

Charter High School Senior Student Survey

Introduction

The Center on Education and Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison studied charter high schools with programs that place learning in a real-world context. These schools connect students to the world beyond the classroom through a variety of strategies and instructional practices. Research reports generated by the study, such as this one, were used to address research questions and create products to support the implementation of innovative strategies within other high schools, both charter and non-charter.

One goal of the study was to describe students' perceptions of their high school experience before and after graduation. The description of students' perceptions was based, in part, on two surveys. Seniors completed one survey in the latter half of their graduating year while researchers were collecting data at eight study sites. The results are reported here. These same seniors completed another survey six months after graduation with results reported in *The 2002 Charter High School Graduate Survey*, available at <http://www.cew.wisc.edu/charterSchools/>, the project's web site. Also available is a summary report of the graduate survey along with a CD entitled *Student Voices from Charter Schools*, containing actual portions of student interviews. Detailed case studies covering every facet of charter school development and operation as well as student views about their charter school experiences will be available during fall 2003 and availability will be announced at the above web site. Collectively, this report and the three others provide a rich and detailed view of charter high schools, including the point of view of students.

Seniors completing the survey were from 11 charter high schools. Four of the 11 schools are located under one administrative umbrella at a single site (Intermediate School District of St. Clair County Academies). For the purpose of this report, these are treated as one. Thus, this report summarizes the analysis of survey data from seniors from eight charter high school sites.

The results of the survey are presented in four sections following a preview of the schools and a summation of methods and response rate. Findings are presented for the entire population and/or for individual schools. The first section explores who these seniors are. The second section explores seniors' expectations about their lives after graduation. The third section explores the reactions of seniors to a number of components of their school experience, including classroom practices and real-world activities. The report ends with conclusions and a summary.

The Schools

Seniors attending seven charter high schools and four charter school academies sponsored by an intermediary school district were surveyed starting in December, 2001 and concluding in April, 2002. Schools proved to be quite diverse as the following brief descriptions show.

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 twelve 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 principles are adapted from Howard Gardener's ideas of multiple intelligences influence instructional practices.

Cesar Chavez Public Charter High School for Public Policy (Chavez) is located in Washington, DC, and serves 240 students in grades 9-12. It opened in the fall of 1998, and is authorized by the DC Public Charter School Board. 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 develop and implement public policy with experts in their fields. 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 and Greenfield Village, and RESA. Henry Ford Academy offers a full-day comprehensive program to students in grades 9-12 and enrolls approximately 420 students who come from throughout Wayne County, Michigan—a racially and ethnically diverse area near Detroit. Representatives of Ford Motor Company continue to have an active voice in the school. Henry Ford Academy 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 students explore careers and participate in internships.

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

¹ See <http://wdr.doleta.gov/SCANS/H>. SCANS was the result of a US Department of Labor Commission. The 1992 reports list competencies for students from the perspective of skills needed to succeed in the world of work.

The ISUS Trade & Technology Prep Community School (ISUS) 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 un-graded high school serving 160 students ages 16-21. ISUS opened the Dayton campus in the fall of 1999, and is chartered by the Ohio State Board of Education. The school serves chronic truants, dropouts, and youth ages 16-21 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, located in Port Huron, Michigan, are 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 charter academies (Plastics Manufacturing Technology, Health Careers, Hospitality, and 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 students enter an academy in their junior and/or senior year.

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 serves 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 dedication to serving 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 (Work & Learn), located in Madison, Wisconsin, serves 16-20 year-old high school dropouts and potential dropouts. Work & Learn was founded in 1976 and converted to a charter school in 1996. Students are admitted who are at least 16 years old, and who would have been in their third year of high school. Most Work & Learn 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. Work & Learn is a small program in two geographically separate sites: Bready 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 upon 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 work sites.

Response Rate and Methods

A survey was developed, field tested, and then completed by students classified either as seniors or members of the exiting group at each of the eight sites visited by researchers. At ISUS, Indian River, and Work & Learn, the demarcation of *senior class* was relatively meaningless because of non-graded characteristic of these schools. Work & Learn was considered the pilot site. Results of the pilot are included since only minor changes in survey questions asked were made.

