

Charter High Schools and Real World Practices Summary of Program Survey

This report provides a summary of selected information from a program survey completed by charter high school representatives who participated in an applied research project. The project and the program survey were conducted by the Center on Education and Work (CEW) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from October 2001 to September 2003. The program survey was one of various data collection strategies utilized as part of a study of charter high schools with real-world practices funded by the US Department of Education under the Field Initiated National Activities Projects (award number S282F010049).¹

Program surveys, completed by the principal or director of each participating school and a second staff member, collected information pertaining to the following areas:

- Why the school was formed and “problem” that schools was designed to address.
- 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: the 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.

A total of 16 program surveys were completed, representing 19 of the 21 charter high schools that participated in the project.² The completed surveys are summarized below. Eleven of the 21 participating schools, referred to as “field study sites” below, were visited by CEW research staff during the spring of 2002. The remaining 10 schools, “second sample” sites, participated via distance technology (including email and web-based communication). It should be noted that information on the program survey was self-reported on the part of participating schools, with no attempt on the part of CEW research staff to verify its accuracy.

About the Schools: Basic Information

The 21 participating charter high schools are located in 10 different states (and the District of Columbia) across the country. They collectively enroll 5440 students³ (see Table 1), with the oldest school having been in existence as a charter school since 1994. The grade configuration of the schools varies considerably, from those open only to 11th and 12th graders to several schools that include students as young as the kindergarten level. Authorizing agencies for the schools vary in accordance with charter school legislation in the state in which they are

¹ Various reports and products resulted from the study, including: *Report: Results of Charter High School Survey of Seniors*, profiles of participating schools and real-world practices, a CD package entitled “Student Voices From Charter High Schools,” *The 2002 charter High School Graduate Survey Report*, and seven detailed case studies involving six charter high schools and a group of four career academies with charter school status. The reports and information on ordering the CD and the case studies are available at the project’s web site: <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>.

² 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 this report. A 17th was only partially completed, and the 18th was not completed.

³ This figure represents an approximation in that some participating schools include grades other than the traditional high school grades (9-12). Information that disaggregated enrollment by grade level is not available in some cases.

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

Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Participating Charter High Schools

	Location	Grade Levels	Approximate Enrollment	Year Opened	Authorizer
Field Study Sites:					
Work & Learning Center	Madison, WI	6-12	32 (at the site studied)	1997	Madison Metropolitan School District
Center for Advanced Research and Technology (CART)	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 High School	Vero Beach, FL	9-12	244	1998	Indian River County School District
Academies of St. Clair County:					
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
ISUS/Trade & Technology Prep	Dayton, OH	NA	160	1999	Ohio State Board of Education
Textron/Chamber of Commerce Charter School	Providence, RI	9-12	200	1997	RI Board of Regents of Education
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			5440		

Formation Dynamics: Why The Schools Were Formed and The "Problems" They Solved

Program survey respondents identified a variety of factors as being primarily responsible for the formation of their charter high schools. In most cases, these factors were presented by respondents as distinct "problems" that the schools were intended to solve. For purposes of analysis, factors motivating the formation of the schools can be grouped into five categories that represent desired outcomes on the part of founders. Selected quotations that illustrate each category are also provided.

1. There was an acute absence of career-related educational programming and "hands-on" teaching methods for at-risk and under-achieving students.

For example, one administrator told researchers that "the district has two other high schools that are overcrowded. The district was looking for an alternative for those students who may be falling through the cracks." The focus of this respondent's school was on "specific career training . . . for students who may or may not be seeking a college education." Other comments included the observation that there was an apparent need "for a school that would help at-risk students by giving them an applied, hands-on learning experience."

2. Lack of preparation of young people entering a workforce requiring technical skills.

To a number of respondents, there were perceived needs for "skilled workers in the workplace" so that "students coming out of high school would have the skills to compete in postsecondary and high tech workplaces." The concern was that "a lack of academic rigor and individualized curricula in the traditional high schools" was leading to under-prepared graduates who lacked the basic aptitudes needed for entry-level jobs in an increasingly technological workplace. One charter school founder, motivated to opening a charter high school after working as an administrator for nine years in one of her area's public high schools, expressed frustration that so many students were graduating without having basic reading or math skills.

3. Failures of traditional public high schools required viable alternative for high schoolers.

One administrator told researchers that her school was begun in response to the desire to give youth "a top-quality high school education that would prepare them to excel in college and in life." The existing system, in which she had worked for many years, "had failed to

tap into the many resources that [the city] had to offer, particularly in the area of public policy." Other respondents expressed "dissatisfaction with the way in which parents were treated by the traditional public schools" and believed the over-sized public schools could do a far better job of producing good citizens who "will make our country a better place by influencing the public policies that affect their communities." Often parents in poorer school districts were themselves poor and thus unable to access alternatives.

