

Chapter Six

Student and Family Characteristics

Act 22 states that charter schools should be open to all students. Hence, in this chapter we compare charter students' characteristics with those of noncharter students. Also, the charter concept (like all policies) makes certain assumptions about the behavior and attitudes of its target population (students and families). In this chapter, we attempt to test some of these "coproductive" assumptions. Questions we will address include the following:

- F How do charter students' and families' background characteristics compare with those of noncharter students, particularly in the host district?
- F What kinds of schools did students attend before coming to the charter school?
- F How much student turnover is there in charter schools?
- F Why did students and their families choose their charter school?
- F 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 two consecutive school years: 1998-99 and 1999-00. 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 Grades 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).

In the selected classes, all students were targeted, but a number of students were either absent or not present during the administration of the surveys and, therefore, 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 both samples (90.4 percent in 1999 and 90.3 percent in 2000). One cyber school had a very low response rate in both years due to difficulties in corresponding with students who had to be sampled through 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 fewer 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 also made to select classes instructed by different teachers and classes that represented different 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 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 and in the Spring of 2000. The random sample 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. Each charter school was encouraged to prepare and include its own cover letter in order to make the contact with the families more familiar. The questionnaires were sent home with the students or delivered to the parents by mail.

Upon completion, the questionnaires were returned to the designated person at the school, and the name of the family was checked off the list to denote that the survey was completed and returned. The designated person at each school was instructed not to open any of the sealed envelopes, since this would compromise the confidentiality of the respondents. A summary of the 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. It was not initially scheduled in the evaluation proposal, but representatives of a number of charter schools, along with staff at the Pennsylvania Department of Education, thought parent feedback was important. This issue warranted inclusion during the first round of data collection, even though there would not be sufficient time for follow-up before the close of the school year. During the second round of surveying, in the spring of 2000, more time was available to conduct a follow-up. 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 non responding 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. In 2000, 5 schools did not receive a sufficient response rate and were therefore not included in the totals for the state. Altogether, the response rate was 51 percent.

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 25 percent and 40 percent. Since these schools had large numbers of families targeted and because the results from this subset of schools did not exhibit any noticeable differences from the remainder of the schools, a decision was made to use a 25 percent response rate as a cutoff point. Four schools had response rates below 25 percent, so they were excluded from the sample. Therefore, 26 of the 30 participating charter schools were included in the analysis of total parent results. Within these 26 schools, 364 of the 777 families sampled returned a completed survey, making the total response rate 46.8 percent. Appendix B includes specific information about the survey results for parents and students.

6.2 Description of Charter School Students and Families

In this section, we describe the students enrolled in the charter schools. We have relied on a variety of sources, including data reported to the Pennsylvania Department of Education by the charter schools. Other sources of data included were the annual reports prepared by the charter schools, and data collected directly from students that took part of our sample. An attempt is made to refer to the specific source of the information as it is presented.

For the 2000-01 school year, enrollment in Pennsylvania charter schools is expected to exceed 20,000 students. This is a rapid increase from the 1,179 students that were enrolled in the first year of the reform (1997/98). 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. However, Grades 8 and 12 were somewhat underrepresented, with each having fewer than 92 students. Figure 6:1 depicts the distribution of students by grade for both samples. The students ranged from 10-20 years in age. They were rather evenly distributed by age, although the majority of the students fell between the ages of 11 and 17. Only 75 students were between the ages of 18 and 20. The average age of the students sampled in 2000 was 13.8 years, which was the same as for the sample in 1999.

