

Chapter Two

Methodology of the Study

The array of questions addressed in this study required multiple approaches for collecting and verifying information and for capturing the various perceptions that exist. Our aim was to collect enough information to analyze all charter schools individually as well as among and between 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 final 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 with the Pennsylvania Department of Education to ensure that they are worthwhile and of interest to decision makers and other interested parties.

2.1 Approach and Strategies for Data Collection

We used the following methods for collecting information:

- Surveys of staff, students, and parents (charter schools surveys developed by The Evaluation Center and nationally-normed school climate surveys)
- Reviews of (student) work samples (when available)
- Interviews
- Diaries and logs (if available)
- 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 shows a matrix of the evaluation questions and sources of data/information for each question.

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

Table 2:1 Data Collection Strategies and Information Sources

Strategy/ Source	Question- aires	Interview	Document Review	Focus Group	Test Data	Direct Observation	Work Sample	Portfolio (if available)	Diaries or Logs (if available)
Students	X			X	X	X	X	X	
Teachers	X	X		X		X	X	X	
School CAOs/ Directors	X	X				X			
Parents	X	X		X					
Local School Districts that Charter		X	X						X
Community Members		X							
PDE Personnel		X	X						X
School Records			X						
Schools			X		X	X		X	X

Table 2:2 Matrix of Objectives of the Study 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)	Inter-view	Docu-ment review	Focus group	Test data (PSSA)	PSSA school indicators	Direct observa-tion	Work sample	Portfolio (if avail-able)	Diaries or logs (if available)
Does increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability result in improved pupil results?	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	
What effect does budget have on student results, non-academic services, and school facilities?	X	X	X	X	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			X	X
What is the impact of charter schools as related to district reform efforts?	X		X	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	X		
What are promising practices in charter schools that could be included in district systemic reform?			X	X	X		X	X	X		X

topics. While this attention may be complimentary and initially well received, it becomes 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 was much improved over time, and we hope the process of obtaining information was viewed as time well spent by the informants 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 a response 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 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 informant groups in the charter schools.

All schools were visited at least two times for the purpose of administering surveys. 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, teachers/staff, and parents/guardians. Interviews were also conducted; and documentation, where available, was collected about the school.

Below a brief description of the questionnaires and targeted informant groups is included as well as information about the timing of the administration of the questionnaires and the actual data collection process. Appendix B contains copies of the surveys used in this study.

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 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. Students in grades 7-12 could typically complete the questionnaires on their own, after initial instructions. More instructions for individual items was 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 were selected at each school 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 in this component of the study was optional during the first round of data collection in May 1999. This was because of the short space of time available before the end of the school year to administer the survey and conduct a thorough follow-up. During the second round of data collection, two dollars were enclosed in each envelope going home to selected parents. This served as a means of expressing 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 a traveling observer 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 compare 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 informants at each school. 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.

Table 2:3 Sample Size and Response Rates on Surveys

	1998/99			1999/2000		
	Target Pop.	Achieved Sample	Response Rate	Target Pop.	Achieved Sample	Response Rate
Teacher/Staff Charter School Survey	609	447	73.4%	649	537	82.7%
Student Charter School Survey	1021	923	90.4%	1221	1105	90.5%
Parent/Guardian Charter School Survey	577	292	50.6%	777	364	46.8%
Teacher/Staff School Climate Survey	–	–	–	366	316	86.3%
Student School Climate Survey	–	–	–	842	755	89.7%
Parent/Guardian School Climate Survey	–	–	–	25	17	68.0%

Since one of the key purposes of the charter school reform is parental choice, parents are clearly one of the most important informant 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 informant group and year.

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 with other staff members. In some schools we also had the chance 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 source of documentation regarding the operation and performance of the charter schools. For 6 schools we obtained 3 annual reports and for 24 schools we received 2 annual reports. Additionally, we received annual reports from most of the schools that began operation during the 1999-00 school year.

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 their 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. 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. We were able to include data for the 1997-98 and 1998-99 academic years. In some cases, we were also able to include data from the 1999-2000 school year. Since most of our comparisons were made 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. 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 informant, 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. Most central to the evaluation are tables on the 31 charters covered under the evaluation contract. These tables are linked to school-level summaries generated from the student, staff, and parent surveys, and to data from the PDE's Pennsylvania School Profiles.

In addition to data on the 31 "core" charter schools, the relational database included data from all Pennsylvania schools from 1996 to 1999 on dozens of dimensions. Thus, in cases where data are available, we were able to compare charter schools to their host districts, to demographically similar schools, and to all Pennsylvania schools.

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 is conducted with the following comparisons in mind:

- Compare charter schools over time (of course, this will be limited to 2 years for 6 of the schools, although additional comparisons can be made with conversion schools).

- Compare each charter school with its host school district or a school with similar background characteristics including demographics, size, location, and educational level. Comparisons would consider test scores, financial data regarding revenues and expenditures, etc.
- Results from the charter school surveys and School Climate Survey have been merged with school-based data regarding the demographics, size, location, etc. This will allow comparison of 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 evaluative 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.

All schools received the disaggregated results from the surveys administered at their own school as well as averages for all charter schools. In addition to this, all comments and responses to the open-ended items on the surveys were typed, organized, and returned to the schools. Care was taken to remove references or comments that would reveal the source of the comments.

2.4 Limitations to the Evaluation

There are a number of limitations to this study that 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 informants. 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. Compared to other similar studies, the response rate was extremely good. Appendices A-C contain information on the samples. Nevertheless, the response rates from parents and guardians were not as high as for the other informant groups. Likewise, response rates on the school climate survey were not as good as those for the charter school survey. We did extensive follow-up to raise the response rates but, since the school climate survey was administered in May 2000, there was less time before the close of the year to follow up on persons not responding. Schools with a response rate lower than 45 percent were removed from the data set

We opted to have the charter schools assist us in distributing and collecting questionnaires. While this helped us to obtain a higher response rate, it also limited the data, since a number of informants complained that their responses would not be confidential. We gave strict instructions not to open any of the sealed envelopes at the school, although on a few occasions this happened by accident.

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, or when references were made to financial issues or testing results, we attempted to confirm such information using the databases we obtained from PDE.

Timing. The fact that the evaluation was so short in duration is also a limitation, since the impact of the charter schools can hardly be measured over so short a period of time. We have used PSSA test scores as one indicator of success, but mostly view this as an indicator of the type of students enrolling in the charter schools. Furthermore, due to the time that is required to prepare and recheck school statistics before they are released, we have often been dependent on interpreting older data on school characteristics.

Start-up phase of schools. A considerable portion of the schools we visited were in their first year of operation. We are well aware of the growing pains of opening a new school and the heavy demands on the personnel who run these schools. It is likely that the new schools require a few years in order to implement their plans. A few years of operation is also often required in order to secure or renovate a permanent facility. We recognize that the schools have been in a start up phase and that any fair summative evaluation would need to wait a few more years. For these reasons the evaluation is largely formative in nature and when we describe outcomes, we qualify them and remind the reader of the specific limitations that apply.