4. Utilization of community resources and meaningful input from local business and industry was sorely lacking in the public school system.

A number of respondents echoed the sentiments of one administrator who saw the need for "creating schools that were governed by local business and industry, thereby establishing curricula that were based on industry standards." Generally, respondents believed that community resources were under-utilized and students needed to be educated "outside the traditional classroom" for preparation in the workplace.

5. A number of students, under-prepared in basic academics and behavioral expectations relevant to the workplace had difficulty transitioning from high school to the real world.

One administrator summed up this problem: "The most pressing need was to have a seamless transition from secondary to post-secondary education that would meet the needs of business and industry and the student." As a result, a number of charter schools that participated in the survey saw at least part of their mission as "a focus on rigorous academics, technology, and specific career education." Some charter schools even advocated "dual credit offerings beginning as early as the ninth grade" to ready students for the post-secondary transition.

Core Philosophies and Valued Outcomes of Participating Schools

Just as there were a variety of factors motivating the formation of charter high schools, schools participating in the survey were similarly diverse in terms of their core philosophy, how this philosophy is enacted in the school, and valued outcomes for students. With respect to core philosophies, six broad themes emerged from program surveys, with a number of the 16 schools featuring more than one theme:

1. Providing students with *a small and nurturing educational environment* featuring individualized attention for all students.
2. *A rigorous curriculum* that emphasized high standards of academic performance and high ideals for personal conduct.
3. An underlying belief that *all students can and will learn* when challenged to do so, and that school must commit themselves to support systems that allow no student to fail.
4. *Technology-oriented learning opportunities and coursework*, with several schools offering classes that are either partially or entirely on-line.
5. An *integrated curriculum* that attempts to blend traditional "stand alone" academic subjects with each other and with real-world learning opportunities
6. *Cultivating citizenship and values* in students through coursework and real-world learning opportunities (including service learning and community service).

The program survey also asked respondents to characterize the philosophy of their school by rating their level of agreement or disagreement with 11 potential goals for students. The list of 11 student-related goals is presented below, along with the number of respondents who “strongly agreed”⁴ that “each is an important student goal that most of the staff in your high school should try to achieve,” is as follows:

- Learn skills such as teamwork, communication, and responsibility (15 “strongly agree” responses)
- Be Prepared for the reality of life in the 21st century (14)
- Understand and use technology (computers, software, etc.) (14)
- Be ready for college, a trade apprenticeship, or work (13)
- Learn critical and independent thinking skills (13)
- Learn workplace behavior, expectations, and skills (12)
- Can actively pursue personal interests and career goals (11)
- Know about a wide range of career and education options (10)
- Know how to make a difference in the community (8)
- Understand links among academic subjects and careers (6)
- Learn leadership skills (6)

Groups Involved in Planning, Establishing Policies, and Setting Curriculum

Program survey respondents were also asked to identify groups that had been prominently involved in three distinct aspects of their schools’ development and operations: planning and development; policies, mission, and direction; and curriculum and instruction. The most interesting overall finding was that educators acted as the most influential participants in all three areas of involvement, generally followed, by business interests and parents, respectively. Specific analysis of each area appears below.

1. Planning and Development

In the planning and development phases of participating schools, educators were the most influential group, closely followed by business interests. Respondents were allowed to identify as many groups involved in planning and development as were applicable for their school. The survey did not investigate how the nature of involvement on the part of various stakeholders might have differed. Groups identified by respondents are presented below, along with the number of respondents who made that identification:

- Educators (15)
- Business, industry, trade or non-profit employers (14)
- Community advocates (10)
- Parents (10)
- Elected officials or staff of government agencies (6)
- Potential students (5)
- Professional societies or groups (2)
- Other (6)

⁴ Potential responses appeared on a four-point scale, with 1 representing “disagree strongly” and 4 representing “agree strongly.” Each one of the 16 respondents marked either a 3 or a 4 to all 11 goals.

2. Policies, Organizational Mission, and Direction

Educators were also the most prominent decision makers in terms of the policies, organizational mission, and direction of participating schools. The most influential stakeholder groups in this capacity, in order of frequency among the 16 program survey respondents, included the following:

- Principal or director (16)
- Teachers (11)
- Other high school staff (9)
- Business, industry, trade, or nonprofit employers (9)
- Parents (9)
- Students (6)
- Elected officials or staff of governmental agencies (3)
- Community advocates (1)
- Representatives of professional societies or groups (1)
- Labor union representatives (0)
- Other (5)

3. Curriculum and Instruction

Important stakeholders in terms of curriculum and instruction that were identified by respondents are ranked below according to frequency:

- Principal or director (16)
- Teachers (15)
- Business, industry, trade, or nonprofit employers (7)
- Other high school staff (5)
- Other (5)
- Parents (4)
- Students (3)
- Elected officials or staff of governmental agencies (2)
- Community advocates (1)
- Labor union representatives (0)
- Representatives of professional societies or groups (0)