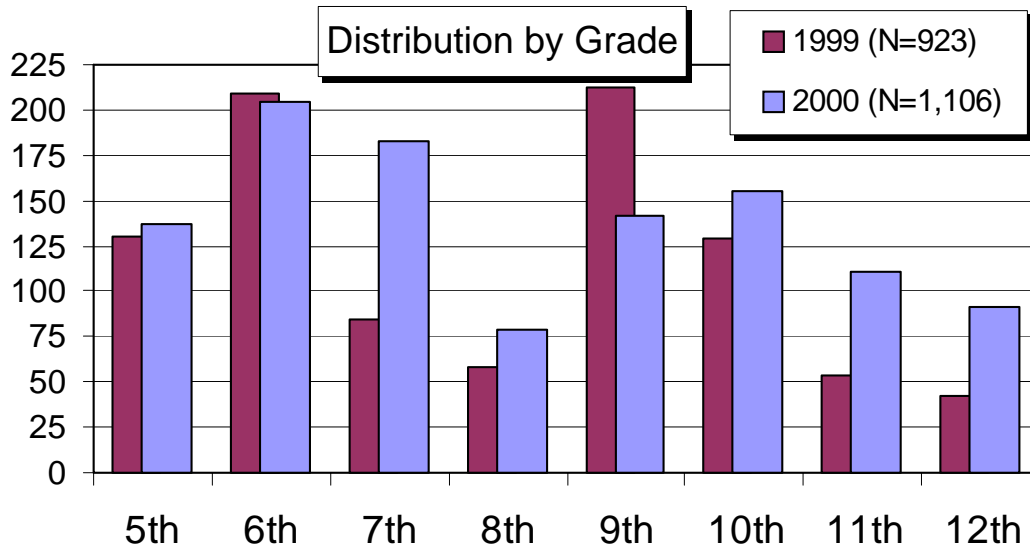


Figure 6:1 Distribution of Sampled Students by Grade

The children of the sampled parents were rather evenly distributed across the various grade levels. Again, Grades 8 and 12 were underrepresented, each with less than 4 percent of all parents. Just over 50 percent of the parents had children enrolled at the elementary level (an average of 8.58 percent at each grade between Kindergarten and Grade 5), 24.6 percent had children enrolled at the middle school level (an average of 8.2 percent for each of Grades 6-8), and parents with students enrolled at the high school level accounted for 23.9 percent of all parents returning a questionnaire (an average of 5.97 percent at each grade level, 9-12).

