

Chapter Thirteen

Summary of Findings and Issues for Further Consideration

This report has provided a largely formative evaluation of Pennsylvania's charter school policies. We have sought to identify strengths and weaknesses with an eye toward providing a factual basis upon which policymakers and stakeholders might improve the program. As such, the report takes no position on whether there should be a charter law in Pennsylvania. This issue will be taken up in a more summative evaluation due in the Fall of 2002. Thus, another goal of the current evaluation was to lay the foundation for the summative evaluation, the purpose of which will be to assist policymakers in determining whether the program should be continued in its current form, continued with revisions, or terminated. This concluding chapter summarizes the report's main findings and identifies a number of issues and implications for further consideration.

13.1 Summary of Main Findings

At the heart of Act 22 lies a bargain: charter schools will receive more autonomy in operations in exchange for being held more accountable for results. In many respects, this evaluation is an early and formative attempt to assess the implementation of this autonomy-accountability bargain.

Patterns of Growth in Pennsylvania Charter Schools

One of the key evaluation questions is whether the charter school law is providing students, parents, and teachers with new alternatives within the public school system. Indeed, choice policies will not be effective without a sufficient "supply" of schools. As of the 2000/01 academic year, 66 charter schools are in operation in Pennsylvania. A 67th school was closed after its first year of operation. Taken as a whole, these schools have enrolled more than 20,000 students, or just over 1 percent of all public school students in Pennsylvania. Throughout the life of the charter school law, there has been relatively steady growth both in the number of charter schools and charter school students. Most of these schools enroll far fewer students than the typical Pennsylvania public school but more than the typical charter school nationwide. There is, moreover, evidence of a trend toward larger schools.

Given the size of Pennsylvania and its student population, it would be unreasonable to expect that charter schools would provide meaningful choices to all students after just a few years of operation. It is clear that charter schools are concentrated in certain parts of the Commonwealth, particularly

Philadelphia. Indeed, while Philadelphia enrolls approximately 11 percent of the public school students in the state, it has 51 percent of the charter schools and 69 percent of the charter school students.

Charter schools appear to target students of a reasonably wide variety of grade levels. There is, however, a tendency for charter schools to seek students in the lower grade levels of the elementary, middle, and high school grades. We speculate that many of these schools are planning to “grow from the bottom,” which might well even out the distribution of grade levels covered. Similarly, charter schools’ mission statements indicate that they intend to serve a wide variety of educational interests and goals. A large number of the Pennsylvania charter schools seek to serve at-risk students.

Charter School Start-Up

The range of charter school alternatives depends, in the first instance, on founders’ commitment to and skill in gaining charters and opening schools. Under Act 22 virtually any individual or group may apply for a charter, with the exception of for-profit and sectarian groups. Act 22 is somewhat more restrictive, however, in defining who may *grant* charters. The Act gives primary authority to consider and approve (or deny) charters to local districts (LEAs). Since July 1999, however, the Charter Appeals Board (CAB) has heard appeals from denied applicants, those who believe their charter has been unjustly denied, and those who believe that an LEA has wrongly chosen not to renew a charter.

Not surprisingly, charter schools appear to be born of dissatisfaction with noncharter public schools, as evidenced by low PSSA scores. Lower performing districts, in turn, tend to have higher concentrations of poor and nonwhite students. The founding coalitions behind charter schools often include public school teachers and administrators, academics, and members of the business community. However, there is little evidence thus far that parents have played a significant role in founding charter schools (though they do become active in the operation of charter schools). Founding coalitions’ goals have included providing a choice for poor children, creating a venue in which to operationalize ideas and practices hindered by district practices, promoting change in noncharter schools, and inculcating a particular ethnic or cultural perspective. Private conversion charter schools, moreover, are often founded with an eye toward scaling up practices already employed in private schools and attracting a broader base of students.

Finally, there is evidence that in order to be successful, founding coalitions usually need to be able to muster considerable political resources. In some cases this has involved tapping into support for charter schools among influential community leaders and the more general dissatisfaction with public school bureaucracies. In some instances, however, it appears that host districts have seen advantages in sponsoring charter schools, making such political tactics unnecessary. The most striking finding, however, is the extent to which successful founding coalitions appear to have relied on ties with preexisting schools, community development groups, ethnic/cultural groups, and other nongovernmental organizations. Some 78 percent of the charter schools in operation as of the 1998/99 academic year had such an organizational base.

