

Chapter Six

Student and Family Characteristics:

In this chapter we present charter students' characteristics and compare them with those of noncharter students. We also present information on the families of charter school students. The charter concept (like all policies) makes certain assumptions about the behavior and attitudes of its target population (students and families). Questions we will address include the following:

- ❑ How do charter students' and families' background characteristics compare with those of noncharter students and families, particularly in the host district?
- ❑ What kinds of schools did students attend before coming to the charter school?
- ❑ How much student turnover is there in charter schools?
- ❑ Why did students and their families choose their charter school?
- ❑ Are students and parents aware of the school's mission?

6.1 Sampling of Students and Parents

Student Sample

For the purpose of this study, a sample of students completed questionnaires in 3 different school years: 1998-99, 1999-00, and 2001-02. Only students in grades 5 and above were included in the surveys. Twenty-three schools and 923 students were included in the 1998-99 sample (8 of the 31 schools were not included in 1999 since they did not have any students enrolled in grade 5 or higher). In the second sampling during spring 2000, 25 of the original 31 schools and a total of 1,106 students were included in the sample (only 5 schools were not included in 2000 because they did not provide instruction at grade 5 and above; also, one school was closed after the 1999-00 school year). The third round of sampling was the most comprehensive covering 62 schools¹ and including 2,519 students.

¹ In total, we collected survey data from 76 schools. Eleven schools did not enroll students above grade 5 so they did not complete the student survey. Due to scheduling problems, 2 schools with students in grades 5-12 were not sampled: Freire C.S. and Village C. S. of Chester-Upland. One cyber charter, PA Learners Online Regional CS, was sampled, but we did not receive any responses.

All students were targeted in the selected classes, but a number of students were either absent or not present during the administration of the surveys and were not included. The response rate, which was calculated on the number of students who completed the surveys in the sampled classes, was high for all 3 samples (90.4 percent in 1999, 90.3 percent in 2000, and 83.3 percent in 2002). We had rather low response rates for the cyber schools, especially in the 2002 sample. This was due to difficulties in corresponding with students who had to be sampled though the mail.

The aim of the sampling was to select at least 3 classes and at least 40 students at each school. In some cases the number of students was less than 40. In these cases, we sampled all the students enrolled at the school in grade 5 and above. To the extent possible, an effort was made to select classes instructed by different teachers who represented different grades and subject areas. Only classes required by most/all students at a particular grade level were sampled in order to avoid selection bias.

All members of the evaluation team received a handbook with instructions and support materials for the data collection before the work started. Members of the evaluation team administered the surveys to students. Evaluation team members read general instructions and then explained the items that some students typically have trouble with. For classes in grades 5 and 6, the survey administrator read through the whole survey, item by item, as the students completed the work. Additionally, in-service training was provided to new members of the evaluation team before they administered surveys to students on their own.

Parent Sample

Depending on the size of the school, between 25 and 35 parents from each school were randomly selected during a visit by a member of the evaluation team in May 1999, in the spring of 2000, and the spring of 2002. The random sample of families was drawn from a roster of all students. Survey packages containing a cover letter, questionnaire, and a return envelope were prepared for each selected family. In 1999 and 2000 each charter school was encouraged to prepare and include its own cover letter in order to make the contact with the families more familiar. In 2002 representatives from the charter school were asked to contact each parent receiving a survey to encourage participation. The questionnaires were mailed directly to the families by the evaluation team. Upon completion, the questionnaires were returned to the evaluation team by mail in addressed, postage paid envelopes; and the name of the family was checked off the list to denote that the survey was completed and returned. A summary of the disaggregated results for each school was returned to each school after the data analysis was completed.

This component of the evaluation was optional during the first year because there was not sufficient time for follow-up before the close of the school year. Two dollars were enclosed with each survey. As many as three follow-up surveys were sent to some families and, in some schools, as many as four follow-up calls were made to nonresponding families. The effort put into the follow-up increased

the overall response rate, even though the response rate was below our anticipated goal.

In 1999, 11 schools did not conduct parent surveys or were unable to obtain a sufficient response rate to have their parent responses included in the state totals. The overall response rate was 50.6 percent in the 1999 sample. In 2000, 5 schools did not receive a sufficient response rate and were not included in the totals for the state. Altogether, the response rate was 46.8 percent. In 2002, we received satisfactory response rates for parent surveys from 67 of 76 schools. The 9 schools that were dropped from the analysis either returned no surveys or had an insufficient response rate to be included. More details on sampling is found in chapter 2.