Curriculum & Instructional Practices

Another set of questions provided information regarding the curricula and instructional practices used by participating charter high schools. One question within this set asked respondents to describe how different their school's curriculum is from that in a traditional public high school. The most common answer among the 16 respondents was that the curriculum was "somewhat different" (8 responses), followed by "very different" (6), "a few differences" (2), and "no difference at all" (0). Three specific categories into which differences in curricula and instructional methods can be grouped became apparent to researchers. These included greater use of real-world learning opportunities, more or improved use of technology as a strategy for delivering instruction, and a greater emphasis on partnerships with higher education and the community.

The most common way in which curricula at the participating schools is organized and presented to students is through "usual academic subjects, commonly referred to as Carnegie

units" (8), followed by "competencies related to a career, job, career pathway, or occupational cluster" (5). In terms of how precisely the curriculum is stated and defined for teachers, the most common response was "somewhat precisely" (11), followed by "very precisely" (4). Fourteen of the 16 respondents indicated that the curriculum at their school has changed in some way since the school opened. Analysis of responses as to why curriculum had changed did not reveal that the reason was indecision or correction of poor curricular choices. Rather, these schools continually worked on improving curriculum; that is, the curriculum was constantly under evaluation and evolving due to the resistance to viewing curriculum as a static body of knowledge to be learned by students. Those completing the survey viewed adjusting the curriculum to the needs of students as critically important.

Some degree of variation emerged with respect to student-related goals that the curriculum of the participating schools was intended to achieve. When asked how important it was that graduates be prepared for "a particular career, career cluster, or occupational cluster," five of the 16 respondents indicated that this was a "very important" goal, while seven indicated that it was "somewhat important" and four felt that it was "not very important." No such diversity of opinion was present when respondents were asked how important it was that "students understand links between academic subjects and adult life in the real world," however. All 16 respondents indicated that this was a very important goal.

In terms of instructional practices, a majority of respondents (11) indicated that the methods used in their school are "somewhat different" than those used in a traditional public high school, with five others indicating that their school's methods were "very different." The most common methods used by teachers, as measured by the number of respondents who described each as being used either "very often" or "often," are as follows:

- Lessons based on teacher-developed units (16)
- Exhibitions of student work (15)
- Students work in small groups or teams (14)
- Hands-on activities (14)
- Students brainstorm ideas (13)
- Assigned research projects (13)
- Projects requiring use of the community (12)
- Portfolios of student work (12)
- Computer simulations or software (11)
- Student self-assessment (10)
- Students present and defend work in front of peers (10)
- Teacher lecture or teacher-led discussion (9)
- Student-led debate or discussion (8)
- Lessons based on textbooks (7)
- Workbook exercises (4)

Real-World Practices

The program survey also asked respondents to describe the level and nature of "real-world" practices taking place within their school. These practices are defined for the purposes of this project as learning opportunities that foster connections between students and the world beyond the classroom, and provide students with opportunities to acquire the skills, experiences, and attitudes needed for success as adults in the world of work, family, and community.

Based upon this definition, respondents were first asked to characterize the level of emphasis that their school places on educating students using the real world as a context for learning. Thirteen of the 16 respondents indicated that their school places a “strong emphasis” on real-world learning opportunities, with two selecting “moderate emphasis” and a single respondent marking “weak emphasis.” A related question asked respondents to characterize the percentage of students in their school that are engaged in learning based on the real-world approach. Eight of the 16 respondents indicated that 100% of their students are engaged in this type of learning, while four selected 75-99%, and three others selected 50-74%. A single respondent indicated that less than 25% of students in her school were involved with real world learning opportunities.

A final description of real-world practices in participating charter high schools was provided by a question that asks how often specific forms of this type of learning are used. The list of examples, along with their frequency of use as cited on the 16 completed program surveys, is as follows:

- Participation in community development or service learning (16)
- Lessons on resume writing, applying for a job or interviewing (16)
- Student placement in a work site for more than two weeks (defined as a paid or unpaid internship/fellowship) (15)
- Job shadowing (defined as a short visit to a workplace) (15)
- Classroom lessons on work skills and behaviors (14)
- Completion of a research project on a possible career (14)
- Students receiving advice from a mentor who works in a business, trade or industry (14)
- Part-time student jobs that are used as a supplementary learning experience (12)
- Creation of marketable products such as a house or a computer network (11)
- Student apprenticeships (defined as formal training for a specific career) (9)
- Classes that involve early preparation for certain career fields (examples: design, health occupations, or technology) (8)
- Student completion of a research project of six months or longer with people from the community such as business, industry, trade, service agency or government workers (6)
- Students working in a school-based business, such as a school store (5)

Issues Encountered and Solutions Utilized

A final area of interest pertaining to the program survey was a set of questions asking respondents to describe significant issues encountered by their school and any solutions they have used to address these issues. A first question within this set was open-ended in nature, asking respondents to describe one important issue faced during the planning, development, or first year of operation at their school. Responses can be grouped into five general categories, with selected examples that illustrate each category presented below.

