

Autonomy in Exchange for Accountability:

An Initial Study of Pennsylvania Charter Schools

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1

General Aims of the Study

- The study examines the accountability-autonomy trade-off and the new forms of accountability (outcome vs. input/process accountability)
- The study also seeks to determine how charters are using their autonomy and whether these uses lead to positive student outcomes

4

Overview of Presentation

- Background & methodology
- Structure of the report
- Challenges and limitations
- Student/family characteristics
- Teachers characteristics and working conditions
- Innovations
- Special education
- Accountability and student achievement
- 3 year extension of the evaluation

2

Accountability Plan for Pennsylvania Charter Schools

- Annual reports to PDE and LEAs
- Student performance on state achievement test
- Local and state audits
- Annual financial report
- Federal grant-monitoring visits
- School profiles
- External evaluation

5

Autonomy in Exchange for Accountability

- *Charter schools are responsible for improved student achievement.* Typically, each school negotiates a contract (or "charter") with the sponsoring agency, specifying areas in which students would learn more and how that learning would be measured. Schools that fail to achieve their contracted improvements are to be closed by the sponsoring organization.
- In turn, the *states grant greater autonomy* and a waiver of many rules and regulations governing public schools, aside from health, safety, and other particular regulations.

3

Characteristics of the Approach Used by The Evaluation Center to Study Charter Schools

- Intent to improve, not prove
- Desire to promote an appreciation of and capacity to conduct evaluations that can be used and developed by each participating charter school
- Holistic approach with aspects of both formative and summative evaluation included
- Use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection
- The design and conduct of the evaluation met the applicable standards of the program evaluation standards (utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy).

Evaluation Questions

- Does increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability result in improved pupil results?
- What effect does budget have on student results, nonacademic services, and school facilities?
- 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?

7

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%

Evaluation Questions

- Are the opportunities (i.e., professional growth, salaries, benefits, employee rights) for teachers and other employees significantly different at a charter school than at a traditional public school?
- What is the impact of charter schools as related to district reform efforts?
- Is there evidence that, over the term of the charter, student learning has significantly improved?
- What are promising practices in charter schools that could be included in district systemic reform?

8

Scope of the Evaluation

- Surveys, interviews, and document review focused on the 31 schools open during the 1998/99 academic year
- Secondary data analysis (with some exceptions, e.g., AFRs) included the 47 schools open during the 1999/2000 academic year

11

Data Collection Methods

- Surveys of staff, students, and parents, CSS & SCS
- Interviews with stakeholders
- Document reviews
- Portfolios (if available)
- Direct observation
- Focus groups
- Analysis of test results and available demographic and financial data

9

Charter School Database

- Annual reports
- Annual Financial Reports (PDE-2057)
- Survey data
- PDE School Profiles data
- Data collected during site visits
 - CAO interviews
 - Interviews/focus groups with others
- Documents

12

Reporting

- Year 1 interim report
- Final report
- Reporting to schools on survey results

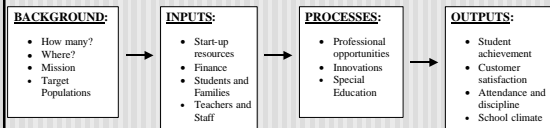
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Limitations (cont'd.)

- Small number of schools, limited time period
- Accounting for start-up issues
- Defining, observing, and assessing "innovation"
- Aggregate generalizations vs. variation among schools

16

Structure of the Report



14

A Snapshot of Pennsylvania Charter Schools

- Growth patterns
- School size

17

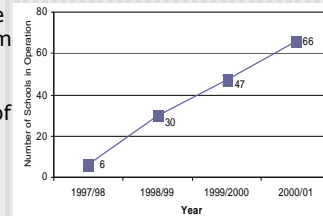
Challenges and Limitations

- Data are insufficient to answer the "value for money" question
- Unresolved normative issues
 - E.g., how much gain in student welfare is sufficient?
 - E.g., how should stakeholders balance achievement versus other outcomes?