Typically, a 40 percent response rate has been used as a cutoff point for decisions about including schools in the total sample. A number of schools had parent response rates between 20 percent and 40 percent. If the school had a large number of families targeted to start with and if the distribution of results did not exhibit any noticeable differences from the remainder of the schools, we decided to include them. Within these 67 schools with satisfactory response rates in 2002, a total of 1,949 families were targeted; and we received surveys from 863 parents or guardians. Appendix B includes specific information about the survey results for students and Appendix C includes specific information about the survey results for parents.

6.2 Description of Charter School Students and Families

In this section, we describe the students enrolled in the charter schools. We relied on a variety of sources, including data reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education by the charter schools. Other sources of data included the annual reports prepared by the charter schools and the students and parents who took part in our sample.

For the 2001-02 school year, enrollment in Pennsylvania charter schools was 28,576 students. This is a rapid increase from the 1,179 students that were enrolled in the first year of the reform (1997-98) and just under 20,000 in 2000-01. Chapter 3 contains more specific information about the growth of the charter school reform in terms of the number of schools and enrolled students.

Grade and Age of Students

Students taking part in the survey were rather evenly divided between the middle and high school levels as well across the specific grade levels. Over the three samples, there was generally a shift to the lower grades. Figure 6:1 depicts the distribution of sampled students by grade from all three years. The students ranged from 9-20 years in age. They were rather evenly distributed by age, although the majority of the students fell between the ages of 11 and 16. Only 75 students were between the ages of 18 and 20. The average age of the students sampled in 1999 and 2000 was 13.8 years, but in 2002 this dropped to 13.2 years.

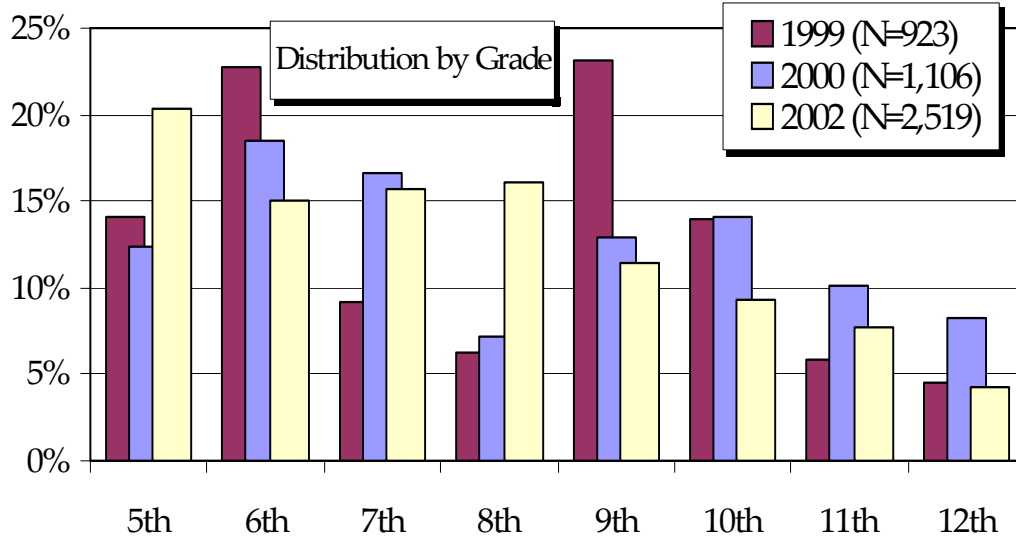


Figure 6:1 Distribution of Sampled Students by Grade

The children of the sampled parents were rather evenly distributed across the various grade levels, although grades 11 and 12 were underrepresented. Over 62 percent of the parents had children enrolled at the elementary level, 19.4 percent had children enrolled at the middle school level, and parents with students enrolled at the high school level accounted for 18.3 percent of all parents returning a questionnaire (an average of 4.8 percent at each grade level, 9-12).

Figure 6:2 illustrates the distribution of enrollment by grades according to official enrollment data. This bar chart illustrates that the largest proportion of students are enrolled in lower elementary and that upper secondary has the fewest.

