

Naturalistic Generalizations About Charter High Schools

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Since October 2001 a team of researchers from the Center on Education and Work (CEW) at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wisconsin, has studied charter high schools through a grant from the Public School Charter School Program, Office of Innovation and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. Charter schools are special public schools governed by state laws and funded through public money. Depending upon state laws, charter schools are granted degrees of autonomy over their educational programs and operations in exchange for greater accountability for student outcomes. Charter schools vary in educational programs offered, types of students served, authorizers (agencies that grant the charter), and staffing configurations. Generally, charter schools have smaller numbers of students per school compared to most public schools.

The two-year CEW grant funded an applied research project involving charter high schools with certain practices linking classrooms to the real world. Applied research, for study purposes, is an inquiry undertaken to meet the needs of targeted audiences through the development of products and materials, while simultaneously addressing questions of interests to researchers.

Charter schools have spread rapidly across the country since the first two charter schools opened in 1992. The number of states with charter legislation continues to rise, as does the number of charter schools. As of school year 2001-2002 there were 2,348 charter schools.¹ The number of charter high schools is less than charter elementary schools. Exact numbers are unknown, in part because charter schools can designate grade levels they will serve.

A national study of charter schools, using 1998-99 school year data, reported that 17 percent of the 1400 charter schools in existence had a grade configuration of 9-12, typical of most high schools.² A National Center on Education Statistics charter school questionnaire completed by 870 charter schools showed that 42 percent, or 362 of the respondents, were high schools with grades 9-12. Thirty-nine and one-half percent of these 362 high schools identified themselves as being alternative schools, while 37.5 percent described themselves as regular schools. This compares to 18.5 percent that said their school had a special emphasis program, 3.3 percent vocational technical schools, and 1.4 percent having a special education emphasis.

CEW researchers estimated that there are at least 450 charter high schools with 9-12 grade configurations. This estimate is based on an instrument mailed to charter high schools, the result of which is the *Handbook of Charter High Schools: Learning in a Real-World Context*, one of the four products resulting from the overall study.³ Schools with such practices volunteered to be listed in the handbook.

This report presents naturalistic generalizations pertaining to 21 studied charter high schools. These generalizations are empirical and grounded in what researchers learned during the inquiry. They are therefore applicable and credible within the context of 21 charter high schools, but are not meant to apply to all charter high schools.⁴

During the research the 21 studied schools gradually earned the label of being schools “using the real world as a context for learning.” According to this approach, life in the real world defines

¹ See http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2003/overview03/table_09.asp.

² See <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter4thyear/b2.html#3>

³ See Appendix A for descriptions of products.

⁴ See Lincoln, Yvonna S. & Guba, Egon G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

skills students need to learn for future success. A variety of strategies are used to teach those skills. Some examples are: (1) providing learning opportunities outside the use of conventional classrooms or textbooks, (2) instruction that brings the outside world into classrooms, (3) placing students in “real-world” settings, such as internships and (4) requiring that students demonstrate mastery under conditions similar to those in the community and professional world.

Initially CEW researchers intended to study charter high schools that were “employer-linked.” Public Policy Associates studied such schools and defined employer-linked schools as “a special type of public charter school in which employer organizations or networks join with educational entrepreneurs in a collaborative partnership to develop and operate a workworld-informed educational program.”⁵ However, as CEW studied the 21 schools the construct of “using the real world as a context for learning” emerged. Specific practices to implement the approach were labeled as “real-world practices.” More discussion of these changes at the construct level follows in this report in the section on generalizations applicable to all schools. Before presenting these generalizations, the report gives a brief overview of the studied schools and how they were selected, and provides an overview of the methodology. The report concludes with a summary.

Schools Studied and Their Selection

Seven charter high schools and a cluster of four academies each having charter status and at one location were designated “field study sites,” for a total of 11 charter schools (see Table 1).⁶ Ten other schools constituted “second sample sites” (See Table 2), for a total of 21 studied schools. Methods of site selection included a nomination process, an extensive search of all U.S. charter high schools via the Internet, a review of schools based on selection criteria, and telephone interviews with key school administrators from potential sites prior to actual selection. The nomination process included a webpage and extensive advertisement of the search in cooperation with the Charter Friends National Network and personnel from the U.S. Charter Schools website. Nominating procedures by themselves failed to produce adequate numbers of potential schools and were supplemented by a state-by-state search of high schools using available online information and directories.

Initial site selection criteria were: (1) three years in operation, (2) a commitment to practices that connect students to the world beyond classrooms, and (3) significant number of students engaged in such practices. Following these criteria, 34 potential sites emerged. This list was reduced after further study and phone interviews guided by three more criteria: (1) “site robustness”—a determination of how much could be learned from the site that would be applicable and useful to others in charter schools, (2) geographical spread, and (3) inclusion of at least one school from states with the most charter schools. The final sites were chosen after the phone interviews (two sites and the pilot were selected at the time of the grant).

The 21 schools studied are located in 10 different states and the District of Columbia, with a total enrollment of 5400 students. Grade configuration varies from those open only to 11th and 12th graders to a few schools that include students as young as the kindergarten level. Seventeen sites had full day programs, while the remaining four had half-day programs with students attending a local “home high school.” School authorizers vary with charter school legislation in the state in

⁵ Public Policy Associates (June 2000). Employer-Linked Charter Schools: An Introduction. <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/pdfs/introduction.pdf>

⁶ Appendix B provides more information about these sites.

which they are located and include state boards, local school districts, regional educational service providers, and public universities.⁷

Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Field Study Sites

	Location	Grade Levels	Approximate Enrollment	Year Opened	Authorizer
Field Study Sites:					
Work & Learning Center (Pilot)	Madison, WI	6-12	32 (at the site studied)	1997	Madison School District ⁸
Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART) (Half Day)	Clovis, CA	11-12	954	2000	Fresno Unified School District
Cesar Chavez Public High School for Public Policy	Washington, D.C.	9-12	240	1998	D.C. Public Charter School Board
Henry Ford Academy	Dearborn, MI	9-12	415	1997	Wayne RESA
Indian River Charter HS	Vero Beach, FL	9-12	244	1998	Indian River County School District
ISUS/Trade & Technology Prep	Dayton, OH	NA	160	1999	Ohio State Board of Education
Textron/Chamber of Commerce Charter	Providence, RI	9-12	200	1997	RI Board of Regents
4 St. Clair County ISD Academies (Half Day)					
Academy for Plastics Manufacturing Technology	Port Huron, MI	11-12	151	1996	Intermediate School District of St. Clair County
Information Technology Academy	Port Huron, MI	11-12	121	2000	Intermediate School District of St. Clair County
Hospitality Academy	Port Huron, MI	11-12	63	2000	Intermediate School District of St. Clair County
Health Careers Academy	Port Huron, MI	11-12	139	1997	Intermediate School District of St. Clair County
Total Students			2719		

⁷ More information on each participating school is available at <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>.