15

Growth Patterns: Number of Schools

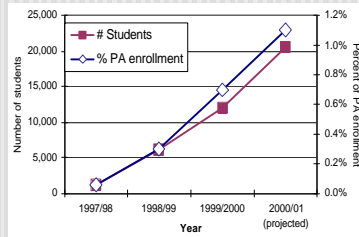
- For choice and the market mechanism to work, there must be an adequate supply of charter schools.
- Tremendous growth since the first year



18

Growth Patterns: Number of Students

- Projections put total 2000/01 enrollment at 20,533, or 1.1% of all PA public school enrollment



19

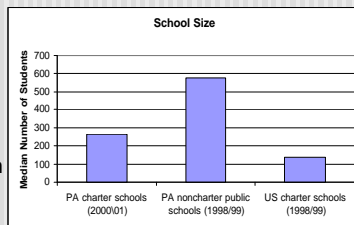
The Importance of Studying Start-Up

- Competition and choice cannot work unless there are "educational entrepreneurs" willing and able to bear the risks of start-up
- Start-up is also important as the first accountability hurdle

22

School Size: Comparisons

- Median charter school enrolls 265 students
- Smaller than the median PA school, but larger than the national median
- Recently opened schools are more likely to be larger



20

Organizational Resources

- Approximately three-fourths of the first 31 schools had clear ties to non-governmental organizations
- Such organizations can provide fiscal and social capital, as well as technical know-how
- Resources often come through ties to universities, foundations, and the business community
- Such organizational dependence might enhance the likelihood of long-term survival and high performance
- However, it might also present a barrier to large-scale implementation of the charter law²³

Charter School Start-Up in the First 31 Schools

- Founders' backgrounds
- Organizational resources
- The "epidemiology" of charters

21

The "Epidemiology of Charter Schools": Where Do They Thrive?

Chartering districts . . .

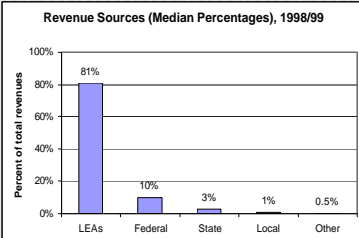
- Are larger
- Are poorer
- Have more nonwhite students
- Have posted lower PSSA scores
- Have more adults with a BA or more

. . . than nonchartering districts

24

Revenue Sources

Most charter schools rely extensively on non-LEA sources, with variation among schools. Estimates suggest that the typical district funds charter students at 71% of other students.



Student and Family Characteristics

Any evaluation of schools – charter or noncharter – must take into account the endowments the students bring with them. While demography is certainly not destiny, the fact remains that there is a strong empirical relationship between background factors, such as income and student achievement.

28

Expenditure Patterns

- The typical charter school spends approximately the same per pupil as the typical host district
 - Median charter: \$7,010
 - Median host: \$6,922
- However, charters must bear start-up and facilities costs
 - Typical charter spends 38% on “support services” (hosts: 32%)
- This (along with teacher salaries) might explain why the typical charter spends less on instruction (59% vs. 66%)

26

Questions Considered

- How do background characteristics compare with those of host districts?
- What kinds of schools did students attend before coming to a charter school?
- Why did students and families choose to attend a charter?
- Are students and parents aware of their school’s mission?

29

Expenditure Patterns

- However, some charters receive in-kind services from districts
- There is preliminary evidence that charter schools with clear relationships with non-governmental organizations devote a larger share of their total expenditures to instruction.

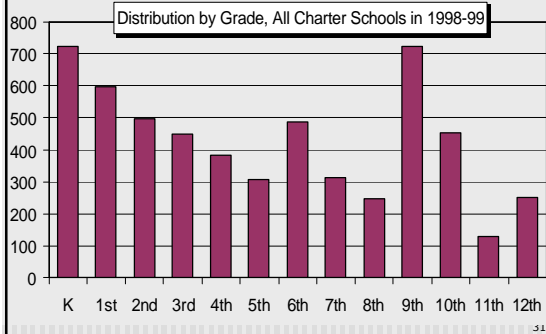
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Description of Sample