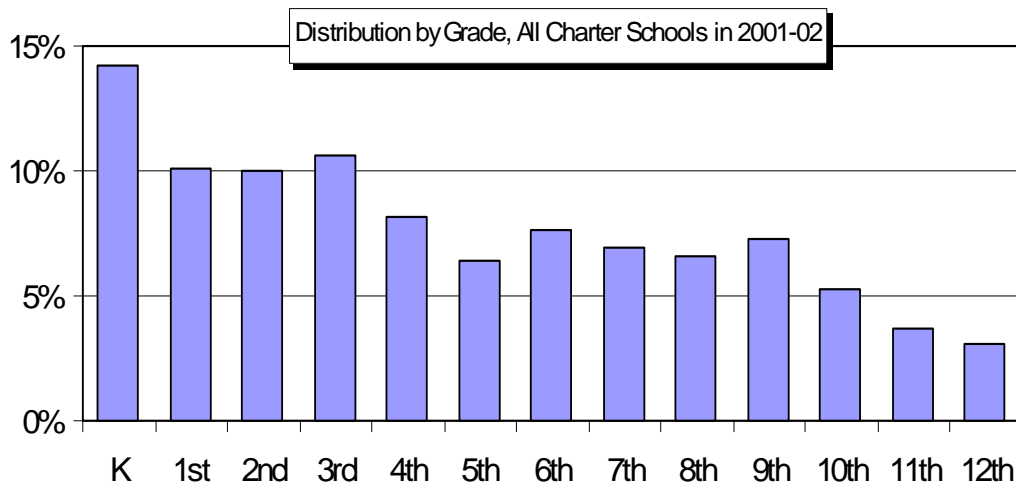


Figure 6:2 Distribution of All Pennsylvania Charter School Students by Grade

Gender

Students were fairly evenly distributed by gender, with 51.9 percent females and 48.1 percent males. It is interesting to point out, however, that there was considerable variance among schools. Some schools had high proportions of either males or females, depending on the nature and profile of the school.

Ethnicity

Minorities, which account for just under 75 percent of the sampled charter school enrollments, are highly represented in Pennsylvania's charter schools. Among the sampled students the largest group by race were blacks with 54.9 percent, followed by whites with 25.1 percent, Hispanics with 14.1 percent, Native Americans with 4.8 percent, and Asian/Pacific Islanders with 1.2 percent.

Figure 6:3 illustrates the breakdown of sampled students and parents by race and ethnicity and highlights differences between these samples and the officially reported figures for all students in the 77 charter schools that were operating in 2001-02.

Because the charter schools are highly concentrated in urban areas, and particularly in Philadelphia, we expected a large proportion of students from minority backgrounds. In contrast, the *National Study of Charter Schools Report* (RPP, 2000) gives the demographic breakdown for charter schools nationally with 48.2 percent white, 23.5 percent black, 21.1 percent Hispanic, 3.4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.6 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, and 1.2 percent other. From these figures we can see that Pennsylvania charter schools are attracting more minorities than are charter schools in other states. Chapter 10 examines issues related to equity and access and will provide a more detailed analysis of differences between charter and noncharter public schools in terms of race, family income, and ability.

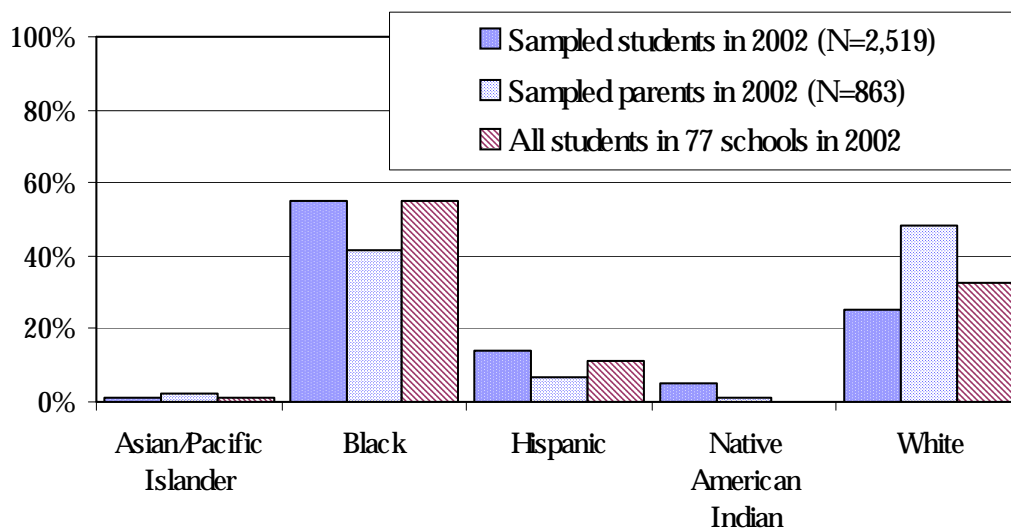


Figure 6:3 Distribution of All Charter School Students and Sampled Students and Parents by Race/Ethnicity, 2001-02

While the student sample included only schools that had at least one class between grades 5 and 12, the parent sample included all schools, even those with only lower elementary grades. More than 86 percent of the parents responding were female.