After the pilot test, some formatting changes and language changes had to be made for some sites because of the uniqueness of their programs. For example, changes in the instrument were made for CART and the St. Clair academies because these schools are half-day programs with students also attending non-charter high schools. Survey instruments were modified to cue students that when answering questions they were to consider only experiences within the half-day program—the charter school portion.

The goal was to conduct a census of seniors or the exiting group at each of the eight sites at the end of the 2001-02 school year. Researchers would administer the surveys. At some schools (ISUS, CART, and St. Clair), student completion of the surveys during the site visit proved to be impossible. Staff at those schools administered the survey either before or after the researchers' visit.

Four hundred and twenty seniors, or 53% of the total estimated number of seniors from all schools, completed the survey. At four schools, at least 80% of the seniors completed the survey. At Indian River and Ford, because of scheduling mix-ups during the site visit, a staff member administered additional surveys to other seniors after the visit. As the table to the right shows, the survey return rate was the lowest at ISUS and CART.

| SCHOOL | Seniors | Number Surveyed | Percent Returned |
|--------------|------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Ford | 70 | 58 | 83% |
| Indian River | 57 | 37 | 65% |
| Textron | 35 | 28 | 80% |
| Cesar Chavez | 25 | 20 | 80% |
| ISUS | 60 | 16 | 27% |
| CART | 325 | 103 | 32% |
| Work & Learn | 19 | 19 | 100% |
| St. Clair | 200 | 139 | 69% |
| Total | 791 | 420 | 53% |

Analysis methods were based on Exploratory Data Analysis.² Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) is really a way of thinking about data. The *exploratory* approach is best used when hypotheses about the data structure do not exist or when rigorous assumptions necessary for classical statistical analysis cannot be made, as is the case with most of these data.

² See *NIST/SEMATECH e-Handbook of Statistical Methods*, H<http://www.itl.nist.gov/div898/handbook/H>

In EDA, various graphical displays of the data, including scatter plots, are developed and the researcher studies the displays discerning any patterns. EDA is essentially a qualitative approach to quantitative data and is aligned with narrative data analysis rather than classical quantitative techniques. EDA relies on interpretation of visual patterns found in these graphical displays of quantitative information. By relying on graphics, an analyst examines the entire field of data both *question-by-question* and *across questions*, trying to discern any structure. Often this is the sort of structure that is hidden from classical statistical analysis. Thus EDA can provide insights into the data both at the question level and across questions.

The goal of exploratory analysis is to approach the data with the fewest possible assumptions about what will be learned or discovered and to identify patterns leading to findings. Through EDA, a researcher's analytic process involves careful study of the graphically displayed data, along with a guarded reluctance of drawing any inference that cannot be directly traced back to the data.

Some classical statistics are part of the methods in support of discerning patterns. For example, means testing is used to test the null hypothesis that the student population is equally divided between boys and girls. However, overall use of significance testing in data analysis is secondary to describing the patterns visible in graphical displays.

Characteristics of the Seniors³

The survey had a number of questions about the seniors who were completing the survey. These included questions such as gender,⁴ the education level of parents or guardians, family involvement and need for reminders about homework, attitudes about school and life in general, community involvement and extracurricular activities, and attitudes about a college degree versus a technical degree.

Gender

There were equal numbers of female and male students within the senior classes of all schools collectively. Some schools may have had more female or more male students. However, only two schools (Indian River and Textron) had a significant difference in the greater number of females to males.

Education Level of Parents or Guardians

As an indicator of the educational backgrounds in their home environments, seniors were asked to indicate the highest level of education their parents or adult guardians had attained. Data analysis showed a disparity of family educational attainment among the represented schools. At three schools (Ford, CART, and Indian River), approximately 60% of parents and guardians had at least some college, and the majority of these had a degree. Ford and Indian River had the most families with at least one parent having a college degree. In contrast, at two schools (Chavez and Textron) most parent and guardian education was at the level of high school or lower. At one site school (the four St. Clair academies), there were an equal number of parents and guardians with high school degrees as with at least some college (approximately 40% each).

³Not all schools referred to the exiting class as seniors reflecting a non-graded approach.

⁴The survey was not designed to collect demographic data, as these are available from state Department of Education web sites. Thus only a few demographic data that might be useful in comparing subpopulations are included.

