarized results from each survey were returned to each school for its own planning purposes. Additionally, a short report containing the responses to the open-ended questions were returned to the schools. When returning the results of the second round of surveys, we also provided the schools with a primer to help them understand and interpret the results for their school.

*Response rates on surveys .* 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. We pieced together this picture by sampling representative groups of stakeholders at each school. Table 2:3 contains the information on target population, achieved sample, and response rates.

Our strategy in sampling teachers/staff was to receive a high response rate from all teachers/staff in the charter schools. For students, the strategy was to select three representative classes at each school. In many cases this involved sampling 100 percent of all the students at grade 5 or above. In all other cases, the three classes represented a large portion of all enrolled students.

Since one of the key purposes of the charter school reform is parental choice, parents are clearly one of the most important stakeholder groups. Unfortunately, parents are also the most difficult group from which to collect information. Many other studies invest time and effort into sampling all parents, but then invest little effort into follow-up. In order to achieve a representative sample, our strategy was to sample a smaller group of parents at each school and then work hard to obtain a high response rate from this randomly selected group. Either of the two approaches would likely have yielded a similar number of returned surveys, but from our experience we find that the parents who initially respond are either extremely critical or extremely positive about the school. In other words, a small, well-drawn sample is better than a large, poorly drawn sample, since the former is more likely to be representative of the target population. Table 2:3 illustrates the overall sample and response rate by stakeholder group and year.

Table 2:3 Sample Size and Response Rates for Charter School Surveys

	1998-99			1999-00			2001-02		
	Target Pop.	Achieved Sample	Response Rate	Target Pop.	Achieved Sample	Response Rate	Target Pop.	Achieved Sample	Response Rate
Teacher/ Staff	609	447	73.4%	649	536	82.6%	1,990	1,706	85.7% <sup>1</sup>
Student	1,021	923	90.4%	1,221	1,105	90.5%	3,023	2,519	83.3% <sup>2</sup>
Parent/ Guardian	577	292	50.6%	777	364	46.8%	1,949	863	44.3% <sup>3</sup>

While not included in Table 2:3, it should be pointed out that in 1999-00, we also administered a nationally normed school climate survey to the schools. The response rates were 86 percent from teachers/staff, 90 percent for students, and 68 percent for parents.

### ***Interviews and Site Visits***

During the site visits when we administered surveys, as well during other site visits, we conducted interviews with the CAOs and other staff members. In some schools we also had the opportunity to meet with parents and community members. As on other occasions, the purpose of the visits was to collect information about innovative or unique aspects of the schools, as well as to inquire about evidence of success according to the school mission statement.

### ***Document Review***

The annual reports the charter schools prepared and submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Education in August each year were the primary

<sup>1</sup> Three schools did not complete teacher/surveys despite several attempts to obtain their participation: Family CS, Harambee Institute CS, and Freire CS.

<sup>2</sup> We received student surveys from 62 schools in 2000-01. Eleven schools did not complete student surveys since they did not have students in grades 5 or above. Due to scheduling problems and/or resistance from schools, three schools that had students in grades 5-12 were not sampled: Freire Charter School, Village Charter School of Chester-Upland, and PA Learners Online Regional CS. The response rate for students dropped in the most recent year due to the poor response rates that we received from students enrolled at the cyber schools. Typically, we administer the surveys to the students in person. However, we had to mail student surveys to the cyber school students.

<sup>3</sup> While most schools had response rates on the parent surveys between 40 and 65 percent, 9 schools were dropped from the analysis because they had response rates that were below 20 percent despite repeated attempts to survey the parents. These schools were Chester CS, Crispus Attucks Youthbuild CS, Freire CS, Germantown Settlement CS, La Academia: The Partnership CS, Math Civics and Sciences CS, Nueva Esperanza Academy CS, Richard Allen Preparatory CS, and YouthBuild Philadelphia CS.

source of documentation regarding the operation and performance of the charter schools. For the 6 oldest schools we obtained 5 annual reports, and for 23 schools we received 4 annual reports. Additionally, we received annual reports from all but a few of the schools that began operation during the 1999-00, 2000-01, and 2001-02 school years.<sup>4</sup>

Wishing to be as unobtrusive as possible, we requested documentation already produced by the schools that would likely contain the information we wished to collect regarding each individual charter school. During site visits, we also asked for descriptive information/evidence about a school's success and its ability to fulfill its mission as well as any innovative or unique aspects of the school in terms of curriculum, instructional methods, or governance/administrative/operational aspects.