Ideally, the proportion of minority parents in the parent sample should reflect the proportion of enrolled students. Figure 6:2 illustrates that the sample of parents had more white families and fewer minority families than the sample of students. The differences could be due to the fact that the minority families have more siblings enrolled in the charter schools; thus, the proportion of minority families is not as high as the proportion of minority students. Another partial explanation is that the schools excluded due to a low response rate had a considerably higher proportion of minority students than the 67 schools included in this component of the study. It is also possible that the minority families were underrepresented in the sample because a higher proportion of them did not complete and return the survey. It is important to point out that, although a few schools have a high proportion of parents who do not have English or Spanish as their first language, the parent survey was made available in English and Spanish only.

Family Income and Family Type

In chapter 10 we examine in detail variables related to family income. To summarize some of the main findings, we can state that about 55 percent of the students enrolled in charter schools qualify for free and reduced lunch, compared with 53 percent in the host districts. Of course, there were considerable differences among the charter schools, with some having substantially higher proportions of students qualifying for FRL and others with substantially fewer students qualifying for FRL than their respective host districts. Comparison of average household income provides another way to examine the distribution of students in charter schools. The annual family income reported by the sampled parents in 2002 indicated that about 73 percent had annual family incomes between \$20,000 and \$100,000, with 7 percent of the families having incomes over \$100,000.

Sixty-five percent of the families were in two-parent homes in 2002, while 33.6 percent were in single parent homes and 1.4 percent lived in other types of households (e.g., student living with other relatives or residing in state facility). This variable also shifted between 2000 and 2002. For example, the percent of two-parent families with children enrolled in charter schools jumped from 57 percent in 2000 to 65 percent in 2002.

Highest Level of Education Charter School Students Plan to Complete

The students were asked about the highest level of education they planned to complete: high school, 2 years of college, 4 years of college, graduate school, and not sure yet. These categories were explained to the students, and examples of careers requiring the specific level of schooling were provided. In 2002, 5 percent of the sampled students expected to stop their schooling after high school, while

10 percent planned to complete a 2-year degree, 30 percent planned to complete a 4-year degree, and approximately 37 percent planned to go on to graduate school, which was explained to the students to include training after the bachelors degree that included a masters, doctoral, or professional degree. Not surprisingly, nearly a fifth of the students were still not sure about their future school/training plans beyond high school.

Level of Parents' Formal Education

The level of formal education of the sampled parents in 2002 varied considerably. Slightly more than 7 percent indicated that they had not completed high school; 27.6 percent of the parents ended their formal schooling after graduating from high school; 33.9 percent completed less than 4 years of college; 14.4 percent obtained a bachelors degree; 6.3 percent had a BA plus some graduate courses; and 10.6 percent, a slight increase from 2000, completed a graduate or professional degree.

Length of Enrollment at Charter School

Twenty-two percent of the students in 2002 reported that they had been enrolled in their charter school for 1 year or less, a logical decrease from 47 percent in 2000 and 88 percent in 1999. Fifteen percent of the sampled students had been enrolled for 2 years. Just over 30 percent of the students indicated that they were enrolled for 3 or more years, 21 percent indicated that they were enrolled for 4 years in their charter school, and 10 percent indicated that they were enrolled for 5 years. Since the charter school reform is only 5 years old, the maximum number of years a student could be enrolled in a charter school in 2002 was 5 years. However, some students reported being enrolled for more than 5 years since their schools were conversion charter schools.

Previous School Attended

More than 75 percent of the sampled students in the Pennsylvania charter schools reported that they had previously attended public schools. Of the remaining 25 percent, 19 percent attended either a private or a parochial school, and 1 percent were home schooled. The remaining students either did not attend school, attended some other form of school, or did not respond to the question. The proportion of students transferring from private/parochial to charter schools increased from 16 percent in 1999 to 17.4 percent in 2000 and to 18.7 percent in 2002. Because our sample includes only students in grades 5-12, and because a larger proportion of students move from private schools in the lower elementary grades, it is likely that our sample underestimates the proportion of students moving from private/parochial schools to charter schools. It is also important to point out that the actual proportion of the students that were previously homeschooled is likely to be much higher than what is reported since the response rates from students in the cyber schools was very poor.

The charter school enrollment of students who had not previously attended a public school represents an additional burden for the host school districts.

Districts must divert a portion of their resources to educate these students, yet the students do not represent a decrease the number of students left in the district. Representatives from the Philadelphia Public Schools indicated that students who move from nonpublic schools to charter schools represent a heavy financial burden on their budget. In 2000, 25 percent of the students enrolled in charter schools sponsored by the district moved from nonpublic schools. Our 2002 sample of students from Philadelphia indicated that 22 percent of the students enrolled in Philadelphia charter schools reported that they had previously attended nonpublic schools.² This was an increase from the 18.6 percent of students in 2000 and the 16.8 percent in 1999 who were previously enrolled in nonpublic schools.