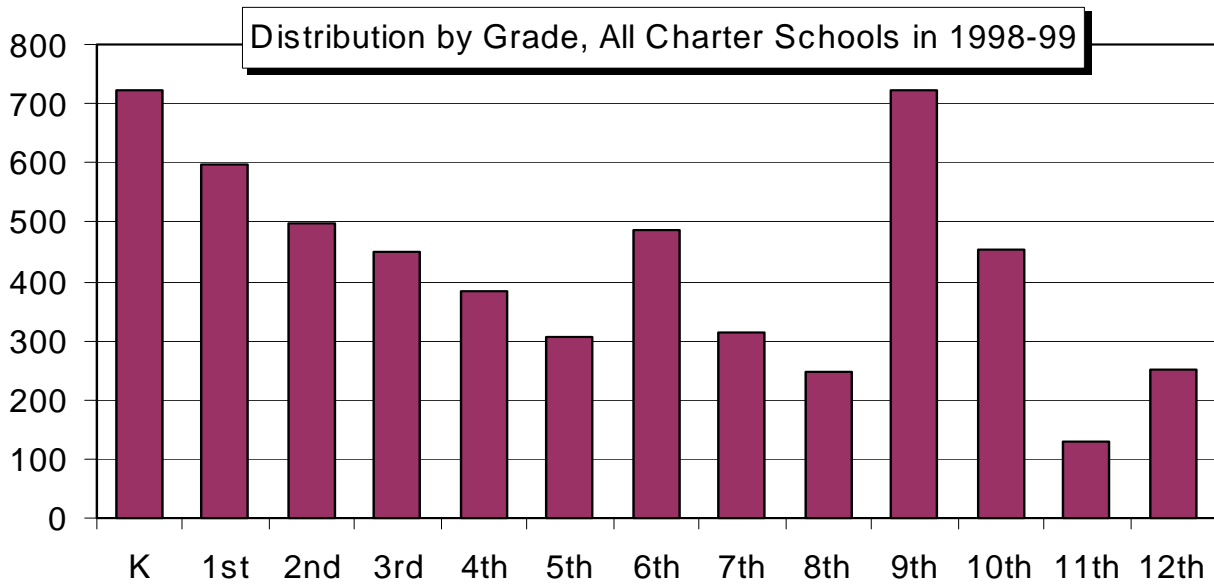


Figure 6:2 Distribution of All Pennsylvania Charter School Students by Grade

Gender and Ethnicity

Students were fairly evenly distributed by gender, with 51.3 percent females and 48.7 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. Minorities, which account for 73.2 percent of the sampled charter school enrollments, are obviously highly represented in Pennsylvania’s charter schools. Among the sampled students the largest group by race were Blacks with 51.4 percent, followed by Whites with 26.8 percent, Hispanics with 15.8 percent, Native Americans with 3.6 percent, and Asian/Pacific Islanders with 2.4 percent.

Figure 6:3 illustrates the breakdown of students by Race and ethnicity and highlights differences between the sample of students we drew from grades 5-12 officially reported figures for all students in the 30 participating schools as well as for all schools that were operating in 1999-2000. The yellow bars in the figure illustrate the most accurate breakdown for all charter schools. It is interesting to note that the schools that were opened in 1999-2000 have a lower proportion of Hispanics and a higher proportion of White students than the schools that were already open.

Because the charter schools are highly concentrated in urban areas, and particularly in Philadelphia, we can expect 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, 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.

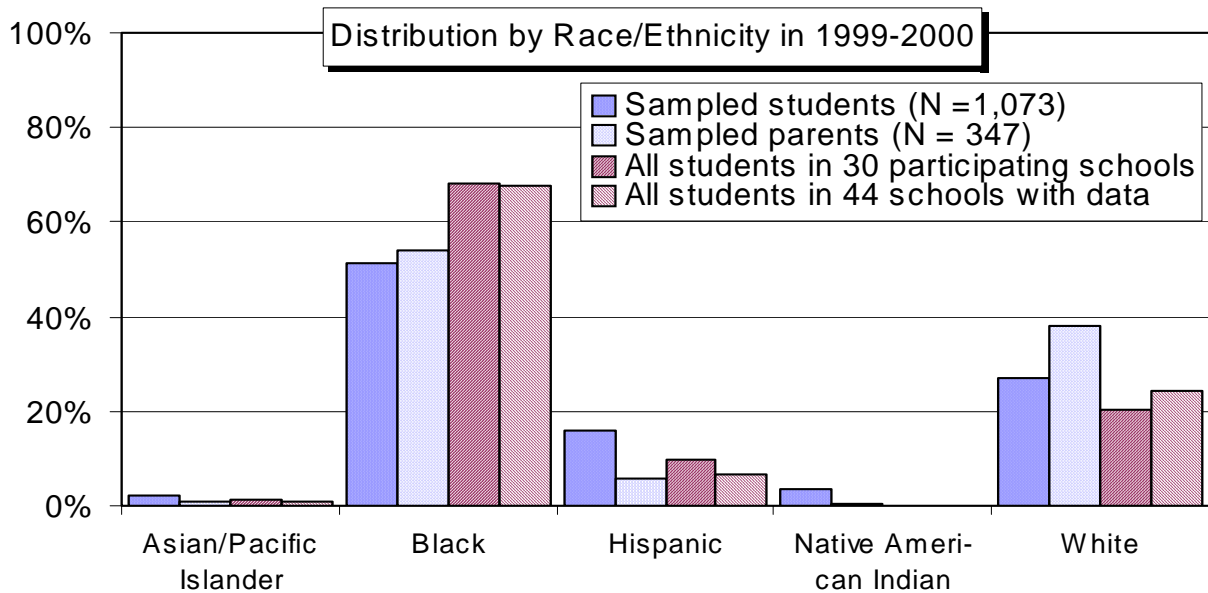


Figure 6:3 Distribution of Charter School Students by Race/Ethnicity, 1999-00

Some studies of charter schools have indicated that charter schools are leading to greater segregation based upon race. Cobb and Glass (1999) found that charter schools in Arizona had fewer minorities than the districts in which they lie and that half of the charter schools exhibited evidence of substantial ethnic separation, meanwhile, Horn and Miron (1999) found that the proportion of minority students was dropping sharply in Michigan charter schools.