Charter School Finance

Like other school choice policies, Act 22 mandates that funding follows students. Thus, charter schools have an incentive to satisfy students and their parents who can “vote with their feet” for and against the school. Under the terms of the Act, this funding is funneled through host districts and other LEAs sending students to a given charter school. The size of the LEA subsidy is based on the LEA’s per-pupil expenditure on its own students. The mean per pupil subsidy that LEAs pay to charter schools is \$5,849. Subsidies for special education is based on a formula that reflects the LEAs spending patterns for special education and is typically at least twice the amount for a non special education student.

Analysis of charter schools’ financial reports indicates that the median charter school received approximately 81 percent of its total revenues from LEAs during the 1998/99 school year. There is, however, a large amount of variation among charter schools, with some charter schools receiving as little as 17 percent and others as much as 89 percent of their revenues from other LEAs. Much of this variation, of course, is explained by the fact that some schools spend much more per pupil than others and that the size of the LEA varies with district expenditures. Beyond that, schools vary in their reliance on non-LEA revenue sources. Next to LEA transfers, the largest revenue source for charter schools is the federal government, mostly through Title I monies and charter school start-up grants. While there is considerable school-by-school variation, the median charter school received approximately 7 percent of its total revenues from the federal government. The remainder of charter school revenues came from state grants and “local” sources, including earnings on investments, charitable donations, and revenues from student activities (e.g., candy sales, car washes, and so on). In addition, a few schools relied on proceeds from extended term financing during the 1998/99 school year.

The report also examines charter schools’ expenditure patterns. Analysis of charter schools’ financial data indicates that the median charter school spent approximately the same amount per pupil as its host district during 1998/99. Of that total amount, charter schools typically spent a smaller percentage (59 percent) on instructional items than their host districts (66 percent) and a larger percentage on support services (which include renting and maintaining facilities) and on other noninstructional items. The reasons for these differences in expenditure patterns apparently lie more in the exigencies of starting new schools (e.g., acquiring and maintaining physical facilities) than in any inherent inefficiency in charter schools. Moreover, the fact that teacher salaries (a large portion of instructional expenditures) at charter schools are substantially lower than at noncharter schools (even after controlling for differences in education and experience) might account for some of the difference. However, definitive answers to these questions lie beyond the scope of this study.

Last, the report examines charter schools’ fiscal viability using two indicators. First, analysis of financial reports indicates that charter schools appear to be relatively conservative in budgeting, taking in more than expected on the revenue side and spending less than expected on the expenditure side of the ledger. Moreover, there is some evidence that schools benefit from experience, as second year schools had slightly lower expenditure variances than first year schools (there was no

discernible relationship on the revenue side). Second, analysis of end-of-year balances indicates that most schools ran surpluses for the 1998/99 school year. Seven charter schools (23 percent), however, showed negative balances (deficits), the largest of which constituted 10.7 percent of total expenditures.

Student and Parent Characteristics

Another important set of inputs to charter schools are the students who attend charter schools, and the parent who send their children to these schools and volunteer at the schools. On the whole, charter schools enroll roughly equal proportions of males and females. The proportion of low income students enrolled in charter schools, moreover, is roughly comparable to host districts; in both groups approximately two-thirds of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Charter schools, however, enroll a significantly higher proportion of nonwhite students (80 percent) than their host districts (57 percent) and charter schools nationwide (52 percent). Finally, most students (80 percent) previously attended a public school, 17 percent a private/parochial school, and 3 percent who attended another charter school, or were homeschooled. The proportion of students coming from private schools roughly corresponds to the overall proportion of private school students in the Commonwealth (15 percent). However, there is significant variation among charter schools.

The charter school concept assumes that parents and students will choose charter schools on the basis of educationally relevant criteria and that they will be aware of and agree with the school's mission. Evidence from surveys suggests that parents choose charter schools mainly because of the perceived quality of instruction, the school's academic reputation, dissatisfaction with their child's previous school, and because they agree with the school's educational philosophy. Indeed, some 88 percent of parents sampled indicated that they are aware of their school's mission. The most common reason cited by students was that their parents believe the school is good for them. Beyond that, students cite school safety, teacher quality, small classes, and dissatisfaction with their previous schools as the most important factors driving their choice. Approximately 60 percent of students report that they are aware of their school's mission.

