

Research and Evaluation Update: National Trends in Charter Schools

PURPOSE

The purpose of this brief is to provide a synopsis of current information about general trends in charter schools.

Kamehameha Schools has a formal relationship with fourteen charter schools at the present time: twelve start-up charters through the Ho'olako Like program and two conversion charters through our partnership with the Ho'okāko'o Corporation. The Ho'olako Like schools enrollments are predominantly Native Hawaiian. These schools offer a Hawaiian culture- and place-based education. The Ho'okāko'o schools enrollments include a substantial proportion of Native Hawaiian students. These schools have made a commitment to the perpetuation of 'Ike Hawai'i and to reducing gaps in achievement between Hawaiian and non-Hawaiian students while increasing the level of achievement for all students.

WHAT WE LEARNED

A Short History of Charter Schools

Charter school laws return much of the control of schools to their local constituencies by granting the schools greater fiscal and educational autonomy in exchange for greater accountability. The theory behind charter schools is that, by giving them freedom to innovate and holding them accountable for results, the schools will develop educational models that are responsive to their communities and increase student achievement. At a systemic level, the state and federal governments expect that charter schools essentially become laboratories for the development and testing of educational reforms that can inform improvement in traditional schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The first state charter school law was passed by Minnesota in 1991 and the first charter school opened in there in 1992. In 1995 the federal government began support of charter

schools with the passage of the Public Charter Schools Program (U.S. Department of Education Office of the Under Secretary, 2004). There are now 2,996 charter schools in 38 states and the District of Columbia with a total enrollment of nearly 800,000 students (Rothman, 2004).

There are two main types of charter schools: start-ups and conversions. Start-up schools are typically schools formed in response to the opportunities created by charter school legislation. In Hawai'i, some start-up charters have their roots in former programs within traditional public schools or a "school-within-a-school." Start-up charter schools may also include former private schools that convert to public schools through the charter process. Conversion charter schools are traditional public schools seeking greater autonomy. Charter schools may be independent, self-managing schools or may be run by nonprofit or for-profit entities, such as the Ho'okāko'o Corporation in Hawai'i.

TRENDS IN CHARTER SCHOOL PARTICIPATION

The Public Charter School Program evaluation (U.S. Department of Education Office of the Under Secretary, 2004) compiled information about participation in charter schools nationwide through 2002. Charter schools are increasingly becoming schools of choice for low-income and minority students and for minority teachers. Findings from this study include the following.

- The proportion of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch in charter schools increased from 39 percent in 1999 to 53 percent in 2002 (compared with 38 percent in traditional public schools)
- The proportion of teachers of color increased between 2000 and 2002—from about 16 percent to about 24 percent for African American teachers, remained stable at about 8 percent for Hispanic/Latino and 3 percent for "other minority." Non-white teachers in traditional public schools are at about 16 percent.
- The proportion of minority students increased from about 52 percent in 1999 to about 68 percent in 2002.

Changes in Hawai'i mirror those at the national level. The first two charter schools (the conversions of Wai'alae and Lanikai elementary schools) are located in middle to upper-middle class communities and enrolled predominantly middle-class students. However, since the changes in the Hawai'i charter school laws, which allowed the creation of start-up charter schools, the profile of the charter schools students has undergone significant changes.

- At the end of the 2002–03 school year, 11 percent of the students at the first two schools qualified for lunch subsidies compared with 50 percent of the students in the start-up charters and 42 percent of public school students statewide.
- Students of Hawaiian ancestry, one of the two ethnic groups with the lowest levels of achievement in Hawai'i public schools, comprised 11 percent of the enrollment in the original charter schools, 50 percent of the enrollment in the start-up charter schools, and 26 percent of the enrollment in all public schools.

CHARTER SCHOOL IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

Given that charter schools are typically created to respond to local concerns and interests, it is not surprising that charter schools are incredibly diverse and that studies of their effectiveness yield mixed results. However, with slightly more than a decade of experience, a body of research on the effectiveness of charter schools is emerging. The Public Charter School Program evaluation (U.S. Department of Education Office of the Under Secretary, 2004) included case studies of charter schools in five states. The evaluators found that the charter schools were less likely to meet state performance standards than traditional public schools whether they used unadjusted numbers, adjustments for student and school characteristics using one factor at a time, or logistic regression to control for multiple school characteristics. However, they note that these findings are not indicative of the impact of the charter schools on student achievement and that it is not possible to determine from this study whether or not traditional schools are more effective than charter schools. The authors suggest that the findings may be linked to prior achievement of students or other factors.

The American Federation of Teachers sponsored a study of charter school effectiveness based on a 3 percent sample of charter schools. The study garnered headlines when it reported that charter school students performed about half a grade behind their peers in traditional public schools (Nelson, Rosenberg, & Van Meter, 2004).

A report by Hoxby (2004) was based on a 99 percent sample of charter schools and compared their performance with that of the nearest traditional elementary school. Hoxby found that

“Compared to students in the nearest regular public school, charter students are 4 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 2 percent more likely to be proficient in math, on their state’s exams. Compared to students in the nearest regular public school with a similar racial composition, charter students are 5 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 3 percent more likely to be proficient in math. In states where charter schools are well-established, charter school students’ proficiency “advantage” tends to be greater.” (Hoxby, 2004, p. 1)

After a study of charter school student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the U.S. Department of Education (2004) researchers concluded that “for students of the same racial/ethnic backgrounds, reading and mathematics performance in charter schools did not differ from that in other public schools. However, this study found lower overall mathematics performance in charter schools than in other public schools” (p. 10). The researchers went on to note that charter school student performance on reading was stronger than expected: “... in reading there was no measurable difference between the overall performance of charter school fourth-grade students as a whole and their counterparts in other public schools. This is true even though, on average, charter schools have higher proportions of students from groups that typically perform lower on the NAEP...” (p. 10).

A recent PASE study of the achievement of Native Hawaiian students in start-up charter schools revealed that these students scored better than comparable Hawaiian students in traditional schools on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) for both reading and

mathematics and on the mathematics portion of the Hawai'i State Assessment. (The charter school students scored as well as traditional students on the reading portion of the Hawai'i State Assessment.) In addition, the Hawaiian charter school students had better rates of school attendance (Kana'iaupuni & Ishibashi, 2005). This study used statistical controls for students' gender, socioeconomic status, and grade; teacher credentials; and geographic region.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE CHARTER SCHOOLS

Gary Miron, an expert on charter schools who has studied charters in twelve states, notes that there are large differences in the effectiveness of charter schools within and across states and that strongest student achievement results are observed in the states that have been the most aggressive in closing poorly performing charters (cited in Rothman, 2004). The U.S. Department of Education's Policy and Program Services unit conducted a case study of eight successful charter schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). These schools were selected because they had met the annual yearly performance (AYP) targets in their states and had demonstrated growth in achievement test scores for at least three consecutive years. The sample included schools serving urban minority populations and schools in more affluent communities. Common aspects of these schools included the following characteristics.

- A well-conceived and powerful mission
- Mission-driven innovations across the school program
 - Mission-responsive curriculum and pedagogy
 - Flexible structure and operations (use of time, length of school day)
 - Responsive staffing—hiring staff to fit the program
 - Supportive school environment
- Promoting a community of continuous learning
 - Internal accountability—sharing of student work to improve teaching and learning
 - Staff commitment—teachers who live the school philosophy
- Partnering with parents and the community—shared vision creates a strong sense of community

- Governing for accountability—annual self-evaluation of school program, quality of teaching, student outcomes related to school mission and goals, financial management, and family satisfaction

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