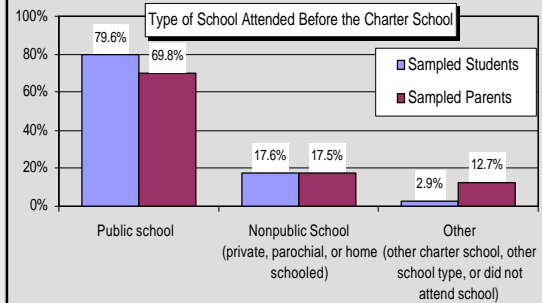
- 3 classes grade 5 and above at each school
- Total of 1,105 students
- 90.5% response rate
- 80% previously attended public school, 15% private/parochial school, and 1% home schooled

30

Enrollment Distribution by Grade

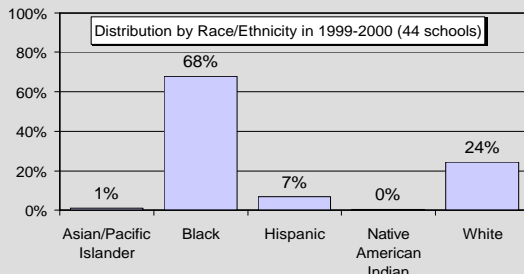


Previous School Attended



Race/Ethnicity

High concentration of minorities in the charter schools, but similar to their host districts



Reasons for Choosing Charter Schools

- Parents' top picks: good teachers and instruction, safety, educational philosophy
- Students' top picks: parents' preferences, safety, teachers, dissatisfaction with former school
- Different reasons for choosing between schools at elementary and secondary levels, and between schools that cater to at-risk populations and those that do not

Comparing Charter Schools and Host Districts

- Charters schools and host districts are quite similar in the proportion of low income students
- However, there is an indication of a trend toward "suburbanization" of the movement in Pennsylvania
- As a group, charter schools are serving at-risk student populations
- A few schools appear to attract students that do not reflect local districts

Awareness of Mission and Parental Participation

- Nearly 90% of parents report that they are aware of the mission of the school
- Over 3/4 report that they volunteer little or not at all at the school, in spite of the fact that 53% say that their school requires it. Some decline during the two years of the study. However, we still found evidence of strong parental involvement in some schools
- A small proportion of parents volunteer extensively

Characteristics of Teachers and Staff and their Working Conditions

Charter school theory suggests that granting teachers more choice and autonomy over their working conditions will allow schools to build faculties that are more motivated and willing to work hard. The surveys we administered attempted to tap into important teacher attitudes.

37

Certification/Experience

- 82% of classroom teachers certified in the state, 12% working toward certification
- Of certified teachers, about 87% teaching in their subject area
- About 31% of accrued experience in private/parochial schools
- Level of formal ed. and work experience similar to charter school teachers in other states

40

Description of Teacher/Staff Sample

- All instructional staff and key administrators sampled
- Response from 537 teachers and staff in 1999/00
- Response rates: 73% in 1999 and 84% in 2000
- 52% of staff white, 38% African American, 8% Hispanic
- 69% are female

38

Reasons for Seeking Employment at Charter School

- Interest in an educational reform effort
- Opportunity to work with like-minded educators
- Two intrinsic factors
- A number of factors that suggest a better working environment were also important: e.g., working with small classes, safety at school, and high academic standards

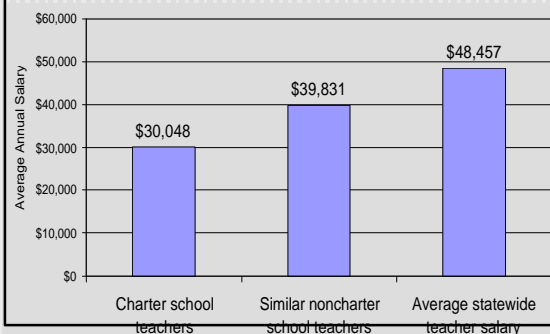
41

Description of Charter School Teachers

- As a group, charter teachers are quite young, with half under 30. Nationally, only 11% of teachers are under 30
- The typical teacher surveyed in 1999/2000 reported 4.8 years of teaching experience (with virtually no change from the previous year)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ of staff intend/wish to return next year; rates of teacher attrition/turnover vary extensively