Some proponents of charter schools argue that allowing parents and students to select schools whose educational philosophies match their own will lead them to invest more time and energy in the school. Only one-quarter of surveyed parents, however, indicated that they volunteer more than 3 hours per month at their charter school. This is in spite of the fact that approximately half report that their school requires such involvement.

Teacher Characteristics

Teachers and staff represent another important human capital input for charter schools. The majority of teachers and staff are female (71 percent), while the gender split for administrators and directors is close to equal. This generally matches the gender distribution in noncharter public schools. Charter school teachers, however, are generally younger than their counterparts in noncharter public schools, with approximately 50 percent under the age of 30 compared with 11 percent in public schools across the nation. Approximately 40 percent of teachers are nonwhite, with African

Americans comprising the largest group, followed by Hispanics, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans. Nearly half of sampled charter school staff indicated that they were classroom teachers (52 percent), 11.6 percent teaching assistants, and 7.3 percent specialists. Approximately 8.2 percent indicated that they were Chief Administrative Officers, principals, or school directors, and 21 percent indicated that they had some other title or position at the school.

Some 75 percent of charter school teachers surveyed in 1999/2000 reported that they are currently certified to teach in Pennsylvania. This represents a decrease from 82 percent in the previous year. On the other hand, the percentage of teachers certified to teach in *other* states rose from 2 percent to 4 percent over the same period, as did the percentage of teachers working to obtain certification (12 to 17 percent). The vast majority (75 percent) of charter school teachers with university degrees had attained a BA as their highest level of education, while 22 percent had attained a MA. Among noncharter school public teachers in Pennsylvania, 55.6 percent of the teachers have BAs and 43.2 percent have MAs. The average experience level of the teachers surveyed was just under five years. In short, charter school teachers are younger, less experienced, and possess less formal education than their counterparts in other public schools.

As with students and parents, the charter school concept assumes that teachers choose to work at schools with educational philosophies similar to their own. Teachers who agree on mission and philosophy are, in this view, more likely to work effectively as a team. Indeed, the most commonly cited reason for joining the faculty of a charter school was an interest in being involved in a school reform effort, followed by the opportunity to work with like-minded educators. Other popular responses included small class sizes, safety, and the school's academic reputation. Some 97 percent of teachers, moreover, indicated that they are familiar with their school's mission. Of these teachers, 72 percent believe that their school's mission is being followed "well" or "very well."

Teacher attrition rates appear to be quite high in Pennsylvania charter schools. Nearly 40 percent of the charter school teachers left during or between the 1998-99 and 1999-00 school years. During this same time period slightly less than 10 percent of the CAOs left or were replaced. Interviews and analysis of salary data suggest that these high attrition rates among teachers might be linked to teacher dissatisfaction with salaries, which are substantially lower than in comparable noncharter public schools.

Professional Opportunities for Teachers

One of the goals of Act 22 is to provide enhanced autonomy and professional development opportunities for teachers. Many teachers have come to charter schools seeking autonomy in creating and implementing curriculum. We found evidence at a number of charter schools that there was a conscious effort to involve teachers in developing curricula. Teachers indicated that they had autonomy in curriculum decisions and freedom to utilize creative approaches. Indeed, many teachers report that they have considerable flexibility and opportunities for creativity in their day-to-day activities. We found clear evidence in slightly more than half of the charter schools that the teachers

in the schools work collaboratively. They are encouraged in their collaborative work efforts through programs of team teaching, mentoring, and staff members creating presentations.

Evidence from teacher surveys indicates that approximately one-quarter to one-third of teachers are satisfied with their school's physical facilities, while one-third to one-half were satisfied with resources available for instruction and other educational functions. The average charter school paid teachers an annual salary of approximately \$30,000, compared with the state average of approximately \$48,000 and an average of \$40,000 for schools with similar levels of teacher education and experience and similar per pupil expenditures. Only 30 percent of teachers report that they are satisfied or very satisfied with their salaries.

There was a measurable difference between initial teacher expectations and current experience on many topics. The largest differences between initial expectations and current experience came on such topics as the effectiveness of leadership and administration, parents' ability to influence the direction and activity of the school, availability of support services to students, the extent to which students receive sufficient individual attention, and good communication between parents/guardians and the school. There was also a large gap between expectations and experience in terms of teacher empowerment and the degree to which they are able to influence the steering and direction of the school. Other areas that teachers felt less positive about were class size, and emphasis on academics. One must note that many teachers were hired before the school opened, some teachers simply expected too much, and many were young teachers. Despite these figures, many teachers reported that they are still satisfied with their teaching environment and about 75 percent planned to return to the school the following year.