Among the schools in our sample, there was considerable variation in terms of the types of schools from which the charter schools were attracting their students. While several charter schools have no students who previously attended a private/parochial school, 7 schools had 40 percent or more of their students coming from private/parochial schools. Except for Edison and former Advantage-run schools, the EMO-operated charter schools were more likely to have a high proportion of their students coming from private or parochial schools. Two Philadelphia schools operated by Nobel, for example, had approximately 40 percent of their students reporting that they had previously attended a private or parochial school. The cyber schools also had a higher proportion of their students coming from nonpublic schools. Finally, it should be noted that the private conversion schools also tended to have a higher proportion of students report that they had previously attended a private school. Obviously, this is explained by the fact that a large portion of the students currently enrolled were also enrolled in the same school before it converted to a public charter school. The schools with high proportions of students coming from private or parochial schools are, in most cases, also the schools that have low proportions of minority students and low-income students.

Figure 6:4 illustrates the differences between our student and parent samples in terms of what they reported as the previous school attended. We have grouped these various categories into three areas: public school, nonpublic school, or other. The sample of parents covered grades K-12, while the sample of students covered grades 5-12. It is common that after the first year of charter school operation the largest group of new students is at the entry grade level for a particular school. A more detailed look at the parent responses indicates that 8 percent of the parents selected “other” because their child was just entering school in kindergarten and had not attended a school previously.

² By contrast, the proportion of charter school students previously enrolled in private or parochial schools in the non-Philadelphia charter schools during 2002 was only 12 percent.

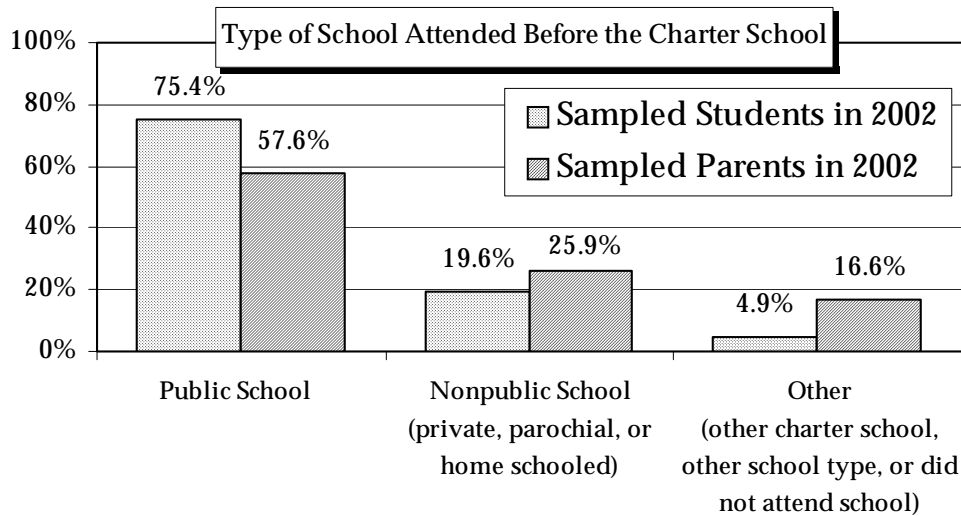


Figure 6:4 Type of School Attended Before Charter School:
Responses from Sampled Students and Parents, 2002

The movement of students from nonpublic schools to charter schools results in local districts having to pay for educating children who previously were not enrolled in the public schools. We have seen in other states that the local districts report a large movement of students to charter schools in their first year of operation; but over time, the transfer of students back and forth between the charter school and the local school district equalizes (Horn & Miron, 2000). In reality, the number of students moving to the charter schools is still high because elementary-level charter schools will continue to enroll large groups of students at the kindergarten level. Since the local districts never enrolled these students, they do not appear in their records as transfers.

Stability/Mobility of Students

PDE collects data on all public schools regarding the stability of its student population. For each school year, schools and districts are asked to report the number of new students entering after the start of the school year and the number of students that left during the school year. Table 6:1 illustrates the aggregated results for charter schools, their host districts, as well as for the Commonwealth. In order to make comparisons between charter schools and host districts, we calculated the entering and withdrawal rates as a percentage of total enrollment in the same year. The results indicate very small differences in terms of the aggregate entering and withdrawal rates. There were, however, large differences across the schools with some schools reporting withdrawal rates below 1 percent and 1 school reporting that more than half of its students had withdrawn. In total, just over 10 percent of the charter school students were new, compared with 14 percent of the students in the host districts. More closely matched, 13.5 percent of the charter school students were withdrawing, compared with 15.3 percent of the students in host districts. Figures for the Commonwealth as a whole were

considerably lower than for the charter schools and their host districts (see Figure 6:1).