By contrast, the proportion of minorities in Pennsylvania charter schools is substantially higher than the state average and comparable to the school districts in which the charter schools are established. Among the 30 participating schools in our study, 79.6 percent of the students are minorities compared with 57 percent minorities in the host districts of these charter schools. With the addition of the schools that opened for the 1999-00 school year, the proportion of minorities dropped 4 percent to approximately 75.6 minorities for the 44 charter schools for which we have data. At the same time, the proportion of minorities across the host districts also dropped 4 percent to approximately 52.9 percent. The drop in the proportion of minorities in the charter schools was due to the addition of new schools. These new schools were located in districts that had fewer minorities. This indicates that the schools that opened in 1999-00 have fewer minorities. When comparing the proportion of minorities school by school, we find that all but 8 charter schools enroll a higher proportion of minorities than their host districts.

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. Eighty-six percent of the parents responding were female.

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 Hispanic 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 5 schools excluded due to a low response rate had a considerably higher proportion of minority students than the 25 schools included in this component of the study. It is also possible that the minority families were underrepresented in the sample because they did not complete and return the survey. It is important to point out that, although some 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.

Proportion of Low Income Students

Family income is an important determinant of students' achievement (see chapter 11). For this reason we thought it was of particular interest to compare the proportion of low income students, as defined by eligibility for free/reduced lunch, in charter schools with that population of students in the districts from which they come. For the 30 schools participating in our study in 1999-00, 68 percent of their students came from low income households compared to 66 percent of students in

the sending districts. While these figures are very similar, it is important to point out that there is considerable variation both across the charter schools as well as across the sending districts.

When we include the schools that were started in 1999-00, we find that the charter schools have a lower proportion of students that are classified as low income compared to the sending districts (i.e., 61 percent low income for the 44 charter schools we had data on in 1999-00 compared with 63 percent for the sending districts).

Table 6:1 Proportion of Low Income Students in Charter Schools, Sending Districts, and Nonsending Districts

	Proportion Low Income, 30 Participating Charter Schools Compared to 30 Host Districts	Proportion Low Income, 44 Charter Schools Compared to 40 Host Districts
Charter Schools	67.8%	61.0%
Districts With Charter Schools	66.0%	63.5%
Districts Without Charter Schools	24.8%	23.8%

Table 6:1 illustrates the differences in the proportion of low income students for charter schools, as well as for the districts that have charter schools within their boundaries or from which charter school students originated. While the differences are small between charter schools and the sending districts, the differences are great between school districts that are losing students and districts that have no charter schools and that are losing no students to charter schools.