39

Comparison of Teacher Salaries Between Charter and Noncharter Public Schools



Satisfaction of Staff

- 35% satisfied or very satisfied with salary, 31% dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with salary
- Staff generally more satisfied with benefits than salary
- Class size an important reason to seek employment at charter school, but an area with which teachers not yet satisfied
- Most staff satisfied with mission, but not equally convinced that school could fulfill mission

43

Staff Turnover

- Nearly 40 percent of teachers left during or between 1998/99 and 1999/2000
- 25% indicated that they did not plan to return
- Those not planning to return reported being dissatisfied with governance, leadership, resources, and the school's ability to realize its mission
- CAOs often told us that salaries were driving teachers away
- There was great variation among the schools
- Not all teacher attrition is bad

46

Initial Expectations vs. Current Experience

- Teachers and staff generally quite satisfied with school but initial expectations not being met
- Reasons for choosing a school do not necessarily correspond with qualities of a school

44

Innovation

- Defining innovation
- Innovations in organization and governance
- Innovations in curriculum and instruction
- Diffusion of innovation

47

Biggest Differences Between Initial Expectations and Current Experience on the Following Items

- The school will have/has effective leadership and administration
- Teachers will be able to influence the steering and direction of the school
- Support services will be/are available to students
- Parents will be/are able to influence the direction and activities at the school
- Students will receive/receive sufficient individual attention

45

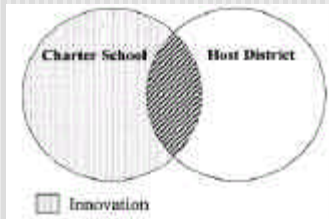
Defining and Observing Innovation

- Note that the scope of the project precluded systematic study of practices in noncharter public schools.
- Innovation as R&D
- Innovation for the purpose of choice
- The second definition is less restrictive

48

CAB Definition of Innovation

- The CAB appears to favor the "innovation for choice" definition
- One implication is that, other things being equal, charters in larger districts are less likely to be "innovative"



49

Innovations in Curriculum and Instruction

- Ethnic and cultural foci
- Pedagogical approaches
 - Constructivism
 - Back-to-basics
 - Structured job shadowing
 - Etc.
- Scheduling
- Technology

52

Innovations in Organization and Governance: Examples

- Extended hours
- Saturday classes
- Smaller classes
- Continuity between middle and high school
- Mandatory parental participation
- Continuous staff development
- Integrated social services
- Token economy

50

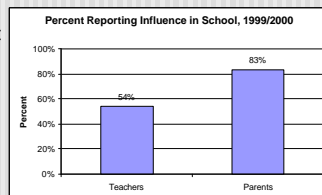
District Impact

- Collegial model
 - Few regular channels of communication
 - "We don't deal with charter schools"
 - Financial situation leads some to perceive a zero-sum game
 - What contacts there are tend to grow out of prior personal relationships
- Competitive model
 - In most areas, charter enrollment is small
 - Even in Philadelphia, informants suggest that perceived competition does not translate into policy change

53

Innovation in Organization and Governance

- The majority of parents and teachers report that they have influence in their schools
- However, PA charter schools score below national norms on "parent- and community-school relationships" on the School Climate Survey



51

Special Education

Unlike many other mandates on schools, states cannot waive federal special education requirements. Thus, there is a basic conflict between special education law and the charter concept.

Special education is often a very resource-intensive activity. Yet, many charter schools are forced to work with relatively scarce resources (less money, less experienced teachers working at lower salaries, etc.).

56

Key Findings

- There remains uncertainty about special education legal obligations at school level
- In spite of all this, PDE has been conscientious in addressing the issue (e.g., the new rules)
- Funding formula makes no distinction among high- and low-need students. Thus, a financial incentive for schools to avoid students with severe disabilities
- There are large school-to-school variations in special ed enrollment
- Teachers in some school feel overwhelmed, while others report that things are going smoothly

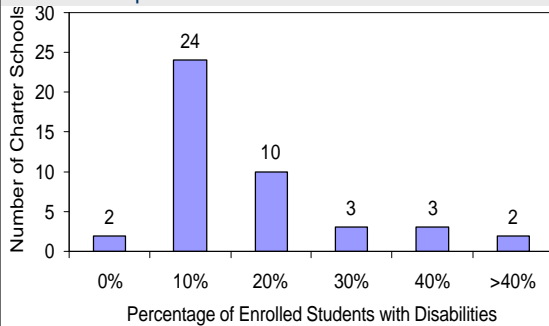
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Perspectives on Charter School Accountability