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 the facility were two significant obstacles commonly faced. One administrator added that “developing a food program and other traditional functions of the school” was also a major expense. Some respondents also discovered that state funds for start-up costs were insufficient or arrived after expenditures were incurred.

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

The unwillingness to assist charter school endeavors noted above was symptomatic of what some respondents saw as predictable opposition. As one administrator noted, "the [local school board] strongly objected to the receipt of the charter." Another told researchers that "during the first year of operation, the teachers and staff were faced with perception issues from the media, public, and other traditional schools as to the validity of the school's academic program because we were a charter school."

Respondents came up with a variety of strategies to overcome these obstacles. Several succeeded in "forming an alliance with the parents and the local business community," and were consequently able to "appeal to the State Regents to grant the charter without local approval." The approach of building coalitions was an important factor in more than a few start-ups. One school deliberately fashioned the composition of their governing board as "one third parents, one third business leaders and one-third teachers."

Another strategy was accreditation. One administrator commented that "the fact that we became the first newly-formed charter school in the United States to become fully accredited [by our accreditation association] assisted us in overcoming this perception."

3. Issues related to finding and keeping personnel

As one might expect in the difficult circumstances of starting a charter school, finding people who would weather the storm was itself a difficulty. Start-up leaders were looking to find "the people who had the passion to carry on this new endeavor." Some board members and administrators were specifically seeking educators who "carried the torch and did battle with those who thought they could enter this new arena and take advantage of poor kids and benefit from the money that was available for these new public institutions." In some situations, parents participated in recruiting both teachers and students. As each new endeavor progressed, turnover was inevitable, but also necessary.

4. Recruiting and retaining students

Some of the charter schools represented by survey respondents have experienced steady growth. For others, "enrollment has been an ongoing barrier." Part of the problem is the competition for students with local high schools, which is in turn related to the resistance to charter start-ups noted above. Aside from administrators of local schools and local school boards, respondents noted there has been local support for new charter school efforts. As one respondent observed, "We recruit from the local high schools, and are currently working with some influential business partners in our community to try to make the program more appealing to all students. Local city and county officials support the school as well."

But even schools that have experienced steady growth face the problem of retaining students, particularly when students were "skill-deficient." One principal related that, "despite all the planning and experience in education . . . the school had no way to anticipate the skill level of the student population." Another administrator lamented that a major difficulty was "how to handle the wide range of assessed student achievement, especially in math." This start-up reality "made it very difficult to not only implement the curriculum but also to meet the targets established in the charter. Planning took place in a vacuum."

As further research revealed, support services are a key to retaining students who have difficulty adjusting to the rigor of new charter schools. Bridging the gap of prior preparation must be continually addressed “through intense remediation for the students and professional development for the staff.”

5. Ongoing revision of the curriculum

The wide variance in skill levels among students noted above and the need to incorporate real-world practices and job training into the educational program have prompted administrators and teachers to continually evaluate the curriculum to student needs. Instead of viewing the curriculum as an entrenched body of knowledge that must be uncompromisingly taught to all students, staff at the surveyed charter schools are constantly mindful that curriculum must be adapted to the needs of students. One respondent recalled that “during the first year, parents in the local community came forward asking for full day, site-based programs. Our original configuration [only] allowed students to take two or three classes on campus.” Discerning how to achieve a curricular balance between high academic standards, charter goals, skill deficiencies in students, and the academic goals of business and industry leaders meant that, at times, curricula “had to be completely rewritten, sometimes from scratch.”

Summary

The program survey summarized in this report provides important descriptive information regarding the diverse set of schools that participated in an applied research project conducted by the Center on Education and Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from October, 2001 to September, 2003. The survey, which was completed by the lead administrator at 16 of the participating schools, is particularly informative in terms of describing six key areas pertaining to the development and operation of these schools: (1) formation dynamics (why the school was formed and the “problem” it was viewed as solving); (2) core educational philosophy and intended outcomes for students; (3) groups and prominent decision makers that have been involved in planning and operating the school; (4) curricula and instructional practices; (5) types of real-world practices used; and (6) major issues and challenges encountered.

Participating schools show considerable diversity across most of these six areas, with one notable exception. In the planning, development, and operation of the surveyed charter schools, educators have been the most prominent decision makers, particularly in terms of school planning and establishing curricula.

On the other hand, across all the surveyed schools, some commonality exists with respect to challenges encountered, finances, overcoming opposition to the charter concept, and finding ways to meet the needs of at-risk student populations.

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