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 indicated that

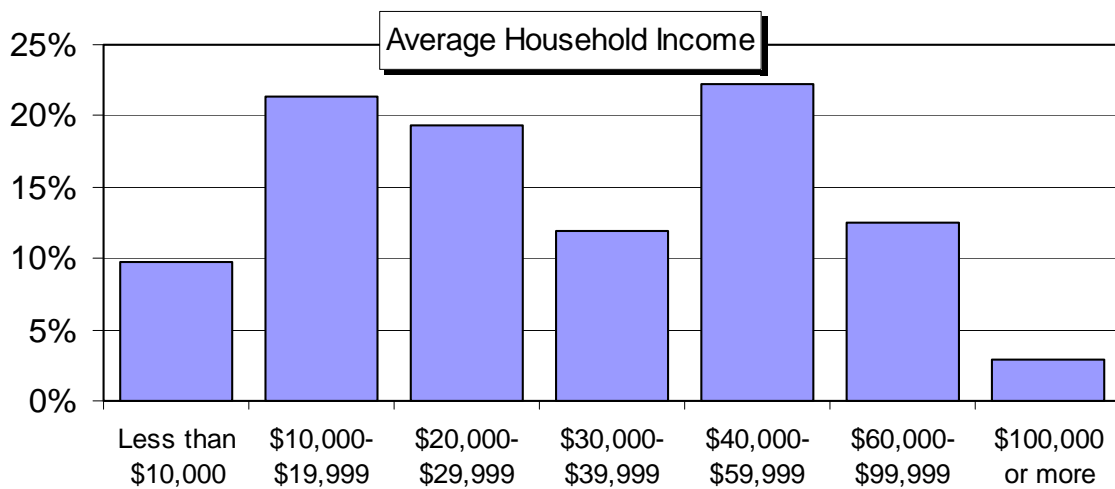


Figure 6:4 Average Household Income of Charter School Families

about 66 percent of the parents had annual family incomes between \$20,000 and \$100,00, with 2.8 percent of the families over \$100,000. One-third of the families had incomes under \$20,000 (21.4 percent between \$10,000 and \$19,999 and 9.7 percent below \$10,000), which clearly indicates that these charter schools are providing educational services to a large number of low-income families.

Fifty-seven percent of the families were in two-parent homes, while 41.7 percent were in single family homes and 1.7 percent lived in other types of households (e.g., student living with other relatives or residing in state facility).

Highest Level of Education Charter School Students Plan to Complete

The students were asked about the highest level of education they planned to complete. They were asked to choose between the following categories: 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. Seven percent of the sampled students expected to stop their schooling after high school, while 9.4 percent planned to complete a 2-year degree, 28 percent planned to complete a 4-year degree, and approximately 38 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. The students' responses regarding their further educational plans was noticeably more diverse in 2000 than in 1999. The proportions of students either not planning to go to college or else planning to go to graduate school increased noticeably in 2000, while the proportion of students with plans to attend four years of college decreased.

Level of Parents' Formal Education

The level of formal education of the sampled parents varied considerably: slightly more than 7 percent indicated that they had not completed high school, 33.5 percent of the parents ended their formal schooling after graduating from high school, 32.1 percent completed less than 4 years of college, 9.2 percent obtained a bachelors degree, 5.6 percent had a BA plus some graduate courses, and 12.3 percent, a slight increase from last year, completed a graduate or professional degree.

Length of Enrollment at Charter School

Nearly 47 percent of the students reported that they had been enrolled in their charter school for one year or less, a logical decrease from 88 percent in the previous year when most of the schools were started. Forty-six percent of the sampled students had been enrolled for 2 years. Just over 7 percent of the students indicated that they were enrolled for 3 or more years. Since the charter school reform is only three years old, the maximum number of years a student could be enrolled in a charter school is 3. However, some of the schools were private conversions and the students indicated that they were enrolled more than three years.

Previous School Attended

Nearly 80 percent of the sampled students in the Pennsylvania charter schools had previously attended public schools. Of the remaining 20 percent, 16.2 attended either a private or a parochial school, and 1.2 percent were home schooled. The remaining students either did not attend school, attended some other form of school, or else they 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. Because our sample only includes 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 school to charter school.

The enrollment in charter schools 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 Philadelphia Public Schools indicated that students who move from nonpublic schools to charter schools represent a heavy financial burden on their budget. The district indicated that 25 percent of the students enrolled in charter schools are moving from nonpublic schools. Our sample of students from Philadelphia indicated that 18.6 percent of the students were previously enrolled in nonpublic schools, which is an increase from 16.8 percent in 1999. Our sample of schools does not include the charter schools that opened in 1999-00 and in some of these schools there appear to be substantially more students moving from private/parochial 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 of the charter schools have no students that previously attended a private/parochial school, a few schools have close to half of their students coming from nonpublic school backgrounds.

The three schools with the highest proportion of students coming from nonpublic backgrounds include one private school conversion, one operated by a for-profit educational management organization, and one charter school with college prep profile located in Philadelphia. These schools also had a low proportion of minority students and low-income students.