- Two central questions
 - Accountability to whom?
 - Accountability for what?
- We focus on the second question
- The first question is largely an institutional and political decision)

58

Distribution of Charter Schools According to Their Proportion of Students with Disabilities

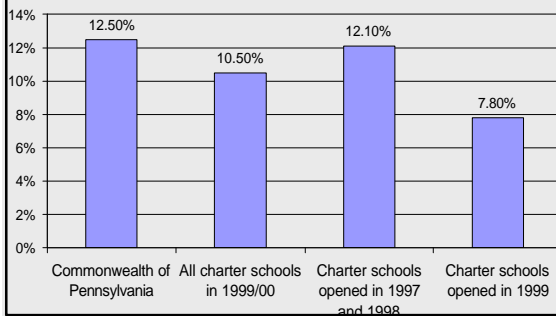


Accountability for What?

- Regulatory/process accountability
 - Inputs and processes
- Performance accountability
 - Outputs and outcomes
 - The "new deal" in accountability
- Market accountability
 - Customer satisfaction
 - "Voting with their feet"

59

Percent of Enrolled Students with Disabilities



Performance Accountability: Student Achievement

- Data, methods, and limitations
- Three sets of comparisons

60

Data and Methods

- Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)
 - Used scaled scores rather than quartiles (600 point scale)
 - Scores are equated to 1995/96 administration; allows examination of growth over time
- RFP called for three comparisons
 - "District schools" (all schools, host districts)
 - "Like" schools
 - Comparisons over time

61

Comparisons With Host Districts

- Provide a better comparison group, since charter schools draw *mostly* from their immediate area
- Where there are multiple sponsors, we created a composite "host district" by taking the weighted average across districts

64

Generic Limitations

- PSSA provides no way to track students individually, only school means
- Thus, no way to assess students' pre-charter performance
- Most schools are still quite young (first founded in 1996/97). Note the persistence of past schooling experiences (TN experiment)
- Small number of schools for any given test
- 1999/2000 PSSA scores not available in time for inclusion in the report

62

- Findings are suggestive but in no way

Comparisons with Host Districts

- Not surprisingly, the charter-host discrepancy is smaller when the comparison group is host districts only
- As a group, and averaged across tests, charter schools scored 50 lower (8% of the scale)
- However, some schools draw from many districts (one draws from 70)
- We can't rule out the possibility that at least some of the difference is due to selection effects

65

Comparisons With All Noncharter Public Schools

- As a group and averaged across subjects/grades, charter schools scored 140 points lower (23% of scale) than noncharter public schools
- Such comparisons are useful inasmuch as charter school students must ultimately compete in the labor market with all other students
- However, given that background factors explain almost 75% of school-to-school variation in PSSA scores, such comparisons mostly show selection effects

63

Comparisons with Demographically Similar Schools

- One problem with host district comparisons is that host districts are not always similar on educationally relevant "background" factors
- Thus, we created composite comparison groups of demographically similar schools
- We used regression residuals
 - Positive value: school outperformed DSSs
 - Negative value: school was outperformed by DSS
- Typical charter school scored 46 points below similar schools (8% of scale)

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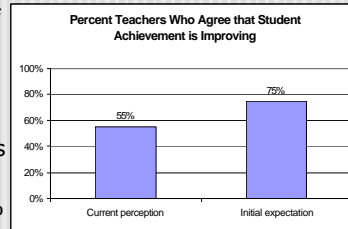
Comparisons Over Time

- Schools serve as their own comparison group
- However...
 - Two years of data are insufficient to establish trends (cf. RAND study)
 - Consecutive cohorts
 - Small schools are more likely to show dramatic changes by change alone
 - Only 4 schools had change score data
- Schools outgained their host districts by 86 points

67

Subjective Ratings of Student Performance

- More than half of teachers surveyed report that student achievement is improving
- However, 75% *expected* improvements