⁸ Work and Learn Center was part of a charter serving most of Madison's high school aged and older students considered at risk or experiencing significant school problems. In January 2003, nearly a year after the pilot, the district chose not to renew the charter.

Table 2: Selected Characteristics of Second Sample Sites

Second Sample Sites:					
Academic/Vocational Charter Institute	Watsonville, CA	11-12	43	1999	Pajaro Valley Unified School District
Greenville Technical Charter High School	Greenville, SC	9-12	231	1999	Greenville School District
Livingston Technical Academy	Howell, MI	9-12	138	1995	Central Michigan University
McKeel Academy of Applied Technology	Lakeland, FL	6-12	847 (in 6-12)	1998	Polk County School Board
Minnesota Transitions Charter School	Minneapolis, MN	K-12	200 (in 9-12)	1996	Minneapolis Public Schools
Perspectives Charter High School	Chicago, IL	6-12	148 (in 6-12)	1997	Chicago School District
Pinnacle Charter High School	Tempe, AZ	9-12	185	1995	AZ Board of Education
Presidio High School	Tucson, AZ	9-12	350	1996	AZ Board of Education
Prosser Creek Charter School	Truckee, CA	K-12	454 (in 9-12)	1998	Tahoe-Truckee Joint Unified School District
Skills for Tomorrow Charter School	St. Paul, MN	10-12	125	1994	Rockford School Board
Total			2721		

Methodology

The 21 charter high schools were studied following four strategies in addition to analysis of charter school data compiled by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES). These strategies are now briefly described.

Case Studies

For the 11 field study sites, CEW project staff chose data collection and analysis methods aligned with the constructivist paradigm and naturalistic inquiry resulting in case studies.⁹ There were two reasons for selecting this approach.

First, the project goal (producing materials and products while addressing relevant key research questions) meant that inquiry would involve description of phenomena rather than co-relational or causal analysis of the relationship among or between a pre-determined set of variables. Thus, project staff paid particular attention to how individuals perceive, value, and experience the phenomena under study in order to convey the results to others as accurately as possible. The constructivist paradigm allows and supports a posture of capturing the phenomena of charter schools from the points of view of those who are intimately involved in such institutions.

Second, as the site visits dramatically revealed, the implementation of real-world practices is a complex affair, intimately connected with the population served by a school, the school mission, the nature of the educational problem confronted by the school, and the political realities of

⁹ Lincoln, Yvonna S. & Guba, Egon G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

administering programs on the ground. Thus, project staff determined that the “thick descriptions”¹⁰ associated with case studies offered the best means of assisting others in adapting programs and practices to their own inevitably unique school settings.

In order to produce thick descriptions or case studies, each of the seven charter high schools (counting the pilot) and the four academies at one location were intensively studied using various procedures, including a four-day on-site visit conducted by a team of two or three researchers. Prior to the four-day site visit, teleconferencing (ranging from 75 to 90 minute sessions) was used to collect initial information, gain familiarity with the site, plan the site visit, identify those who would be interviewed, and to instruct the site contact how to submit documents and records. Prior to each site visit, through emails and phone discussions with the designated site contact, an acceptable on-site schedule was developed.

Extensive portfolios of documents and records for each field study site were assembled. Shortly before the site visit the site’s portfolio was carefully read and studied. Interview and observation protocols were reviewed and, when needed, revised to ensure that researchers addressed questions using terms and programmatic labels unique to the site. Each site visit started with a one hour “document review session” with the school’s director or designee. During this session researchers reviewed what they had learned so far about the school from the documents and asked for confirmation, correction, or further elaboration. These sessions proved invaluable. Gaining an early understanding of how staff and others associated with the school talked about their school and its programs was the first research challenge, and these sessions were instrumental in meeting that challenge.

During the site visit one-on-one interviews ranging from 60 to 75 minutes were conducted with the school principal or director, a key informant, at least four teachers, and a minimum of two school partners (employers or community representatives).¹¹ In some cases multiple session interviews were necessary, and at some sites focus group interviews were used. In addition, data from students about their school experiences were collected through one-hour individual interviews with a cross section of the graduating class of 2002, as well as by a survey administered to the entire class. Table 3 shows the number of students surveyed, and Table 4 shows the number of interviews conducted during the site visits. Researchers also conducted lengthy observations in classrooms. Additionally, the field study sites (except the pilot site) completed a lengthy web-based program survey explained in the next subsection.

As Table 4 reveals, 420 members of the Class of 2002, or 53 percent of the total estimated number of graduating seniors from field site schools, completed the survey.¹² The eight-page survey covered various topics, including how much students liked attending the charter school, overall effectiveness given certain outcomes, frequency of participation in real world practices, classroom instructional practices, future plans, assistance in thinking about a career, relationships with people at the schools, and information about each individual student. The instrument was pilot tested, including checks on readability level.¹³

¹⁰ Geertz, Clifford. (1973). Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture. In Clifford Geertz (ed.), *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

¹¹ Interviews with school partners were added as a result of the pilot.

¹² Some schools did not classify the exiting group of students as seniors indicating a desire to be non-graded.

¹³ A report of survey results is available at the project website, <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>.