Charter schools devote considerably more time to teacher professional development activities than noncharter schools, with the average charter school allotting 7 professional days and noncharter schools 5 days. A strong emphasis on graduate study was frequently reported, with some programs requiring it. The format for professional development opportunities included workshops, conferences, in-service training, and graduate courses. The content of professional development opportunities included methods of teaching, technology, student assessment, and classroom management.

Innovations in Governance, Curriculum, and Instruction

One of the stated goals of Act 22 and other charter school statutes is to encourage the development and diffusion of innovative practices. In this sense, charter schools are to be public education's "R&D." This report examines innovations in leadership, organization, discipline, curriculum, and instruction.

Teachers and parents generally expressed approval of their school's leadership, with 67 percent of parents and 53 percent of teachers indicating that the statement "This school has good administrative leadership" was true. Moreover, approximately 70 percent of teachers agreed that their school's

leaders set high standards, communicate them effectively to others, and set a good example by working hard themselves.

Parents, teachers, and students, moreover, often have enhanced opportunities to participate in school decision making, including those listed below:

- Involvement in the strategic planning process, including attendance at planning meetings
- Attendance at meetings to plan and evaluate curricula
- Attendance at school board meetings and otherwise providing input to board members
- Input via school surveys and interviews
- Formal appeals process for teacher grievances

While opportunities for influence do not guarantee actual influence, approximately half of teachers (54 percent) said that they are involved in decision making at their school. A similar proportion of students report that administrators listen to their ideas about the school. Approximately 83 percent of parents, moreover, said that it was true or partly true that “I am able to influence the direction and activities in the school.” Many teachers, however, indicated that their workloads did not leave them enough time to remain involved in school decision making. Parents cited work and family obligations as barriers to their participation.

Notable organizational and disciplinary practices in the charter schools include extended hours and Saturday sessions, inclusion of both middle and high school grades in order to address common problems in making the transition from middle to high school, and preventive disciplinary measures that focus on behavior modification techniques.

Curricular innovations in charter schools often come in the form of a focus on a particular ethnic or cultural perspective. Some schools, for instance, offer courses on Spanish and Swahili; in some cases, such instruction begins in kindergarten. Other schools focus on social and vocational skills, with some offering individualized instructional plans for all students. In some cases, charter schools employ packaged programs such as Success for All reading, Everyday Mathematics, or Discovery Works.

Evidence of charter schools’ use of technology was scant. However, the weighted average number of students to computers in charter schools is 4.5, compared with 7.5 for their host districts. One school maintains student portfolios on-line, and—at the time of the study—at least one school offers on-line courses that students can participate in from home.

Special Education

There is an important conflict between the spirit of charter schools laws, which seek to deregulate charter schools, and the preemption of special education by federal law. Indeed, it is not clear that states have the authority to significantly ease the burden of special education regulations. Act 22

may have created some confusion over the matter given its lack of attention to the special education issue. To its credit, the Commonwealth has made considerable headway since enactment of Act 22 in clarifying charter school obligations and providing guidance to charter schools, in proposing new regulations in this area, and also in providing support and technical assistance to help charter schools provide special education services that are in compliance with IDEA.

The average proportion of students with disabilities in the charter schools was 10.5 percent in 1999-00, which is slightly lower than the statewide average of 12.5 percent. Among the schools that opened during the first two years of the reform, the proportion of students with disabilities was higher (12.5 percent) than for the 17 schools that opened for the 1999/2000 school year (7.9 percent). However, there was great variation among the schools, with some schools reporting as many as 42 percent special education students and some reporting no such students.

While the findings reported in this report that not all is well with special education in the Pennsylvania charter schools, it is important to recognize that regular public schools are also not able to fully satisfy parents who have students with special needs. Indeed, a large proportion of parents surveyed indicated that an important reason for choosing a charter school was the inability of their previous school to accommodate the child's special needs.

Student Achievement in Charter Schools

The data on student achievement in charter schools precludes conclusive statements about charter schools' impacts on student learning. First, the Commonwealth's charter school policy is still quite young, leaving charter schools with little time to demonstrate their ability to improve student achievement. Second, data on only a small number of charter schools were available to the evaluation team. Thus, generalizations to the broader movement are tenuous. Finally, no data exist on such important characteristics as students' precharter school achievement rates, which seriously diminishes the evaluation's ability to provide valid assessments of charter school impact.