70

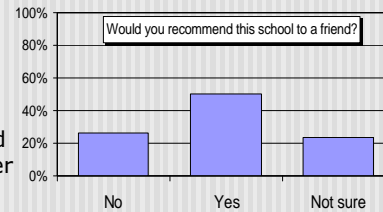
Other Indicators of School Quality

- Subjective ratings of student performance
- Waiting lists
- Attendance
- Safety
- Learning climate
- National norms

68

Student Satisfaction

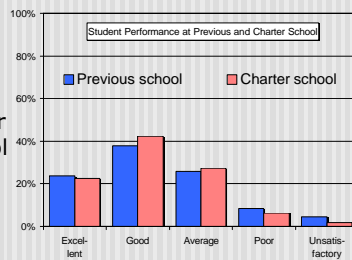
- Half of students surveyed said they would recommend their charter school to a friend



71

Subjective Ratings of Student Performance

- Generally, students report they are doing better at their charter school
- Difference is statistically discernible (Wilcoxon $p = .001$)



69

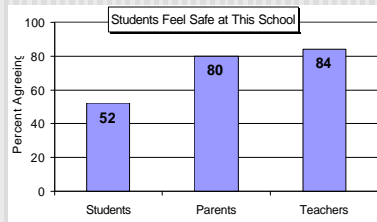
Attendance and Waiting Lists

- The typical charter school had an attendance rate of approximately 90%, with little change from the previous year (some difference in cohorts)
- As of Summer 2000, the average charter school has a waiting list of 125, or 45% of total current enrollment

72

School Safety

- Teachers and parents are more likely than students to report that their school is safe
- No available data on disciplinary incidents



73

Issues for Further Consideration and Policy Issues

76

Learning Climate

- Approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of parents and teachers report that their school has high standards
- 69% of students say their teachers encourage them to think about their future (slight increase over previous year)
- 78% of students say that administrators know them by name
- Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of students say that students are more interested in learning than at their previous school

74

Issues for Further Consideration

- How effective is the charter approval process as a quality control mechanism?
- What happens to charter schools approved on appeal?
- Do charter schools offer more educational value for the money?
- What explains school-to-school variations in student achievement?
- Why do parents and students choose to leave charter schools?

77

Comparisons With National Norms

- Charter schools score above national norms in
 - Teacher-student relationships
 - Administration
 - Academic orientation
- Charter schools score below national norms in
 - Parent- and community-school relationships
- Disagreement between teachers & students in
 - Safety and maintenance (teachers > students)
 - Behavior (students > teachers)
- Availability of student activities

75

Policy Issues

- What are the implications of charter schools' reliance on non-governmental organizations?
- How should stakeholders balance performance, market, and regulatory accountability?
- What is the appropriate role of competition vs. collaboration between charter and noncharter schools?

78

Continuation of the Pennsylvania Charter School Evaluation

- ❖ 3 years in duration
- ❖ Includes legislatively-mandated 5-year evaluation with recommendations for revisions in the charter school initiative

79

Specific Data Collection

- Secondary data analysis
 - Annual reports, School Profiles, AFRs, SASS, etc.
- CAO questionnaires
- Surveys (CSS, tch/staff, & students)
 - Required in all schools in 2001-02, otherwise optional except for case study schools
- Case studies of 5-7 schools

82

Evaluation Questions

- What are promising practices to be addressed in this study?
- Is there evidence that, over the term of the charter, student learning has significantly improved?
- Does increased flexibility in exchange for increased accountability result in improved pupil results? Which waivers have more impact, and which are seen as most important?

80

Why Case Studies?

- Detailed examination of processes at a number of schools
- Understand "why"
- Identify best practices
- Explore barriers to--and potential for--diffusion of innovations

83

Evaluation Questions

(continued)

- 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?
- Are the opportunities (i.e., professional growth, salaries, benefits, employee rights) for teachers and other employees significantly different at a charter school than at a traditional public school?
- What happens to students leaving the charter schools?

81

Deliverables

- Survey reports to schools
- Interim report (10/30/01)
- 5-year legislatively-mandated report (10/30/02)
- Addendum to 5-year report (10/30/03)

84

Web Site for Evaluation Project

- Contains information on evaluation plan, instruments, reports

<http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter/pacharter.html>

85