Table 3: Field Site Interviews

Site	Employers or Community Members	School Staff	Students	Consultant Professors	Total
CART	3	12	18	1	34
Chavez	2	11	10		23
Henry Ford	4	8	22		34
Indian River	4	6	12	1	23
ISUS	10 (7 in focus groups)	7	18 (9 in focus groups)		35
Textron	2	10	14		26
St. Clair Academies	8 (focus group)	13 (6 in focus group)	14		35
Work & Learn (Pilot)	0	6	8		14
Totals	33	73	116	2	224

Table 4: Student Surveys Conducted at Field Sites

Site	Class of 2002	Number Surveyed	Returned
Ford	70	58	83percent
Indian River	57	37	65percent
Textron	35	28	80percent
Cesar Chavez	25	20	80percent
ISUS	60	16	27percent
CART	325	103	32percent
Work & Learn	19	19	100percent
St. Clair Academies	200	139	69percent
Total	791	420	53percent

Interviews with staff and community members were discussions based on topics rather than structured interviews with a question and response pattern. Protocols were developed prior to each site visit and topics adjusted according to interviewee. The menu of topics, with suggested questions, were: (a) interviewee's role in charter school; (b) school's history and development; (c) organizational components; (d) learning environment, curriculum, and delivery of instruction; (e) mission and core organizational principles and values; (f) kinds of real world practices; (g) role of stakeholders; (h) expected student outcomes; and (i) issues faced and responses.

At each site a key informant, defined as a person knowledgeable about all aspects of the school including the school's history and development, was identified prior to the on-site visit and in consultation with the on-site contact. In most cases this was a staff member. All key informants had a long association with the school, starting with the planning phase. Interviews with key informants exceeded one hour and, in some cases, went three hours over a number of sessions.

Student interviews were also topical. Interviewers were instructed to cover such topics as (a) reasons for attending, (b) how the student gained entry, (c) comparison of charter school experiences to other high schools attended, (d) characteristics of students attending, (e) likes and dislikes regarding the charter school, (f) classroom methods, (g) participation in any real world practices and reactions, (h) future plans, and (i) what characterizes a successful adult.

All interviews were taped and transcribed. Once data collection was complete, researchers conducted statistical analysis of student survey data with aid of SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. Interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method¹⁴ with the aid of ATLAS^{Ti} qualitative analysis software. After completion, a draft of each case report was then submitted to a principal administrator at the field study site for critical review and feedback. Detailed written instructions for the review, kinds of feedback desired, and how to provide feedback were given. Those who reviewed each case study devoted significant time to the task and provided additional valuable information while confirming the accuracy of each narrative.

Web-Based Survey

The 10 second-sample sites (listed in Table 2), as well as the field study sites, provided data through a lengthy web-based survey referred to as the “program survey.” A report of results and findings is posted on the project’s website. A total of 16 program surveys were completed, representing 19 of the 21 charter high schools that participated in the study.¹⁵ The principal or director of each participating school completed the instrument. For most sites, another staff member also completed the survey. Collected information pertained to the following areas:

- Why the school was formed and the “problem” the school was designed to solve.
- The school’s core educational philosophy and intended outcomes.
- Groups and prominent decision makers involved in planning and operating the school.
- Curriculum and instructional practices: key features, organization, and significant differences from traditional high schools.
- Real-world practices: presence and types of learning opportunities that foster connections between students and the world beyond the classroom.
- Issues and challenges encountered, and how the school has dealt with them.

Graduate Survey

Starting in early 2003, approximately eight months after graduation, members of the class of 2002 who completed a survey during the on-site visits completed a graduate survey. Four hundred and twenty one 2002 graduates received the survey, and 226 surveys were returned for a 54 percent response rate. Each of the field study sites was represented in the survey.¹⁶

¹⁴ Glaser, Barney G., & Strauss, Anselm L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago: Aldine.

¹⁵ One completed survey actually represents four participating charter schools that are legally separate entities, having separate governing boards and instructional staff, but which are located within the same facility and are managed by the same administrators. The administrator who completed the survey for these four schools indicated that his responses were applicable to all four schools. As such, there were officially 21 charter high schools participating in the project, but only 18 program surveys that could potentially have been received and analyzed. Sixteen of these 18 surveys were in fact completed and summarized in a report. A 17th was only partially completed, and the 18th was not completed.

¹⁶ A report of the survey results and its findings is available at the project website, <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>.

Project staff developed the mailed survey with technical assistance from the Wisconsin Survey Center. The Wisconsin Survey Center administered the survey providing data to project staff. A contracted consultant without any affiliation with the project analyzed data using SPSS and descriptive statistics.

Scaled and short response survey items inquired about the following: (1) the quality of a charter high school education as well as overall satisfaction; (2) ease of transition from high school; (3) usefulness of charter school experiences with respect to what was learned; (4) graduate status with respect to whether graduates were attending a four-year or two-year college, a technical school, or were employed full-time; (5) usefulness of any real-world practices given the student's current status; (6) advice for planners of charter schools; (7) lifestyle values at age 35; and (8) information about each respondent, including how they felt their life would proceed during the next five years.

National Center For Education Statistics Data Set

Researchers studied data relevant to real-world practices obtained via the 1999-2000 School Year Public Charter School Questionnaire, which was conducted at the National Center for Education Statistics. Data from 25 relevant questions were analyzed using SPSS.

Developing Naturalistic Generalizations

The broad applied research strategies discussed above are the foundation for making generalizations about the 21 studied charter schools. It should be noted that gaining an in-depth understanding of the studied charter schools requires reading and studying the various reports available, as well as the detailed case studied of field study sites. The generalizations reported here are the intersections of findings from these other more detailed reports.

Developing these generalizations involved identifying logical and credible inferences using various reports as source of information, along with findings from NCES data. The process of developing inferences was aided by the development of matrices, following the work of Miles and Huberman.¹⁷ Through the use of matrices relationships among and between findings from various reports were studied resulting in memos. These memos are the basis for the information in the next section.

Naturalistic Generalizations about Studied Charter High Schools

Statements that apply to the 21 schools fall into 10 broad categories: (1) limited applicability of “employer-linked” as a descriptive construct; (2) reasons for startup; (3) core philosophy; (4) governance, role of stakeholders, and partnerships; (5) conventional curriculum for full day schools; (6) teacher centered learning process; (7) status of real-world practices and the approach (using the real world as a context for learning); (8) student reactions; (9) issues and vulnerability; and (10) complex entities.