At five schools, there were only minor differences in education between male and female parents or guardians. At three schools (Work & Learn, Textron, and ISUS), education level between male and female parents or guardians differed. Students said that they were not aware of the level of education of a male parent or guardian, or that a male parent's education was not relevant, much more often than they gave these answers for their female parent or guardian. At two schools, about half of female guardians have at least some college (ISUS, 51%; Work & Learn, 46%).

Family Involvement and Schoolwork Reminders By Any Adult

Surveys probed for the involvement of a family member in the senior's education and the need for reminders by any adult to "do your schoolwork." Approximately 35% of all seniors felt that a family member was involved in their education *a little*.⁵ This compared to approximately 33% who checked *somewhat*,⁶ while 25% checked *very involved*⁷ and 7% said that any family member was *never* involved in their high school education. Thus, nearly 7 out of 10 seniors completing the survey had parents that either asked them occasionally, "How are you doing in school?" (associated with *involved a little*) or who attended some parent conferences and meetings (associated with being *somewhat involved*).

Approximately 44% of all seniors completing the survey say they *never* needed any adult to remind them to complete schoolwork, compared to 36% who *sometimes* needed an adult reminder. Approximately 12% checked *often*, and 8% reported they needed reminders *very often*.

Examined school by school, the pattern of answers to both the question regarding family involvement and the question as to the need for homework reminders was very similar to the data pattern from all seniors completing the survey. The exception was at ISUS, where students who completed the survey had a bimodal family involvement, with either no family involvement or very involved families. ISUS and Work & Learn students were least likely to require reminders to do schoolwork.

Attitude Toward School and Life in General

Asked to indicate how much they liked school, the largest percentage of seniors chose *like it most of the time* over *neither like nor dislike it* and *dislike it most of the time*. This applied for all seniors completing the survey and for each school when examined separately. However, there was variation among the schools in the percentage of students who said they either disliked school or felt neutral about it. At four schools (ISUS, Indian River, St. Clair, and Work & Learn), less than 1% of students felt neutral about school or actively disliked it. In contrast, at two schools (Chavez and Ford), 50% of students felt neutral about school or actively disliked it.

Along with liking school, seniors were fairly satisfied with their lives in general. In most schools, students responded most frequently that they were *satisfied* with life (the fourth value on a scale of five). Interestingly, ISUS, the school with perhaps the most socially and economically challenged student body, was the only school where students most often said that they were *very satisfied* with life.

⁵ Defined as any family member occasionally asking, "How are you doing in school?"

⁶ Defined as any family member attending some parent conferences and meetings.

⁷ Defined as any family member that attends parent conferences and meetings and helps with homework

That seniors liked school does not mean that they found it particularly easy. In response to a question asking how easy they found school to be, most seniors chose one of two middle values, *easy* or *difficult*, over the extremes of *very easy* or *very difficult*. However, for each value on the scale relating to ease of schooling, the proportion of students who liked school was similar. In other words, seniors who found school easy liked it by a wide margin, and students who found school difficult also liked it by a wide margin. The same result was found when comparing satisfaction with life to liking school. For the population as a whole, there was a significant, if low, correlation between how easy students found school and how much they liked it. Similarly, there was a significant, if low, correlation between how satisfied students were with life and how much they liked school.

There seems to be no relationship between either liking school or finding school easier and family involvement. However, seniors who said they needed more reminders to do homework more often said they disliked school or felt neutral about it. Similarly, they found school less easy.

At two schools, the length of time in the program affected how much seniors liked school. At Chavez, seniors who had been in the program for four years, from the year it was founded, liked school less than students who had been in the program three years (one year of high school at another school). At Work & Learn,⁸ seniors who had been in the program two years liked school slightly more than those who had been in the school only one year.

In the population as a whole, those seniors who had been in a four-year program for four years found school a little easier than those who had been in a four-year program for less than four years, or were enrolled in a one, two, or three-year program. When the schools were examined separately, two schools (CART and St. Clair) had students who found school equally easy or difficult no matter how long they had been there. In contrast, students at Chavez and Textron who attended less than four years found the school slightly more difficult than those who attended for four years. Not surprisingly, ISUS students who intended to graduate after one year in the program found school slightly easier than those who were taking two years to graduate.