Figure 6:5 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 only 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 more than 5 percent of the parents selected “other” because their child was just entering school in kindergarten and did not previously attend a school. Surprisingly, 7 percent of the parents also indicated that they were switching from another charter school.

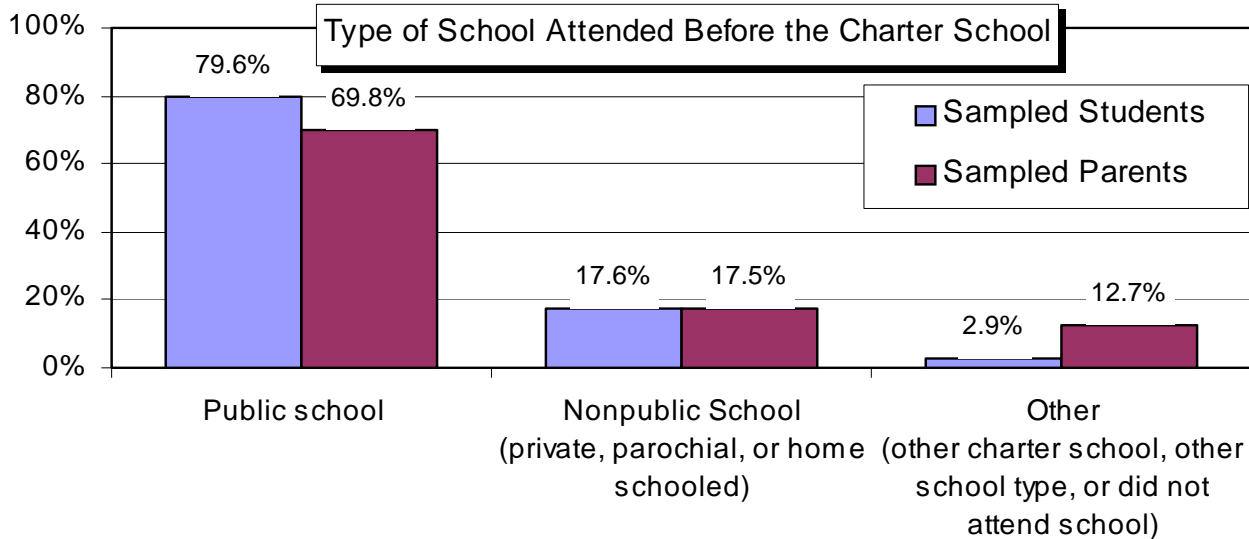


Figure 6:5 Type of School Attended Before Charter School: Responses from Sampled Students and Parents

The movement of students from nonpublic schools into charter schools results in local districts having to pay for educating children that were not previously 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 but only at the kindergarten level. Since the local districts never enrolled these students, they do not appear in their records as transfers.

Amount of Time Volunteering at Charter Schools

It was interesting to find that 76.9 percent of the parents reported that they did not volunteer at school at all, or to a very limited degree (i.e., less than 3 hours per month). A much smaller proportion of the parents reported volunteering quite extensively. Just over 12 percent of the parents volunteered between 4 and 6 hours per month, 4.7 percent volunteered between 7 and 9 hours per month, 1.9 percent volunteered between 10 and 12 hours, and 4.2 percent volunteered more than 12 hours per month. One would expect even more extensive parent voluntary involvement, since 53 percent of the parents believed that voluntary work was required at their charter school. Compared to the previous year, the proportion of parents who believed voluntary work was required dropped from 64. Likewise, the level of volunteering in the schools had dropped noticeably. This may be due to the fact that the schools were better established and required less volunteer work from parents.

Distance to Charter School

The average distance from home to the charter school was 4.9 miles (4.3 in 1999), while the average distance to the nearest applicable traditional public school was 2.3 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 a number of charter schools are still wrestling with arrangements for transportation, 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, 87.5 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 364 parents in 2000. 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 they were in choosing their charter school. The order and relative rating of the responses for the 1999/2000 school year did not differ much from the previous sampling in 1998/99.