Before discussing generalizations, some historical context for the construct of “using the real-world as a context for learning” would be helpful. This construct, as already discussed, relates to Public Policy Associates’ study of employer-linked charter schools. The work of Public Policy Associates as well as this study reflects general interests in the historical role schools play in preparing students to enter the economic sector.

¹⁷ Miles, Matthew & Huberman, Michael. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Sage

The idea of “real world” is more inclusive than Public Policy’s notion of employer-linked schools, yet still focuses on how schools prepare students for life after school, including entering the workforce. Herbert Kliebard points out that “Whatever else public schooling may mean to Americans, it is above all a training ground for the workplace.”¹⁸ Educators, business, politicians, and others have had a long-term interest in increasing the capacity of the American educational enterprise to prepare students for success in the economic sector. As Kliebard documents, linking schools to workforce preparation began in the late 19th century, coinciding with the industrial revolution. Kliebard traces these interests up to 1946 and chronicles a history of mixed results.

In recent times, perhaps the zenith of public policy and interest in strengthening the connections between education and workforce preparation (including post-secondary education) was the school-to-work legislation of the 1990s. The school-to-work era, stimulated by the School-to-Work Opportunities ACT of 1994, had educators and various constituencies, including business representatives, developing local partnerships with the ultimate purpose of assisting students in making the transition from secondary education to successful post-secondary education, work, and careers.

With the above as background, the report now turns to the ten generalizations.

Limited Applicability of the Employer-Linked Construct

While intending to search out, identify, and study employer-linked charter schools, CEW researchers learned that this construct could not be easily applied to the studied schools. Early clues surfaced during the nomination process. Procedures referred to potential schools as being employer-linked and called for schools to be selected on the basis of specific criteria indicative of being employer-linked. For example, one criterion called for selecting schools in which “employer-linked programs and practices permeate the educational program.” Various indicators were associated with this criterion, including business/education partnerships that impact curriculum and instruction. In short, with respect to a continuum of employer-linked practices, researchers wanted to study those charter high schools that were on the higher end of the continuum.

Despite extensive advertisement, including 9,000 emails to charter school personnel through the U.S. Charter School Network, and letters to those associated with the Charter Friends Network, only a handful of schools responded to the request for nominations. Many factors could account for this low response rate. However, phone interviews with administrators of those schools that did respond and with administrators from other potential sites yielded the insight that “employer-linked” had many interpretations. Some administrators viewed “employer-linked” as a reference that the school was a vocational school, a title to be avoided in their estimation. Others viewed being employer-linked as requiring a mission that focused solely on workforce preparation with clear linkages to specific career fields. Still others viewed the construct as requiring school linkages with representatives of business and industry, thereby excluding partnerships with other community entities, such as non-profits and arts and cultural organizations. A few schools labeled as “employer-linked” that had participated in the earlier Public Policy Associates study disagreed with this label, saying that it did not fit their school.

¹⁸ Kliebard, H. (1999). *Schooled to Work*. New York: Teachers College Press. xiii.

Early in the inquiry CEW researchers began questioning the applicability of the major construct – employer-linked—recognizing that if such entities existed they were relatively rare. After schools were selected based on modified criteria during the inquiry itself, researchers discovered that many studied schools had connections to organizations in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors, as well as with classical profit-making businesses and industries. Furthermore, and more germane to this inquiry, workforce preparation, an implied and important motivation for being an employer-linked charter high school, was by no means the uniform goal of partnerships nor the sole mission of most studied schools. Studied charter high schools form linkages with outside organizations for a host of purposes. And to make things more complicated, for most schools workforce preparation was often identified as just one of several important outcomes of a school’s mission.

Overall, studied schools lacked two characteristics implied by the label of “employer-linked.” First, the purposes of the studied schools were more comprehensive than workforce preparation. Schools had multiple purposes associated with public schools such as citizenship, overall youth development, academic competencies, and preparation for post-secondary education. Second, in terms of organization, most studied schools (the exception being Henry Ford Academy with its long-term partnership with the Ford Motor Company) were not tightly linked to employer organizations. Employer organizations were involved in many schools, but they were in fact among several constituencies, as will be explained later in this report.

In the final analysis, the descriptive category or label “employer-linked” could not be used to categorize the 21 studied charter schools. Perhaps the term may fit a sub-set of schools, such as the four career academies, but even these academies had to fit workforce preparation into a school system favoring a broad mission for public high schools. In addition, within these academies educators were the influential stakeholder group determining programming with business representatives acting as advisors.

Reasons for Start-up

Developers and administrators of the 21 charter schools took on the difficult task of planning and ultimately operating a charter school for two broad reasons. First, most developers were motivated by altruism in response to the perceived failure of the public schools in their community. Second, a few initiators sought charter status for practical reasons, such as wanting a stronger voice for existing advisory groups or to allow non-union teachers in the classroom.

Most original initiators (for most schools these were educators) sincerely believed that their educational ideas would better meet the needs of students. Most also felt that their ideas were better, given what they considered to be failures of the public schools. Interviews with principals or directors of the field study sites showed that they were very dedicated and hard-working individuals committed to their schools and to serving youth. Program survey responses confirmed this characteristic, especially of charter school leaders.

Governance and Role of Stakeholders

As required by charter school legislation, all 21 studied charter high schools had a governance structure, but how governance was carried out and what it meant in practice varied. At one end of the continuum the governance role was strictly advisory and/or focused on ratification of decisions made by administrators or, in some cases, actual school boards. At the other end of the continuum were governance groups that acted as school boards and critical decision-makers who

were very influential on policy matters impacting operations and the future of the involved schools.

Regardless of governance role, all groups or boards played a valuable networking function. Boards connected charter school administrators to key community groups and key individuals influential in local school and community politics. This network function also provided access to sources of community support, as well as access to resources including funds, in-kind labor, and helpful information.