Community Involvement and Extracurricular Activities

Surveyed seniors were very involved in community and extracurricular activities. Sixty-three percent of the students participated in school-sponsored extracurricular activities at least once or twice a year, and 35% did so at least monthly. At 40% participation, students at ISUS were the least involved in extracurricular activities.⁹ Students at Chavez, Ford, and Indian River cited the highest participation. At each school, over 80% of the seniors were involved in extracurricular activities. In most schools, nearly the same number of students participated in extracurricular activities on a daily to monthly basis as those who participated only a few times a year.

Seniors were very involved in community-based activities outside of school. Of these, seniors most often participated in volunteer work, attended a religious service, or took a class outside their school. This result was the same in most schools when they were examined individually. By a wide margin, scouting was the activity in which students at all schools were least engaged. Of the 77% of students who participated in some community activity, about 50% took part in one or two activities and 50% participated in three or more activities.

⁸ Work & Learn is a two-year program.

⁹ Work & Learn has no school clubs, and so no participation.

Schools fell into groups on the basis of student participation in community activities. A number of schools had a very high percentage of students who participated in some community activity. These were CART, Chavez, Ford, St. Clair, and Textron (where 70%-80% of students participated in community activities), and Indian River (where 95% of students participated in community activities). At two schools (ISUS and Work & Learn), about 60% of students participated in some community activity. At all schools except St. Clair and Work & Learn, of those students who participated in community activities, at least half participated in three or more kinds of activities. At St. Clair and Work & Learn, students tended to participate in only one or two activities rather than three or more.

Seniors at all schools worked more than is the norm for high school students in the United States. Nationwide, about 30% of 16 and 17 year-olds hold paying jobs,¹⁰ while 66% of the seniors surveyed held a paying job. At six schools (CART, Indian River, ISUS, St. Clair, Textron, and Work & Learn), a majority of seniors held a paying job. At Work & Learn, 100% of the seniors held paying jobs since this is required as part of the program. At Chavez, the number of seniors who had a paying job equaled the number of seniors that did not have paying jobs. Forty-one percent of students at Ford did not answer the question. Of those who did answer, only 6% had a paying job (2% altogether).

Attitudes about College Versus a Technical School Degree

Researchers wished to examine the beliefs of seniors given the common cultural perception that the *best* careers are *only* available to graduates of four-year colleges and how senior felt about these perceptions. Seniors were asked if a four-year college degree “was required for the best careers,” and if a technical or trade degree “can lead to a great career.”

Most seniors completing the survey agreed with both statements, although analysis through comparison of data at the individual school level suggested a lot of variance regarding the value of a college degree versus a technical degree. At three schools (CART, Chavez, and Ford), students valued a four-year college degree more highly than a technical or trade degree. At three schools (St. Clair, Indian River, and Work & Learn), students valued a technical or trade degree much more highly than a four-year college degree. At ISUS and Textron, large numbers of students thought a college degree was important in obtaining the best careers, even if they placed a high career value on a technical or trade degree.

After Graduation: Plans and Careers

Survey questions probed the expectations of seniors for their lives immediately after graduation and their eventual careers. Along with questions about their post-high school plans, the survey included questions about school experiences that may have helped seniors think about careers.

Student Plans for After High School

Approximately 87% or nearly 9 out of 10 seniors surveyed, planned to continue their education, with at least 6 out of 10 planning to combine work with more education. Similarly, at each school examined separately, most students expected that they would work while continuing their education after graduation. Percentages reporting that they would continue their education were higher at CART, Chavez, Ford, Indian River and Textron. At ISUS, as many seniors expected to enter the military or did not answer the question as expected to continue their education without

¹⁰ NCES data. This number varies between 30%-35% from 1970-1985, and between 29%-36% from 1989-1993.

working. At St. Clair, slightly more seniors expected simply to work than expected to go on to more schooling without working. Seniors at Work & Learn had a different survey that did not have a *work and go to school* option; they had to choose between work and school. Most said they expected to go to school. However, a number of students chose a school and wrote “work” under *other*, or wrote “work and school” under *other*.