Table 6:1 Median Stability Rates for Students Enrolled in Charter Schools and Host Districts

	Number Entering the School as a Percent of Total Enrollment	Number Withdrawing from the School as a Percent of Total Enrollment
Charter Schools	14.0%	15.3%
Host Districts	10.5%	13.5%
Pennsylvania	5.5%	6.4%

Note: Only 41 out of 77 school reported these data in 2001-02.

There are important limitations in the interpretation of the data. The first is that only 41 charter schools reported data. The second is that there are no codes or explanations for the reasons for withdrawal, so we cannot easily interpret the meaning of the data. Finally, the schools are in various states of implementation, so differences are bound to be related to the number of years a school is in operation. In 2001-02, 36 percent of the sampled students indicated that they had been enrolled in the school for 1 year or less. This provides a good sense of just how young many of the schools are.

Amount of Time Volunteering at Charter Schools

Interestingly, 73.7 percent of parents reported that they either did not volunteer at school at all or volunteered to a very limited degree (i.e., 3 hours per month or less). A much smaller proportion of the parents reported volunteering quite extensively. Just under 12 percent of the parents volunteered between 4 and 6 hours per month, 3.2 percent volunteered between 7 and 9 hours per month, 3.1 percent volunteered between 10 and 12 hours, and 8.4 percent volunteered more than 12 hours per month. One would expect even more extensive parent involvement, since 49 percent of the parents believed that voluntary work was required at their charter school. The proportion of parents who believed voluntary work was required dropped from 52.7 percent in 2000. The level of volunteering in the schools was similar in 2000 and 2002, though the percentage of parents volunteering 10 or more hours a month nearly doubled.

Distance to Charter School

Surveyed parents reported that the average distance from home to the charter school was 5.6 miles in 2002 (it was 4.9 miles in 2002 and 4.3 in 1999), while the average distance to the nearest applicable traditional public school was 2.4 miles. Distance to the school should not be a large deterrent for parents, since transportation is supposed to be provided by local school districts in the same manner as transportation is provided to other schools in the district. Nevertheless, since some charter schools are still working out arrangements for transportation

with the local districts, the considerably longer distance to the charter schools indicates a high level of commitment on the part of parents.

6.3 Reasons for Choosing Charter Schools: Responses From Sampled Students and Parents

Parents' Reasons for Choosing Their Charter School

In the most recent parent surveys, 89.8 percent reported that they were aware of the charter school's mission. Table 6:2 contains the rank-ordered reasons for choosing a charter school provided by our sample of 863 parents in 2002. The parents were asked to rate each factor on a 1 to 5 scale (1 = Not Important to 5 = Very Important) according to how important it was in choosing their charter school. The order and relative rating of the responses for the 1998-99 and 1999-00 school years differed very little from the 2001-02 sample of parents.

Table 6:2 Parents' Reasons for Choosing Their Charter School, Rank Ordered by Mean Scores, 2002

	<i>Not important</i>		<i>Very important</i>			<i>Mean</i>	<i>STD</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>		
Good teachers and high quality of instruction	1.6%	1.0%	8.8%	16.0%	72.7%	4.6	0.82
Safety for my child	2.6%	1.8%	6.9%	14.0%	74.6%	4.6	0.90
Academic reputation (high standards) of this sch'l	1.8%	2.2%	11.5%	24.5%	60.0%	4.4	0.90
I prefer the emphasis and educational philosophy of this school	2.3%	1.7%	11.3%	26.3%	58.4%	4.4	0.92
Promises made by charter school's spokespersons	7.8%	5.8%	17.2%	26.6%	42.6%	3.9	1.24
My interest in an educational reform effort	7.8%	8.6%	24.4%	23.5%	35.7%	3.7	1.25
I was unhappy with the curriculum and instruction at previous school	28.5%	5.1%	17.9%	12.8%	35.7%	3.2	1.64
My child wanted to attend this school	22.6%	7.5%	24.7%	16.5%	28.7%	3.2	1.50
My child has special needs that were not met at previous school	25.1%	11.1%	24.6%	11.9%	27.3%	3.1	1.52
Convenient location	31.1%	9.8%	18.6%	10.9%	29.7%	3.0	1.62
I prefer a private school but could not afford it	36.6%	7.6%	12.3%	12.2%	31.2%	2.9	1.71
My child was performing poorly at previous school	43.0%	7.3%	16.3%	10.4%	23.0%	2.6	1.64
Recommendations of teacher/official at my child's previous school	50.9%	9.5%	15.3%	7.8%	16.5%	2.3	1.54