In the planning and development phases leading up to actual operations, in most cases educators tended to be the most influential stakeholder. Only in one school (Henry Ford Academy) did business representatives have a significant role in initiating planning and shaping the design of the school. Over time, however, the administrator (an educator) of Ford Academy changed the design within the original framework developed along with Ford Motor Company representatives. In most schools, various stakeholders were involved in planning the school and, as operations commenced, educators emerged as the prominent decision makers in matters of policies, organizational mission, and curriculum and instruction. In other words, the studied schools were highly influenced by the visions and interests of educators. Non-educators involved in planning recognized that, once the direction and the basic program was broadly defined, it was the responsibility of educators to implement the program.

What the business community viewed as desirable student traits that should result after 12 years of public education were taken into account by most of the 21 studied schools. These schools paid attention to the interests of business and industry in matters of education, as well as to various messages about how schools should better prepare students for the workforce given fundamental changes in the nation's economy. However, the interests of business and industry were just one element among several interests that these schools accommodated.

Some of the studied schools have business partnerships. Henry Ford Academy and Improved Solutions to Urban Systems (ISUS) of Dayton, Ohio, had some of the more complex partnerships. Others had partnerships with community colleges such as Indian River of Vero Beach, Florida, along with ISUS. Very few, if any, partnerships were legal contracts. Instead they were based on informal and often verbal agreements among key individuals. School leaders responsible for these arrangements were required to balance differences between organizational cultures, manage complex human relationships, have high levels of communication and facilitation skills, and have enough political finesse to balance different interests and agendas.

Core Philosophies

Case studies and program survey findings showed several important components of the studied schools' core philosophies. Core philosophy is defined as important beliefs and values regarding education that influence all aspects of schooling. The 11 case studies showed that significant numbers of staff within the studied schools shared a common set of beliefs about desired student and teacher relationships. Many staff felt that student/teacher relationships involved more than imparting knowledge. Teachers had to care for youth through adolescence, and so nurturing youth proved to be a key core belief of the studied schools. Several field study sites were especially committed to "personalization" or "individualization," meaning that teachers were to focus on both academic skills and the classically defined affective component of educating youth.

Closely related to valuing “personalization” was the importance of providing students with a small and nurturing educational environment featuring individualized attention for all students. All sites shared the core belief that a small and nurturing school environment was key to the education and development of youth.

Five other noteworthy facets related to core philosophy common to many of the studied schools were identified and these are:

1. Valuing a rigorous curriculum that emphasized high standards of academic performance along with high ideals for personal conduct.
2. An underlying belief that all students can and will learn when challenged to do so, and that schools must commit themselves to support systems that allow no student to fail.
3. A belief in technology-oriented learning opportunities and coursework, with several schools offering classes that are either partially or entirely on-line.
4. Valuing an integrated curriculum that attempts to blend traditional “stand alone” academic subjects with each other and with real-world learning opportunities.
5. Programming that cultivates citizenship and values in students through coursework, service learning and community service.

Conventional Curriculum for Full Day Programs

There were 16 charter high schools that offered their own full-day academic programs. Students of five half-day charters (CART, of Clovis CA, and the four career academies of St. Clair ISD in Port Huron, MI) received much of their academic coursework from a home school that they were enrolled while attending the charter school. For the most part, academic programs in the 16 full-day charter schools had conventional curricula based on academic subjects or disciplines similar to most high schools. Furthermore, at some of these schools the curriculum inadvertently had pedagogical contradictions. For example, at one school a classical college academic curriculum of the Modern Red Schoolhouse, with its emphasis on acquisition of definable knowledge, was combined with project-based learning based on constructivist thinking.

At some full day schools the curriculum was considered integrated, but “integrated” meant traditional academic subjects, especially in the sciences, were bridged and combined rather than being organized according to themes or problems. Furthermore, integration across traditional disciplines in the involved schools was not school-wide.

Teacher Centered Learning Process

The program survey, case studies, and student surveys showed that within classrooms there were frequent interactions between teachers and students, in part because of small class size. Yet the context for such interactions was a learning process that was essentially teacher directed, teacher dominated, and didactic—where the teacher did the instructing, led discussions, provided explanations and feedback, etc.

Some schools had students engage in projects that required students to plan and execute projects while having a voice in what would be researched and how the project would be conducted. Many projects were extensions of academics with students demonstrating the usual academic skills as a result of doing the project. Notable exceptions were CART and Caesar Chavez of Washington, D.C. Some of CART’s projects required students to study a real community issue

and create a product for actual use by those in the community struggling with that issue. Chavez’s junior capstone activities placed students in public policy settings with students participating in those agencies in meaningful ways, most often resulting in a short report to other students.

Status of the Approach and Practices

CEW researchers were particularly interested in the approach they labeled as “using the real world as a context for learning” and the status of real-world practices within the studied schools. Status refers to characteristics, such as types of practices offered, number of students participating, level of implementation, and the importance of real-world practices within the entire educational program. Researchers were also interested in the status of real-world practices within charter high schools in general.

Turning first to charter high schools in general. Data from the National Center For Educational Statistic’s (NCES) 1999-2000 Public Charter School Questionnaire provides some insights about the status of real-world practices. Table 4 shows availability of real-world practices in approximately 362 charter schools with grades 9-12. Such programs and practices indeed are part of the charter high schools that responded to the NCES survey.

Specifically, career learning as a class or part of a class, work-based learning or internships, and job shadowing were the most available practices. Internships were defined as course credits for supervised learning activities that occur in paid or unpaid workplace assignments. Less available were career academies and tech-prep programs. Specialized career (technical) preparation was defined as vocational-technical instruction in the last two years of high school designed to prepare students for two years of post-secondary vocational instruction.

However, these data suggest that for most charter high schools real-world practices are a complementary part of the educational program and not the primary framework for schooling. Less than one-third of the schools were organized into specialized career academies, and less than one-fourth of the schools had a specialized tech-prep program. Within career academies and specialized tech-prep programs, real-world practices would have a much more prominent role in the educational program, acting as framework guiding matters of curriculum and instruction.

Table 4: Programs/Practices in 362 Charter High Schools

Program/Practice	Indicating Availability
Career learning	76.5
Work-based learning	67.7
Job shadowing	53.3
Community service	35.5
Specialized career academies	28.5
Specialized tech-prep	20.4

With respect to the 21 studied charter high schools, real-world practices also were part of each school but not the dominant set of practices. Furthermore, within most studied schools, real-world practices were embedded or part of an educational program that had multiple purposes including college preparation, citizenship, and overall development of youth. The exceptions may be the four career academies with independent charter school status. Their missions and operations were somewhat linked to workforce preparation and early preparation for occupation fields compared to other studied charter high schools.