As one can see from these 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 equal 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 even 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 14, which deals with 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.

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

	Not important		Very important			Mean	STD	Median
	1	2	3	4	5			
Good teachers and high quality of instruction	1.7%	1.7%	11.0%	16.7%	68.9%	4.49	0.88	5
Safety for my child	2.3%	3.1%	10.0%	12.9%	71.7%	4.49	0.96	5
Academic reputation (high standards) of this sch'l	1.4%	3.7%	13.0%	24.3%	57.6%	4.33	0.93	5
I prefer the emphasis and educational philosophy of this school	2.3%	2.3%	12.7%	30.6%	52.0%	4.28	0.93	5
Promises made by charter school's spokespersons	6.6%	4.3%	15.9%	25.9%	47.3%	4.03	1.18	4
My interest in an educational reform effort	6.8%	9.3%	21.4%	22.0%	40.6%	3.80	1.25	4
My child wanted to attend this school	16.8%	10.3%	25.9%	14.0%	33.0%	3.36	1.45	3
I was unhappy with the curriculum and instruction at previous school	23.5%	12.2%	14.2%	13.9%	36.2%	3.27	1.61	4
My child has special needs that were not met at previous school	25.9%	12.5%	16.1%	10.1%	35.4%	3.17	1.63	3
I prefer a private school but could not afford it	28.7%	7.8%	17.8%	15.5%	30.2%	3.11	1.61	3
Convenient location	24.2%	11.5%	25.6%	9.9%	28.7%	3.07	1.53	3
My child was performing poorly at previous school	34.8%	10.7%	18.0%	9.9%	26.7%	2.83	1.63	3
Recommendations of teacher/official at my child's previous school	46.1%	11.0%	15.9%	8.1%	18.8%	2.43	1.57	2

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 home-schooling, (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, for greater individual attention for students, and for better behavior management. Examples of comments include "Class size afforded my child added individual instruction"; "belief that a controlled environment is conducive to the education of our children"; "Discipline One on One"; "Close knitted, less children. I thought it would be less children in classroom-sizes I thought there would be 18-20 children;" "My child could get private school attention in a public school setting."

Cultural issues focused on teaching of cultural/ethnic customs as well as the inclusion of foreign language instruction. Examples of comments include “Bilingual school education”; “This school offers different language so that my son can be bilingual in the future”; “ African American Staff, foreign language”; “Racial/ethnic/cultural diversity”; “The Afro-centric Awareness. Blacks taking the responsibility to teach their own.”

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 “The faculty at the charter school have a better sense of how a child should be treated.(Respect)”; “The children’s education is very important to the teachers”; “The fact that the classes had fewer students allowed more one on one time from the teachers along with a chance for a teacher-student-parent relationship to be formed in a positive manner”; “This school is concerned about the whole well being of any child”; “The staff really care about your children, help to stay in school and enjoy school”; “I believe that the staff cares about my children.”

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 length of time they attend throughout the year”; “all day 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. Nearly 50 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 it was the lowest ranked 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. The differences on four items were significant. Students at the lower levels were more likely than high school students to rate the following reasons as more important: “My parents thought this school is better for me,” “This school has better computers and other equipment,” and “My friends were attending this school.” Smaller school size was seen to be a more important factor for high school students than for students at the lower levels.

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, these factors were not highly rated as reasons for choosing the charter school among the sampled students.

The two least important reasons for choosing a charter school—convenient location and friends were attending this school—indicate that the students believed that an active choice was being made because of quality and safety rather than convenience or social concerns. The general pattern of responses from students regarding reasons for choosing their school was the same in both years the surveys were administered. Table 6:3 shows the order in which students rated reasons for choosing their school.