As one can see from these survey results, some parents chose a charter school because of what they did not like at their local traditional public school, while others chose a charter school because of what was being promised. A number of state and national charter school studies suggest that the reasons parents choose a charter school are equivalent to what exists at the charter school. It is important, however, to distinguish between reasons for choosing and what actually exists at the charter school, especially since most of the parents chose their charter school before it was open and would have had limited information about the quality of instruction that would be offered. In order to differentiate between what parents expected and what the school actually provides, a portion of the parent

questionnaire was designed to have parents rate their initial expectations and contrast this with what they currently perceived or were experiencing at the charter school. These findings are discussed further in Chapter 13, which deals with alternative indicators of process and market accountability.

According to the National Study of Charter Schools (RPP, 1998) parents choose charter schools because they are dissatisfied with the public schools and/or are attracted to charters. The predominant areas of parental dissatisfaction with public schools are (i) low academic expectations, (ii) poor instructional practices, (iii) environment and culture, (iv) safety, and (v) sense that parents are not welcome at school. The top six reasons parents were attracted to charter schools include the following: (i) nurturing environment, (ii) safe environment, (iii) value system, (iv) quality of academic program, (v) high standards for achievement, and (vi) small class size.

The 6 lowest rated factors, among the 20 options to which the parents could respond (based on a mean rating from 0 = feature not applicable, 1 = not powerful to 5 = very powerful), are as follows: (i) support for homeschooling, (ii) longer school year, (iii) focus on cultural/ethnic needs, (iv) extensive community service, (v) flexible school schedule, and (vi) services for disabled.

The findings from the national study are similar to what we have found in our Pennsylvania parent surveys. In particular, there is agreement with the high ranking of “quality of instruction,” “safety,” and “academic reputation” as factors instrumental in the choosing a charter school.

On our surveys parents were asked to list some other factors that motivated them to enroll their children in a charter school. The responses fell into four broad categories: (1) class size; (2) cultural issues; (3) teacher attitudes and relationships with parents and students; and (4) length of the school day and/or year.

Class size was mentioned most often. Parents indicated the desire for smaller class sizes, greater individual attention for students, and better behavior management. Examples of comments include, “The amount of children in the classrooms. Children can get more attention than in a class with 30 children”; “emphasis on behavior, smaller class sizes”; “very structured environment, with zero tolerance for [bad] behavior.”

Cultural issues focused on teaching of cultural/ethnic customs as well as the inclusion of foreign language instruction. Examples of comments include “multi-cultural experience”; “I like the importance of educating children on African-American history”; “African-centered curriculum.”

Teacher attitudes and relationships with parents and students revealed the importance that parents put on positive communication with school personnel and on knowing that teachers are taking a personal interest in their children. Examples of comments include “enthusiasm of founders and faculty”; “caring faculty and support staff”; “the staff really cares about the children”; “warm, caring teachers.”

Length of school day/year was also mentioned as a motivation for choosing a charter school, particularly the availability of full-time kindergarten programs and extended number of school days. Examples of comments include “the school

offers longer hours”; “the school year is longer”; “my nearest public school did not offer full-time kindergarten.”

Student’s Reasons for Choosing their Charter School

The majority of student respondents indicated that their parents’ preference was the primary reason for choosing the charter school. Over 53 percent of the students rated as “Very Important” that their parents thought the charter school would be better for them. Following this was the item dealing with the perceived improved safety at the charter school. Though students ranked it the least important reason for choosing a charter school, friends have an important impact on parents’ decisions. It is a matter of parent and student trust (Meister & Schuh, 2000).

An analysis of responses was conducted to compare the students in grades 5-8 and the students enrolled at the high school level. Large and significant differences existed for a few items. For example, students attending a charter high school were much more likely to cite the small school size or small class size as a reasons for choosing the school.

Two survey items dealt with the quality of the previous school the students attended: “Teachers at my previous school did not help me enough” and “I was not doing very well at the previous school.” Important factors inducing families to choose alternatives to their local public schools are the poor quality of the local school or the lack of appropriate services for students. Nevertheless, only one of these two factors (teachers at previous school not helping enough) was highly rated as a reason for choosing the charter school among the sampled students.

The general pattern of responses from students regarding reasons for choosing their school was the same in all three years the surveys were administered. Table 6:3 shows the order in which students rated reasons for choosing their school. When students were asked to list some other factors that motivated them or their families to choose a charter school, the responses tended to fall into four broad categories: (1) learning environment, (2) personal relationship to school, (3) prior discipline or academic difficulties, and (4) specific curriculum offerings.