None of the 21 studied charter schools had a specialized tech-prep program defined as vocational-technical instruction in the last two years of high school designed to prepare students for two years of post-secondary vocational instruction. None of the charter high schools with full-day instruction were organized according to career academies. The four career academies (half-day programs) are a close approximation to a special tech-prep program, but these were not intended to solely prepare students for two years of post-secondary vocational instruction. CART, a half-day program, had labs associated with occupational areas, but curriculum and instruction were not organized and delivered based on occupational standards, one of the hallmarks of a career academy and of a specialized tech-prep program. Three more studied schools had organizational elements of schools stressing linkages to possible careers, such as ISUS' construction program, but training for construction trades, while being important, was not the aim of the school. The construction program was one strategy for ISUS' overall mission of "youth transformation."

All of the 21 studied charter high schools provided some form of career learning and many had internships. However, internships in most schools were not tightly linked to preparation for a career, and what constituted an internship varied greatly from school to school. In some cases, such as CART and Caesar Chavez, internships were part of a project requiring demonstration of research and intellectual skills. In other cases internships were connected to learning "soft skills" or exploring a possible career.

The two student surveys, one completed in the final year at the school and the other about eight months after graduation, provide further insights about the status of real-world practices in the 21 studied schools. Approximately 9 out of 10 recent graduates of these charter high schools indicated that they had lessons at the charter school for writing a resume, applying for a job, and interviewing. Six out of 10 participated in job shadows, and the same number had internships of at least two weeks long. On the survey completed prior to graduation, approximately 7 out of 10 seniors said that they completed an assignment researching a possible career, and the same number spent time at a workplace to learn more about careers. Roughly 6 out of 10 had developed a written plan on how to achieve career goals. Consequently, thinking about a career and doing related assignments was a component of all studied schools.

Reactions of Students

Data collected from seniors during on-sites and after graduation showed that overwhelming numbers were very positive about their charter school experience while they were in school and after graduation. They also had high regard for any real-world practices in which they had participated.

While in school an overwhelming majority of surveyed students regarded their school as being different from other high schools. According to surveyed students, their charter schools differed from other schools in two ways. First, the charter school was like a community or a family. Within the confines of this community or family, students felt like they received more one-on-one personal attention, had more freedom while feeling responsible for their own education, and had an overall sense that staff cared for them. Second, teaching and learning at the charter schools was perceived as being more personal and individualized as well as being more relevant to post-graduation aspirations and intentions compared to other schools.

Large numbers of students also regarded their charter school teachers as being better than teachers at other schools. Charter school teachers were viewed as better because, according to students, they provided more individualized attention, were more caring teachers, taught in ways that resulted in better explanations and more interesting lessons, and respected students.

Many students regarded their teachers as role models, again indicating positive regard for teachers. Furthermore, large numbers reported that at least one charter school teacher knew them well and that, during their last year at the charter school, they had talked individually three or more times with a staff member about their school progress.

Attitudes of former seniors changed very little after graduation, as indicated by the responses on the graduate survey. Most were satisfied with how the charter school had prepared them for what they were doing at the time they completed the second survey. High numbers of students also felt that, compared to the typical high school, the charter school they attended was either somewhat better or much better. If they had to do it all over again, almost all graduates would attend the same charter high school.

As noted above, many graduates had participated in real-world practices, from career classes to internships. The value of these activities appeared to be judged on the basis of how they contributed to personal career planning and from what was learned about the ingredients for success in a real-world, adult-oriented setting. Taken together, the capacity for personal career planning and the direct learning from experiences in real-world settings appear to have been important factors for youth while they were in high school and transitioning to post-secondary education. Overwhelming numbers of surveyed graduates (8 out of 10 respondents) were engaged in additional education, and 6 out of 10 of this group were working full-time or part-time while attending school.

Common Issues Encountered and Vulnerability

The 21 studied charter schools had encountered similar issues during their development and continue to face issues affecting current operations. Some of the current issues create certain vulnerabilities in some schools, even though they are fully developed and have a track record of at least three years in operation. Issues fall into five general categories.

1. Finances, facilities, and other logistical issues

The difficulty of finding an adequate facility for a new school and then covering the expense of purchasing or renovating that facility were two significant obstacles commonly faced. Facilities were less of an issue for charter schools with close connections to a school district such as CART or the four academies of St. Clair County. Developing traditional functions of a school, such as transportation and lunch programs, proved to be major expense for many schools. Some school leaders also discovered that state funds allocated through charter school legislation for covering start-up costs were insufficient or arrived after expenditures were incurred, thereby making other public and private revenue sources essential. Case studies showed that for some of the school leaders, how to run a school on a daily basis had to be learned quickly and was not considered during the enthusiasm of planning for a new school.

All schools had mastered the logistics of being a school, but for many, facilities and funding remained an issue affecting school operations at the time the program survey was completed. Ensuring long-term fiscal solvency was a particular challenge for most studied schools, and even

more so for those charter high schools with full-day programs and with no organizational connections to public school districts. Some schools, such as CART, that had strong connections to public schools also faced funding questions due to state budget cuts and dependence on meeting enrollment requirements of the districts sponsoring the charter.

2. Opposition to the school/political issues/public relations

Subtle or outright opposition to charter school endeavors was symptomatic of many charter school startups. In some cases, during the first year of operation teachers and staff faced negative perceptions from the media, the public, and other traditional schools as to the validity of the school's academic program. Over time schools successfully managed opposition through various strategies and, for most, opposition became less of a salient issue as schools established themselves.

3. Issues related to finding and keeping personnel

The difficult circumstances of starting a charter school also included finding individuals who would weather the storm. Start-up leaders sought unique teachers who had the passion and the stamina to carry out a new endeavor, as well as excellent teaching skills. Finding such teachers was a challenge. As each new endeavor progressed, turnover was inevitable but also necessary, given that not all staff could function under the conditions of charter schools. Retaining competent teachers suited for teaching under charter school conditions continued to be an issue affecting school operations at the time data were collected for this study.