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

	Not important		Very important			Mean	STD	Median
	1	2	3	4	5			
My parents think this school is better for me	9.3%	6.1%	16.6%	19.4%	48.6%	3.92	1.31	4
This school is safer	20.9%	9.7%	21.2%	14.9%	33.4%	3.30	1.53	3
We heard that teachers were better in this school	27.4%	9.8%	20.0%	16.3%	26.5%	3.05	1.55	3
Teachers at previous school did not help me enough	30.1%	10.9%	18.3%	16.1%	24.6%	2.94	1.57	3
This school has small classes	36.3%	10.9%	17.8%	12.8%	22.2%	2.74	1.58	3
This school has better computers & other equipment	37.1%	11.2%	17.3%	10.9%	23.5%	2.72	1.60	3
This school is smaller	40.6%	9.7%	15.4%	10.8%	23.5%	2.67	1.63	2
I was not doing very well at the previous school	40.2%	10.4%	16.9%	10.9%	21.6%	2.63	1.60	2
This school has a convenient location	35.5%	11.6%	26.0%	11.2%	15.8%	2.60	1.46	3
My friends were attending this school	57.7%	11.4%	11.9%	7.9%	11.0%	2.03	1.42	1

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 “I needed a smaller environment”; “Friends were here, good teachers”; “That it was smaller and I can work better”; “Uniforms and discipline motivated my family.”

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 mother became the Spanish teacher here”; “Friends were here”; “that my Mom work here”; “My sister went here and she liked it.”

Prior discipline or academic difficulties include behavior and learning problems experienced by students at their previous school(s). Examples of comments include “The teachers and I had consistent conflicts”; “To get more help at this school”; “no other school would accept me”; “I got

expelled so I got put here”; “ I was put here due to permanent expulsion;” “. . .County Courts are very persuasive.”

Specific curriculum offerings refers to any specialized curriculum in academic, artistic, vocational, or athletic area. Examples of comments include “I am interested in law so we chose this school;” “The Economics part because I want to own my own business;” “Get more credits than a public school to get into college;” “Because I can learn more Spanish and my culture;” “You get your diploma in 10 months and you get paid.”

6.4 Awareness of School Mission

Students are aware of their schools’ missions. The mean score was 3.52 on a 5 point scale (1 was low and 5 was high) with a standard deviation of 1.41 (n = 934). About 20 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were aware of their school’s mission; about 20 percent neither agreed nor disagreed; and about 60 percent agreed or strongly agreed. The following year, students who agreed or strongly agreed dropped 3 percent; those who neither agreed nor disagreed rose about 1 percent; and those who disagreed or strongly disagreed rose about 2 percent. The 1999-00 parent data have not yet been entered.

Nearly nine-tenths of the parents reported they were aware of their school’s mission. Just over 76 percent of parents responding felt their school followed the mission well or very well. A number was surprising, since nearly the same amount of parents do not participate at all or very little in their school. Last year results were similar: just over nine-tenths of the parents were aware of the school’s mission, and about 80 percent of parents thought their school followed the mission well or very well. The 1999 data also reflected a smaller group that did not volunteer at all or very little.

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 two rounds of surveys, in May 1999 and then a second time during the spring of 2000. Supplemental data that PDE collects was also used to provide comparison data with noncharter public schools through the state as well as in the host districts.

The age and grade level of students sampled was fairly evenly distributed from Grades 5-12, as were the grade levels of the children of the parents being sampled (Grades K-12). Minorities were obviously highly represented in Pennsylvania’s charter schools, with all but 8 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.

Eighty percent of the students surveyed had previously attended a traditional public school. Just over 17 percent had attended a nonpublic school before attending the charter school (i.e., private, parochial or home schooling) 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 the charter schools provides an extra burden in terms of costs on the sending districts and has become of point of contention between charter schools and districts.

The primary reason parents chose the charter school related to the school's mission, or to problems they were having with the traditional public school. Other issues noted were class size and teachers. Students chose the charter school because of parent preference, friends attending, not doing well in their previous school, and class size. Also, both parents and students seemed to be very aware of the school's mission and what it meant.