No seniors at any of the schools said they were unsure about what they would do after graduation. Thus seniors at all schools were definite about their plans. Possibly, the schools had created a mindset among students of having at least their next immediate step planned out. It is also possible that this result was due to some self-reporting bias if the culture in these schools frowned on an “I don’t know” answer to this kind of question.

By a wide margin, seniors decided what they would do after graduation in their last year of high school. This was true for the population as a whole and for most of the schools examined individually. CART was the only exception. Almost as many students at CART decided what they would do before high school as decided in their last year of high school.

More Education and Type of Post-Secondary Institution

Those students who planned to continue their education after graduation were asked what kind of school they planned to attend. More students planned to attend four-year colleges (approximately 5 out of 10) than planned to attend two-year colleges and technical schools combined (about 4 out of 10). Of those students who planned to attend two-year colleges, 25% said they planned to transfer to a four-year college. Presumably most of the rest only intended to get an associate’s degree.¹¹ If those students planning a transfer are added to those who intended to enroll immediately in a four-year college, 57% of students planned to attend a four-year college sooner or later, with only about 10% planning to attend a technical school.

Thinking about a Career and Assistance Received

Most seniors who completed the survey had a career in mind. Only 81 out of the 420 reported they had not decided on a career at the time the survey was completed. Percentages of students with careers in mind ranged from a high of 93% at Textron to 63% at Work & Learn. Seniors also were asked if they had done any of eight career planning activities: (a) talked to a guidance counselor, (b) talked to an adult about a career or job interest, (c) spent time at a workplace to learn about possible careers, (d) completed an assignment researching a possible career, (e) talked in a class about how that class prepared the student for a career, (f) used the Internet to learn about careers, (g) developed a written plan on how to achieve career goals, and (h) kept a portfolio.

Roughly 8 out of 10 seniors who completed the survey did at least four of the eight activities listed on the survey. Approximately 8 out of 10 seniors had used the Internet to learn about careers, and the same number had talked to an adult about their career or job interest. Approximately 7 out of 10 seniors had completed an assignment researching a possible career, and the same number spent time at a workplace to learn more about careers, talked in class about how that class prepared them for a career, and kept a portfolio. About 6 out of 10 talked to a guidance counselor about a possible career and had developed a written plan on how to achieve career goals.

¹¹ Twenty-five percent of students wrote of their transfer plans in the “other” space. More students may have planned a transfer, while only checking “two-year college” on the survey.

The eight career planning activities varied among the schools and were indicative of the total program at that school. Students at CART most often cited the CART lab courses in general (environmental science and engineering lab), the entire experience at CART, and special classes (CAD, marketing, CISCO, biotechnology, accounting, business law, and forensics) as helping with their career decision. Career activities such as internships, projects completed at CART, talks by employers, career searches, or presentations were also mentioned fairly frequently.

At St. Clair, special vocational classes predominated (CAD, welding, electronics, and culinary arts). A number of students cited on-the-job experience in a workplace. Students at Ford overwhelmingly indicated Senior Workshop, Junior Workshop, Senior Mastery, and Senior Practicum as experiences that resulted in thinking about a career.

At Chavez, students most often cited special and regular academic classes (biology, English, chemistry, computer science, math, poetry, economics, and statistics). Yet, almost as often as classes, students cited elements of the Public Policy Program, especially Fellowship and Community Projects completed during 9th and 10th grade.

Career development through the required career class was the most frequently cited response by students at Indian River. Four students cited an art class or art academy. One student each mentioned youth orchestra, owner-builder (house design) class, construction, business management, and personal finance. One student mentioned job internship. At ISUS, students most often mentioned computer classes. Living skills, “everything,” specific teachers, and research on the Internet were also cited. At Textron, students overwhelmingly cited internship as helping them with their careers (one student cited senior research). Some academic classes were cited (English, algebra, computers, and law and society) including one vocational class (cosmetology). One student mentioned work experience.

Of the experiences cited by Work & Learn students, most were on-the-job activities (Operation Fresh Start, construction, “working at my job,” and “the daycare”). A few cited career search activities (Wisconsin Job Fair, career Internet searches, and talks with counselors or guest speakers) or “the overall program.” Two students mentioned academic classes (math, social studies, and psychology). Half of the students who replied that “none helped,” actually listed an expected career. It is possible that some of these students were working in that area while at school, but may not have considered their jobs to be school experiences.