4. Recruiting and retaining students

Some of the studied charter schools have experienced steady growth. For others, enrollment has been an ongoing trial. Part of the problem is competition for students with local high schools, which is in turn related to the resistance to charter start-ups. But even those schools that have experienced steady growth face the problem of retaining students, particularly when students are skill-deficient. Schools faced the challenge of teaching students with a wide range of assessed student achievement. Responses to this challenge impacted recruitment and retention of students.

5. Ongoing revision of the curriculum

Small class size, while helpful, is proving to be insufficient for managing the basic challenge of teaching students with a wide range of skills. The broad variance in skill levels among students has led administrators and teachers from the studied schools to note the need for continual evaluation and revision of the curriculum. However, doing this requires resources and the time to ponder and plan revisions. Leaders of many of the studied charter school have come to realize that the curriculum must be adapted to the needs of students. How to do so was a very present issue among the studied charter high schools.

As already suggested, some of these issues (most notably long-term fiscal solvency) make the studied charter high schools vulnerable. All the studied schools have a successful track record, having gone through the process of either creating a school from scratch or converting an existing program into a charter school. Neither process was easy. Yet successfully weathering the early stages of development and the resolution of related issues does not mean that the studied schools have a permanent niche in the American public school system. Most of the charter high schools remain vulnerable. Permanency will require creativity and high levels of human energy to resolve the issues discussed above.

Complex Entities

Studied charter high schools are complex organizational entities. Small size, while offering an operational advantage at times, does not lessen the complexities of educating high school youth and operating an educational institution. Learning how to run a school, as some of the case studies reveal, was an important lesson to the educational pioneers in the studied schools. As a group the studied charter high schools are a microcosm of all the factors and forces that make up American public high schools, as well as the charter school movement. Having a charter reduces the impact of some of the forces that impinge on high schools while adding to the complexity of operating a school. Locating and financing facilities, recruiting and retaining students, and teaching students with a wide range of skills all contribute to the difficulty level.

Summary

This report presents non-propositional generalizations reflecting the approach of naturalistic inquiry, which requires being mindful of the context for any purported generalizations. Ten non-propositional generalizations were identified within the context of 21 charter high schools studied during a two-year applied research study. The study resulted in both products and findings germane to the inquiry. In addition, some generalizations were deduced from data about charter high schools collected from the National Center on Education Statistics.

The ten statements provide insights about charter high schools that are classified as those that use the real world as a context for learning and that utilize a variety of real-world practices. The construct or descriptive label of being employer-linked did not apply to these charter high schools. That construct suggests that workforce preparation is a key purpose of schools. While workforce preparation in the context of preparation for adulthood and post-secondary life was part of the goal of studied schools, it was not the sole or exclusive purpose. Studied schools, like most public high schools, had multiple purposes.

In most cases real-world practices were embedded into an educational program having multiple purposes rather than serving as an integrated organizational framework. The exceptions were the four career academies that had the introduction of a career field as an organizational framework or a set of industrial skills influencing curriculum and instruction.

For the most part, those who started the studied charter schools did so for primarily altruistic reasons, believing strongly that they could better educate high school youth, given the deficiencies of public schools. The studied schools tended to have elements of a core philosophy in place, with an important element being the caring for and nurturing of youth. Schools with full-day academic programs tended to have a conventional curriculum. In all schools classroom practices were teacher-centered.

The studied schools were complex entities, and were highly regarded by 2002 graduates. As microcosms of both the charter movement and high schools in general, many of the studied schools face issues that make them vulnerable despite being beyond the stages of early development. Charter high schools offering comprehensive schooling and operating completely independently from any school district were especially venerable.

Each of the studied charter high schools is unique in some way. This indicates the versatility of programming made possible by charter school legislation in each of the 10 states represented and the District of Columbia. Uniqueness also indicates that the American public school enterprise is a decentralized system into which charter schools must find a place. Uniqueness allows for a

charter school to differentiate itself within a decentralized system, yet differentiation presents its own challenges and issues.

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Available Products and Materials

The comprehensive study of the 21 charter high schools resulted in four products as well as materials and other reports continually posted at <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>. Besides this report, two reports based on two student surveys and a report of a program survey completed by most of the 21 schools participating in this study are available at the program website. Products available are:

Student Voices from Charter High Schools (CD-ROM)

Recent graduates discuss the nature of their learning experiences and the impact of programs that connect learning to the real world. A booklet with the CD shares findings from a national survey of charter school graduates.

Digest of Real-World Practices: Applications in Charter High Schools

A collection of abstracts of practices that provide programmatic information as well as advice and contacts. Sections include work-based learning, career pathways, project-based learning, community partnerships, and more.

Handbook of Charter High Schools: Learning in a Real-World Context

Concise profiles of approximately 100 charter high schools nationwide. Each profile includes contact information for school leaders and information on school formation, educational philosophy, curriculum and instruction, real-world practices, and more.

Inside Charter High Schools

A series of in-depth case studies that follows the development of 10 charter high schools as each responds to the educational challenges confronting it. The series provides rich detail on all aspects of school operations—from governance to curriculum. Each case concludes with student perspectives and researchers' observations. The ten schools included a cluster of four career academies that are part of the St. Clair County Intermediate School District of Port Huron, MI; Indian River Charter High School, Vero Beach, FL; ISUS, Dayton, OH; Henry Ford Academy, Dearborn, MI; Caesar Chavez Public Charter High School For Public Policy, Washington, D.C.; Textron/Chamber Charter High School, Providence, RI; and CART (Center on Advanced Research and Technology), Clovis CA.

Field Study Sites

The Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART) located in Clovis, California, is a joint venture of the Fresno and Clovis Unified School Districts. CART opened in the fall of 2000, and serves 950 students in grades 11 and 12. Students attend from 16 different high schools, spending half of each day (either a morning or an afternoon session) at CART and the remainder of the day at the home high school. During three-hour blocks, teams of students plan and complete projects in one of 12 labs organized according to four clusters: Advanced Communications, Global Dynamics, Professional Sciences, and Engineering and Product Development. In each lab, teams of three to four teachers (one with an English credential) are in charge of 60 to 75 students. CART's curriculum is project-based and uses principles adapted from Howard Gardener's ideas of how multiple intelligences influence instructional practices.

Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy (Chavez) is located in Washington, D.C. and serves 240 students in grades 9-12. It opened in the fall of 1998, and the D.C. Public Charter School Board is the authorizer. Chavez serves economically disadvantaged families, most with Hispanic cultural ties. A major innovation is a public policy emphasis that requires students to participate in community settings and with experts in their fields to develop and implement public policy. At the senior level the public policy emphasis culminates with a thesis. This focus on developing public policy leadership skills is implemented in conjunction with a rigorous college prep curriculum and an extensive array of student support services. Chavez is one of eleven schools selected by the Association of Supervision and Curriculum and the First Amendment Center. The initiative is designed to transform how all schools model and teach the rights and responsibilities of the First Amendment, and how they help students become active and engaged citizens.

Henry Ford Academy (HFA) located in Dearborn, Michigan, is chartered by the Wayne County Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA). The school was founded in 1997 through collaboration between Ford Motor Company, Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, and RESA. HFA offers a full-day comprehensive program to students in grades 9-12 and enrolls approximately 420 students who come from throughout Wayne County—a racially and ethnically diverse area near Detroit. Representatives of Ford Motor Company continue to have an active voice in the school. HFA has several distinctive features, including a curriculum organized into five developmental areas (academic content, technology, communications, thinking and learning, and personal development), business and community partnerships (including the Ford Motor Company), block scheduling, an emphasis on skills associated with workforce success, and a *Senior Mastery Process*, a culminating program in which seniors explore careers and participate in internships.

Indian River Charter High School (IRCHS), located in Vero Beach, Florida, opened in the fall of 1998 and at the time of this survey served 240 students in grades 9-12. The school emphasizes career and college preparation and incorporates character development as an integral part of the curriculum. The SCANS Report (Secretary's Report on Achieving Necessary Skills) has shaped

the curriculum.¹⁹ Each IRCHS student signs a contract for 25 hours of instruction, resulting in a college-like schedule. Students follow an individual educational plan based on several factors, including results of the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) and what is learned during a required first semester careers course. Through dual enrollment at the nearby Indian River Community College, Mueller Campus, IRCHS students take significant numbers of community college courses and can also earn associate degrees at the college. IRCHS classes are conducted from 7:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, until 4 p.m. on Fridays, and 10:00 to 1 p.m. on Saturdays. Besides courses in character development and careers, courses in core curriculum areas (English, math, social studies, science, health, physical education) meet at various times of the day and week.

The ISUS Trade & Technology Prep Community School-Dayton Campus is located in Dayton, Ohio, and is one of two charter schools operated by ISUS. ISUS stands for “Improved Solutions to Urban Systems,” and is a non-profit corporation authorized to operate six charter schools in Ohio. Currently ISUS has another school in Cincinnati. Dayton students participated in the survey. The Dayton campus is an ungraded high school serving 160 students ages 16-21. ISUS opened the Dayton campus in the fall of 1999. The school is chartered by the Ohio State Board of Education. The school serves chronic truants, dropouts, and youth with behavioral problems. ISUS places high priority on youth transformation as a response to the problems of urban education. The Dayton campus offers academic courses targeted at students earning a high school diploma, a trade and construction program, and a computer technology program. Staff from the nearby Sinclair Community College manage and teach courses in both programs, and ISUS students are enrolled as Sinclair students. Through the construction program, students rehabilitate homes in nearby neighborhoods as part of Dayton’s efforts to revitalize central city neighborhoods. A manufacturing program was under development at the time of the survey.

Four St. Clair County Intermediate School District (IMSD) Public School Academies are located in Port Huron, Michigan, and organized according to career academies. These academies and other non-charter academies operate under one administrative umbrella, the St. Clair Intermediate School District. The four chartered academies (Plastics Manufacturing Technology, Health Careers, Hospitality, Information Technology) are attended by 500 students on a half-day basis, with the remainder of the day spent at the student’s home high school. Business representatives are involved in each academy through advisory committees. Teachers of the four academies are non-union, while teachers of non-charter academies belong to a union. In this way the goal of workforce preparation is achieved through a pragmatic business/education partnership. Students come from one of twelve county high schools within seven local school districts and enter an academy in their junior and/or senior years.

The Textron/Chamber of Commerce Charter School (Textron) in Providence, Rhode Island, chartered by the Rhode Island Board of Regents of Elementary and Secondary Education, began in 1997 from an existing school program. Textron served 200 students in grades 9-12 from the Providence School District. Textron is divided organizationally into a “Lower School” and an “Upper School” based upon the age and demonstrated competencies of students, all of whom attend the school on a full-day basis. Leaders and staff, driven by the school’s mission and a

¹⁹ See <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/>. SCANS was the result of a US Department of Labor Commission. The 1992 reports list competencies for students from the perspective of skill needed to succeed in the world of work.

dedication to serve urban youth, have developed a program with six components. These components are: (a) a core academic curriculum, (b) longitudinal assessment methods and skill building periods, (c) senior research requirements, (d) use of rubrics and an attempt to employ a variety of teaching methods, (e) school to work programs that include job placements and community service, and (f) additional programs that extend the school day and augment instruction.

The Work and Learning Center (WLC) located in Madison, Wisconsin, serves 16-20 year-old high school dropouts and potential dropouts. WLC was founded in 1976, and in 1996 converted to a charter school. Students who are at least 16 years old and would have been in their third year of high school are admitted. Most WLC students have failed many courses during the first two years of high school and have either dropped out or are skipping school regularly. Serious problems at home or in the community have contributed to school problems. WLC is a small program in two geographically separate sites: Brearly Street and Park Street. Each site serves 64 students and has four teachers. All entering students are classified as juniors, although most do not have enough credits to qualify for junior status at a regular high school. Students enter together in small groups of about 16. They move through the program as a cohesive cohort until graduation. The two-year “completion program” is broken down into four semesters, each with a distinct curriculum involving specific work and class experiences. Students graduate on completion of all the requirements for all four semesters, without concern for credits. The school has stringent attendance and work completion requirements, both in class and at worksites.