### ***Analysis of Data Available from the Pennsylvania Department of Education***

From the Pennsylvania Department of Education Web site we were able to download data pertaining to charter schools and their host districts, as well as all other districts across the Commonwealth. By host district, we are referring to the public school district in which the charter school resides. We downloaded databases pertaining to head counts, finance, and PSSA test results. For most of the indicators, we were able to include data for the last five years. The Pennsylvania Department of Education made extraordinary efforts to provide us with data files for 2001-02, which still have not been released to the public. The one area where data was lacking was financial data. Typically, these data are two years old before they are released. PDE did provide general indicators on expenditures for the 2001-02 school year; however, the most recent revenue data was for the 1999-00 school year, which we downloaded from the Standard and Poors' School Evaluation Services Web site.

Since most of our comparisons were made with similar noncharter public schools or with host districts, we extracted the records for the charter schools and their matching host districts. Next we merged the charter school and host district data into the same records for each year. Finally, we merged records for each school and year into the same database. The structure of these databases allowed us to conduct longitudinal analyses of the charter school data relative to the host district.

## **2.3 Data Analyses and Reporting**

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.

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<sup>4</sup> In 2001-02, the only three schools that did not submit an annual report were PA Learners Online Regional CS, Delaware Valley CS, and Harambee Institute CS

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 PDE .

As the surveys were collected and returned to The Evaluation Center, all of the open-ended responses were typed up and recorded in a separate database with responses linked to school ID, role of stakeholder, and question number. The written comments from teachers/staff, parents, and students were returned to each school. All comments were stripped of identifying information in order to assure the anonymity of the respondents.

As we collected the data, it was organized and integrated into a relational database. Archiving the data in the database facilitated the simultaneous analysis of district-level, school-level, and individual-level data. At the heart of the database are three sets of tables specific for each school. These tables are linked to school-level summaries generated from the student, staff, and parent surveys and to data from PDE's Pennsylvania School Profiles.

Data analyses are summarized in tables with appropriate explanatory narratives. Preliminary copies of formal reports were submitted to the PDE contact for review. The purpose of the optional review of the reports (formally or informally) by PDE-designated persons and any other personnel is to correct errors and omissions and to ensure readability by stakeholders.

In all cases, the Program Evaluation Standards were followed in the conduct and operation of this study.

The collected data yielded information to help us make judgments about individual charter schools, groups of charter schools, and the charter school initiative as a whole. For example, analysis was conducted with the following comparisons in mind:

- ❑ Compare charter schools over time (for the six original schools for which we had five years of data to consider).
- ❑ Compare each charter school with its host school district or with schools with similar background characteristics including demographics, size, location, and education level. Comparisons included test scores, demographic information, financial data regarding revenues and expenditures, etc.
- ❑ Results from the charter school surveys and School Climate Survey were merged with school-based data regarding the demographics, size, location, etc. This allowed comparisons of the degree of satisfaction and quality of school climate with school characteristics.

In recognition of the various stakeholder groups, decision makers, and interested parties, special efforts were made to communicate the procedures, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in understandable formats. In order to provide information to the various stakeholders, a Web site (<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/>) was established that contained information

about the evaluation as well as copies of the data collection instruments and other fieldwork-related documentation.

## 2.4 Limitations to the Evaluation

A number of limitations to this study need to be weighed and considered. These are described in the following paragraphs.

*Polarization.* The most important limitation is perhaps the very polarized nature of the reform and the strong vested interest on the part of many of the stakeholders. Due to this, there is a tendency for information to be painted “black” or “white.” For an evaluator, this makes such a study a challenge.

*Sampling.* Generally, response rates on the surveys were very good when compared with other similar studies. Instead of sending surveys to all respondents and letting them “self-select” into the sample (which creates bias), we randomly selected smaller groups of respondents and then engaged in extensive follow-up to ensure representative samples.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, response rates at a few schools were unacceptably low and so the school had to be dropped from the analysis. The response rates from parents and guardians were not as high as for the other stakeholder groups. Likewise, response rates on the School Climate Survey were not as good as those for the charter school survey.

Because of the strong vested interests, there is obviously the possibility of misleading information being provided by those we interviewed. Wherever possible, we tried to double-check information. When references were made to financial issues or testing results, we attempted to confirm such information using the databases we obtained from PDE.