Nonetheless, the report presents a number of suggestive, if mixed, findings. Charter schools as a group produced Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) scores that were considerably lower than all noncharter public schools in the Commonwealth. Such comparisons, however, probably measure differences in the types of students who choose to attend charter schools more than any impact the charters have on their students. Thus, the report presents a number of more precise comparisons.

First, the report calculates two-year change scores for the four schools for which there are two years of PSSA data. Taken as a group and averaged across grades and subject areas, these schools posted gains of more than 100 points (the scale ranges from 1000 to 1600). In doing so, charter schools as a group outgained their host districts as a group by some 86 points over the same period. However, the change score analysis is limited by the fact that it cannot follow the same cohort of students over time. A number of schools provided single cohort, pre/post comparisons of the same cohort of students based on commercial standardized tests. These data also show that a substantial number

of charter schools posted gains in student achievement. However, this analysis is limited by the fact that it too is based on a small sample of charter schools.

Second, the report compares each charter school with its host district(s) and with a set of demographically similar noncharter schools. In both cases, charter schools as a group were outperformed by approximately 50 points on the PSSA. While based on a larger sample of charter schools, comparisons to host districts are imperfect since many charter schools target special needs populations. Thus, comparisons with host districts might not fully account for self-selection effects. Comparisons with demographically similar schools were also based on a larger sample of charter schools, but are limited by the fact that the only reliable demographic variable on which charter and noncharter schools could be compared is the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Thus, these comparisons were unable to match schools on special education, race, and other factors associated with student achievement.

Other Indicators of School Quality

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.

Survey evidence suggests that as a group charter school students report that their level of academic performance has improved since they moved to a charter school. Teachers are perhaps a little less sanguine; most teachers expected student achievement to improve more than it has. Still, more than half the teachers believe that student achievement is on the rise at their school. Moreover, parents and teachers reported that charter schools are serving needs not well served by other schools.

The report also examines various indicators of market accountability, or the extent to which parents and students “vote with their feet” for or against charter schools. A nonrandom sample of charter schools indicates that the average school has a waiting list of 125 students, or 45 percent of total current enrollment. However, just as there are students waiting to get into charter schools, a number have left charter schools to return to other public and nonpublic schools. A nonrandom sample of student rosters indicates that the average charter school lost 38 percent of its students from Spring 1999 to Spring 2000. Moreover, data from the Philadelphia school district indicates that some 1,800 students left Philadelphia charter schools to return to district schools. We must emphasize, however, that available evidence on charter school entry and exit is not based on representative samples. Moreover, we have no way of knowing whether decisions to leave charter schools are motivated by concerns about school quality or other reasons. In spite of the significant enrollment instability in some charter schools, more than 90 percent of parents surveyed report that the quality of instruction in their charter school is high and that their child receives adequate attention. Approximately half of the students surveyed said that they would recommend their charter school to a friend.

Finally, the report examines a number of indicators designed to capture charter schools' climates and cultures. Many of these factors might indicate the potential for high achievement levels in the future. For instance, charter schools had an estimated attendance rate of 90 percent for both 1998/99 and 1999/2000. Moreover, nearly three-fourths of parents and teachers reported that their charter schools had high expectations for students. A similar percentage of students said that their teachers encourage them to think about their future. However, a much smaller percentage (one-third) said that students at their charter school were more interested in learning than students at their previous school. Fewer than one-half of respondents report being fully satisfied with school facilities.

13.2 Research and Evaluation Issues for Further Consideration

Given that this evaluation report seeks, among other things, to provide the foundation for a 5-year summative evaluation, we conclude by identifying a number of research and evaluation issues for further consideration. While the current evaluation lacked sufficient data to address them, these are issues that warrant closer examination in any summative evaluation of Pennsylvania's charter school law. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to initiate discussion on directions for further research and evaluation on the subject.