Learning environments include smaller class sizes, school structure, and overall school climate. Examples of comments include “nice people, good way of teaching, happy environment”; “it was a better environment for me to learn in”; “it is safer and smaller”; “smaller classes, teachers that care, discipline.”

Personal relationship to school includes family member(s) or friend(s) attending, family member on staff, and school close to extended family/caregiver. Examples of comments include “my friends went to this school and were learning more”; “the vice-principal is a friend of the family”; “I have a lot of family here”; “I have a lot of family here and the school is near relatives in case of emergency.”

Table 6:3 Students' Reasons for Choosing Their Charter School, Rank Ordered by Mean Scores, 2002

	<i>Not important</i>		<i>Very important</i>			<i>Mean</i>	<i>STD</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>		
My parents think this school is better for me	10.4%	4.8%	14.2%	17.0%	53.6%	3.99	1.34
This school is safer	21.8%	9.1%	17.3%	16.1%	35.8%	3.35	1.56
We heard that teachers were better in this school	26.5%	9.5%	19.0%	16.0%	29.1%	3.12	1.57
Teachers at previous school did not help me enough	29.4%	9.6%	16.7%	13.7%	30.6%	3.07	1.62
This school has small classes	34.9%	9.9%	15.9%	11.5%	27.7%	2.87	1.64
This school has better computers & other equipment	36.9%	11.7%	16.5%	10.8%	24.0%	2.73	1.61
This school has a convenient location	34.1%	11.9%	24.4%	10.2%	19.3%	2.69	1.50
I was not doing very well at the previous school	10.4%	9.4%	17.3%	10.5%	22.4%	2.65	1.61
This school is smaller	43.2%	9.1%	12.8%	10.3%	24.5%	2.64	1.67
My friends were attending this school	54.8%	11.6%	12.9%	7.2%	13.4%	2.13	1.47

Prior discipline or academic difficulties include behavior and learning problems experienced by students at their previous school(s). Examples of comments include “I wasn’t doing good behavior-wise”; “I was not learning that much at my other school.”

Specific curriculum offerings refers to any specialized curriculum in academic, artistic, vocational, or athletic area. Examples of comments include “my family chose it for its art classes”; “to improve my art skills”; “a school to help you get a career.”

6.4 Awareness of School Mission

Students are aware of their schools’ missions. The mean score was 3.51 on a 5 point scale (1 was low and 5 was high), with a standard deviation of 1.49 (n = 2,519). About 25 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were aware of their school’s mission; 19 percent neither agreed nor disagreed; and 56 percent agreed or strongly agreed.

Nearly nine-tenths of the parents reported they were aware of their school’s mission. Just over 82 percent of parents responding thought their school followed the mission well or very well. Previous years’ survey results were similar on this question.

6.5 Summary

In this chapter, we have reported descriptive data about charter school students and parents. Much of the data was collected from our three rounds of surveys in May 1999, the spring of 2000, and the spring of 2002. Supplemental data that PDE collects were also used to provide comparison data with noncharter public schools through the state as well as in the host districts.

The sample was made up of a higher percentage of students in grades 5 through 8 than from grades 9 through 12. The grade levels of the children of parents being sampled (grades K-12) was more evenly distributed. Minorities were obviously highly represented in Pennsylvania's charter schools, with all but 18 charter schools enrolling a higher proportion of minorities than their host districts. Charter school students were fairly evenly distributed by gender; however, there were considerable differences among schools, some with high proportions of either males or females, depending on the nature and profile of the school.

The number of low income students was also compared to the host district schools. The proportions are rather even, although there is a considerable amount of variation among charter schools as well as among host districts.

When surveyed on the level of education they planned to achieve, many students were not yet sure. However, of those who planned to continue their education after high school, most aspire to complete a 4-year degree or graduate level study. The length of formal education of parents was also surveyed, and this varied considerably depending on the location and profile of the school.

More than 75 percent of the students surveyed had previously attended a traditional public school. Just under 20 percent had attended a nonpublic school before attending the charter school (i.e., private, parochial, or home school) and the remainder either did not attend school or attended some other type of school or another charter school. While many of the schools had few students moving from nonpublic schools to the charter school, a few schools really stood out with close to half of their students coming from private or parochial schools. This transfer of students from nonpublic schools into charter schools provides an extra burden in terms of costs to the sending districts and has become of point of contention between charter schools and districts.

The primary reasons parents chose a charter school related to quality of teachers and instruction and school safety. Other issues noted were academic reputation and school mission. Students chose the charter school because of parent preference, school safety, and teacher reputation. Both parents and students seemed to be very aware of the school's mission and what it meant.