*Timing.* Many of the schools we visited and surveyed were in their first years of operation. Many organizations –not just schools –have problems related to start-up that work themselves out over time. It is possible, therefore, that these schools will require more time to show their true potential.

*Comparisons with other schools.* Many of the questions addressed in this report require systematic comparisons between charter and noncharter schools. In many instances, administrative data make such comparisons quite easy, as with PSSA scores, demographic data, and enrollments. In other instances, such as innovation, limitations to the project’s scope and budget made such comparisons infeasible.

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<sup>5</sup> For the teacher surveys we sought to sample all teachers (a census rather than a sample).

## 2.5 Challenges Confronting the Evaluation

One challenge confronting any evaluation concerns the overall frame of the evaluation. In some cases, evaluators take the existence of the program for granted and seek to find ways to improve it. This is most closely associated with formative evaluation. In other cases, evaluators seek to assess whether the program should continue at all. Usually, such evaluations assess the extent to which the program realizes some preordained social or policy goal. This is most closely associated with summative evaluation. This evaluation of Pennsylvania charter schools combines elements of both formative and summative evaluation. The first three parts of the report address issues that are more formative in nature, seeking to identify strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the charter school law. The last part –on student outcomes –seeks to assess the extent to which the program is achieving a variety of student outcomes. Thus, the latter chapters provide an assessment of the program’s overall desirability, as measured by its ability to achieve its stated goals.

However, there are a number of limitations in our ability to provide summative feedback at this stage. Ultimately, the decision to revoke, continue, or revise Pennsylvania’s experiment with charter schools must include the following considerations. First, how much gain in student outcomes (achievement and otherwise) is enough to justify the program’s existence? One way to address this question is to estimate the *cost* of a unit improvement in various outcomes relative to the *value* policymakers place on those improved outcomes. Unfortunately, we were unable to generate reliable cost-effectiveness estimates in this study. Clearly, good methods exist for estimating cost-effectiveness and benefit-cost ratios for educational programs (see, e.g., Grissmer et al., 2000). At this point, however, the financial data are insufficient to support reliable estimates. Second, policymakers should consider the opportunity costs of the charter school program. In other words, might the resources expended on charter schools be better spent on other programs designed to pursue the same goals? Estimates of opportunity costs are even trickier than estimates of fiscal costs, since they inevitably involve tough choices about program and value trade-offs.

Another challenge the evaluation team encountered came in assessing the extent to which various charter school practices are innovative. The challenges were part philosophical and part practical in nature. Philosophically, the concept of innovation is highly contested, with little agreement by scholars and others on its definition. We entertain two competing definitions of innovation at the beginning of chapter 9. Nonetheless, our judgments of innovation are clearly sensitive to choice of definition. More practically, given the scope of the project, we found it difficult to provide systematic assessments of the extent to which any given charter school practice was unique relative to its host district schools. Thus, we relied mostly on less rigorous comparisons between charter school practices and those that are “typical” nationwide.

Still another challenge derives from the controversial nature of charter school policy and school choice policies more generally. Indeed, the apparent bipartisan consensus on charter schools masks deeper disagreements about how charter

policies should be designed. At the heart of this controversy lie legitimate differences of opinion on important value questions, such as the ultimate goals of education and school policy. As we note in the report, charter school stakeholders hold various positions on the relative importance of equity, efficiency, and choice. Thus, it is often difficult to disentangle factual disagreements about the impact of charter schools from value disagreements about the ultimate goals of charter schools. Where possible, we have tried to identify how our findings might affect the pursuit of these various goals (see Chapters 11 and 12).

A final challenge came in interpreting the empirical findings from the evaluation. As is often the case with new programs, the findings in this report are mixed. Some aspects of Pennsylvania's charter school policy appear to be going well, others not so well. Readers should bear in mind, however, that most of the findings in the text of the report represent aggregate generalizations. Hence, to say that some aspect of the charter school experiment is going poorly does not imply that *all* charter schools are doing poorly on that dimension. Similarly, to say that some aspect of the program is going well does not imply that all charter schools are doing well on that dimension. To account for such variations, we have sought, where possible, to include descriptions of school-to-school variation in the text. In addition, we have included detailed school-level tables on a number of variables. Generally, where the data in question are considered public, we have provided the school-level tables. Where the data are considered nonpublic, or particularly unreliable, we have not provided the school-level tables. We encourage readers to pay close attention to the tables and appendices to gain a full appreciation of the range of charter school experiences in Pennsylvania.