- *Charter approval and the accountability process.* Charter school application and approval is the first step in the accountability process. In order to better understand this process, researchers and evaluators should systematically gather data on both successful *and* unsuccessful applications. Such an exercise would provide a clearer picture of the factors that determine success. As discussed in chapter 4, the current evaluation was restricted to observing the characteristics of successful applications only. While this identifies some of the common features of successful applications, it does nothing to assess whether those features are *necessary* for success. Such information would clearly be useful to would-be applications. More than that, however, it would also help policymakers better assess how effective the application and approval process is as a quality control mechanism that filters out weak applications and lays the foundation for educationally effective charter schools.
- *LEA approval/oversight and charter school quality.* Another issue is the role of the various LEA approval and oversight processes in charter school quality and, ultimately, student outcomes. While this issue was beyond the scope of the current evaluation, the evaluation team noticed significant variation in the extent to which LEAs provide clear standards for and meaningful oversight of charter schools, both during the approval process and beyond. Researchers and evaluators might attempt to assess whether certain types of local approval and oversight processes are more likely to produce strong schools and improvements in student outcomes. Given that Act 22 essentially delegates much of the responsibility for charter school accountability to LEAs, it is important to study and learn from local accountability practices.
- *Charters granted on appeal.* The first charter schools approved by the Charter Appeals Board are just now coming to existence. An important question for future researchers and evaluators involves the climate in which these schools operate. Experience with similar processes in other

states suggests that the schools might face hostility from local districts. Future research and evaluation activities should attempt to assess the extent of any such hostilities and, more importantly, their impact on charter school quality and student outcomes. Future research might also examine strategies for making such relationships cooperative and productive over time.

- *The role of nongovernmental organizations.* Chapter 4 reported that most (78 percent) of the first 31 charter schools were established upon the foundations of a preexisting nongovernmental organization. Future research and evaluation activities should assess whether these trends hold for more recently established charter schools. Indeed, it is conceivable that such reliance is symptomatic of the early stages of the reform and that it will diminish as the charter school community develops more collective experience in charter start-up. Moreover, future evaluation and research activities should continue to track the role of private education management organizations (EMOs) in charter development and start-up. As noted in chapter 3, EMOs have played a remarkably small role in Pennsylvania charter schools thus far. However, there is evidence that the role of EMOs is on the increase.
- *Explaining variations in expenditure patterns.* Chapter 5 reports the findings that as a group charter schools spend a lower percentage of their total expenditures on instructional items than their host districts and noncharter public schools in general. Some of the difference might be explained by the need to cover rent and other facilities costs and the fact that charter school teachers receive lower salaries than teachers in comparable noncharter public schools. Future research and evaluation activities should seek to test these and other explanations, since the issue will shed light on how efficiently charter schools are spending their money.
- *Value for money.* More generally, future research and evaluations should seek to assess whether charter schools provide more educational value for the money than noncharter public schools. Answers to questions about efficiency, however, require evaluators to examine the relationship between fiscal inputs and student (and perhaps other) outcomes. Unfortunately, the data available for this report were insufficient to address such questions. With the passage of time and the opening of new schools, future evaluators might be able to provide at least preliminary answers to this important question.
- *Explaining variations in student achievement.* Chapter 11 reports the considerable variation in student achievement among charter schools. Future research and evaluation activities should conduct in-depth case studies that attempt to identify whether there are common characteristics that distinguish charter schools producing high (or higher than expected) achievement scores. Nor would this be simply an academic exercise. Findings from such case studies might identify constraining and enabling factors that could inform program revisions that would make all charter schools more effective. Moreover, such findings might identify a set of best practices and provide a medium for the diffusion of innovations among charter schools and between charter and noncharter schools.

- *Market accountability.* Chapter 12 reported that the average charter school lost 38 percent of its students from Spring 1999 to Spring 2000. Such turnover might imply dissatisfaction with the charter schools. However, there is no way to know for sure without more information on *why* students and parents choose to leave the schools. Future research and evaluation activities should include an examination of the motivations for leaving charter schools. This will provide more precise information on the schools' market accountability.
- *Data collection on student achievement.* Chapter 11 emphasizes that the findings on student achievement are suggestive but in no way conclusive. This is because of important limitations in the PSSA data available to researchers and evaluators. Among the most serious of these limitations is the inability to follow a single cohort of students over time. Revisions to the PSSA would be costly and time-consuming. Fortunately, many schools provide pre/post, single cohort comparisons based on commercial standardized tests. However, the evaluation team found it difficult to get such results for a large number of schools. Moreover, available data came in a variety of formats that made analysis difficult. Thus, a more feasible approach to improving student achievement data would be to develop guidelines for reporting and formatting commercial achievement test data. Even if PDE does not wish to mandate a particular test, schools usually have a wide range of choices about how scores are reported back to them. Charter school officials might be willing and able to choose formats that accommodate the needs of state-level accountability actors and evaluators. As always, any such policy must balance the demands of accountability against the value of school autonomy. Such improvements in data collection would vastly improve the quality of inferences about charter school achievement and thus provide a much sounder foundation for the 5-year summative evaluation yet to come.

13.3 Policy Issues for Further Consideration

In addition to the research and evaluation questions listed above, the report raises a number of policy issues for further consideration. Some of these issues involve minor changes in oversight. Others might require more fundamental debate over the goals and policy tools of Act 22. Once again, this list is not exhaustive.

- *Reliance on nongovernmental organizations.* The finding that a large proportion of the first 31 charter schools rely on nongovernmental organizations for support and finance raises a number of questions. If the primary goal of the Act is to serve as public education's "R&D" by creating innovative schools that can help leverage change in noncharter public schools, then such reliance might be good. Indeed, the need to garner the support of such organizations might provide a de facto quality control check on charter school development, weeding out weak applications and ensuring that approved schools have adequate organizational and financial support. If, however, the primary goal of Act 22 is to provide public school choice to a large proportion of the student population, such dependence on external groups casts some doubt on the scalability of the charter school reform in Pennsylvania and its ability to provide choice to

a large proportion of students.¹ Indeed, it is likely that there are only so many organizations willing and able to undertake the burden of supporting charter schools. Thus, such dependence might indicate that charter schools will require more support from the Commonwealth and other official actors. Resolution of these issues is not merely an empirical and technical issue. Rather, it requires a clear statement of Act 22's many goals and, most importantly, a specification of the relative weights given to each of these goals.

- *The role of competition between charter and noncharter schools.* One of the ostensible goals of Act 22 is to foster head-to-head competition between charter and noncharter schools. However, the apparent tendency for LEAs to approve charters that target special needs populations might subvert this goal. From one perspective, this pattern of charter schools specialization in at-risk student is desirable inasmuch as this segment of the student population has perhaps not been well served by noncharter public schools. Head-to-head competition, however, might require that the schools compete for the same groups of students. Further research is required to determine whether this pattern holds for more recently approved schools. Even if the patterns appears to be robust, however, its policy implications depend upon how policymakers and stakeholders weigh the importance of competition against other goals in Act 22. In short, it is as much a question of values as an empirical question.
- *Innovation in charter schools.* Whether a given practice is innovative depends, in part, on the purposes at hand. Charter school proponents variously trumpet a number of purposes or ultimate goals for charter schools, each of which has different implications for innovation. This statement of charter schools' goals is consistent with a fairly ambitious view of innovation—the creation of truly unique practices that can be shared and perhaps emulated by a large group of schools. A more modest view of innovation is that charter schools exist primarily to provide choice. If this is the case, then innovations must simply provide new options for students and parents in a particular geographic area. Hence, the bar is high on the former view and somewhat lower on the latter view. The Charter Appeals Board (CAB) articulated a view of innovation that corresponds more closely with the second, narrower view of innovation. Policymakers might wish to reconsider this definition to ensure that it is in accordance with Act 22's balance of choice versus other goals.
- *Market vs. other forms of accountability.* This report provides evidence of charter school accountability based on student achievement data and on various measures of “market accountability,” including “customer” satisfaction and the extent to which students and parents “vote with their feet” for or against charter schools. The report finds that, on balance, there is more evidence of accountability defined as customer satisfaction than of accountability defined in terms of student achievement. However, it is unclear from Act 22 how evaluators and stakeholders should weigh these alternative measures of success. Thus, policymakers might

¹ It is notable that Act 22, unlike many other charter school statutes, provides no caps on the total number of charter schools in the Commonwealth.

wish to consider the relative importance of these criteria in advance of the 5-year summative evaluation.

In closing, we return to the evaluation's core question: "Does increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability result in improved pupil results?" As Chapter 11 points out, evidence about student achievement in charter schools is far from conclusive, making a definitive answer to this question impossible at this juncture. Student achievement notwithstanding, this report indicates that Pennsylvania charter schools are well on their way to fulfilling their promise in some areas but are experiencing difficulties in others. Fortunately, the passage of more time and the introduction of new charter schools will enable future evaluation reports to provide more definitive answers to these important questions. In the meantime, this report is intended to help policymakers and stakeholders improve the charter law and the schools founded under its auspices.