Students’ Reactions to School Experiences

The survey had a number of questions that asked students about specific aspects of their school experience. Some asked about the school in general; for example, if and how their schools are different, or how effective their schools are in helping students reach certain outcomes. Other questions asked overall reactions to teachers, to adults as role models, classroom practices including teaching methods, and real-world activities.

Differences Between Charter High Schools and Other High Schools

Overall, 9 out of 10 seniors who completed the survey felt that their charter school was different than the typical high school. In each represented school, seniors from that school also felt that their charter high school differed from a typical high school. Those who reported that their schools were no different than a typical high school were in a minority, often numbering less than five. The exception was the St. Clair academies, where 20 out of 139 (or 14%) who felt the academy they attended was similar to a typical high school.

Students who felt that their school was different were then asked to write how their schools were different. Those differences fall into two broad categories.

1) The school or learning environment in general.

- 62 citations of the school as a community, including “a family”
- 57 citations on “freedom, responsibility, independence, self-reliance, choice of study or attendance”
- 51 on better student-teacher ratio or one-on-one attention
- 40 on smaller size
- 32 citations of “flexible, informal, open, fewer rules, less ‘prison-like’, more adult”
- 30 citations on scheduling and attendance, in general or with reference to school specifics
- 26 on the building, location, or setting
- 23 citations of “challenging, strict, more work”
- 22 citations of “unique, different, fun, less boring, innovative”
- 15 shorter days or “attend only when I have classes”
- 11 on rules and policies—eight positive or neutral; three negative
- 11 on number or length of classes or number of teachers in a class or day
- 7 citations of “environment” or “atmosphere”
- 6 “more time for work”

2) Teaching and learning.

- 64 citations of school as career preparation, “work or job experience (14 similar citations), training for a trade or business-like” (43), certification (5)
- 46 citations of hands-on learning
- 44 “different, more, better, easier” references to teaching or learning
- 32 references to “real world, adult world, useful, preparation for the future”
- 31 citations of specific real-world practices: project-based (8), community involvement (7), senior thesis or mastery (4), other (12)
- 29 use of technology
- 15 “college-like, preparation for college, college credit”

Effectiveness and Satisfaction

On a four-point scale, seniors rated the overall effectiveness of the charter school on 10 outcomes. These were (a) learning how to think deeply about a complex issue, (b) how to locate information to solve real life problems, (c) analyzing unfamiliar information, (d) knowing how to reach future goals, (e) understanding talents and skills, (f) “growing-up” (changing from a child to a young adult), (g) feeling self-confident, (h) clearly expressing opinions, (i) having good people skills, and, (j) having good communications skills.

The mean of all seniors completing the survey on all outcomes was high (ranging from 3 to 3.3) indicating that seniors regarded their schools as effective in the context of the 10 outcomes. These high means also show that seniors had overall positive feelings of satisfaction about their schools.

Data were compared according to school. This analysis showed that seniors from Chavez and Ford had the most diverse reactions across the surveyed outcomes. In these schools, at least on some outcomes, there was a more narrow spread of student responses. On other outcomes, however, there was a wider spread of student responses (different students gave both low and high evaluations considering all listed outcomes). The median effectiveness was also relatively low for some outcomes. These patterns suggest that within these schools there was a wide range of feelings among the seniors who were surveyed about how effective the school was in helping them to achieve the surveyed outcomes.

At the other end of the spectrum, Indian River and Work & Learn both had a more uniform pattern of responses across the nine outcomes, suggesting that these seniors viewed their schools as being effective in helping them to achieve most, if not all, of the listed outcomes. The responses of seniors in each school varied less across each surveyed outcome. The mean effectiveness was also high for all outcomes.

Somewhat different from the above two patterns were the remaining represented schools. The mean scores for all but two outcomes were high at CART and Textron. ISUS and St. Clair each had a unique pattern of effectiveness given the listed outcomes. Students considered their schools highly effective in helping them reach some outcomes and considerably less effective for others, with unique patterns of low to high variation. The uniqueness of the patterns of responses suggests that for these schools, seniors as a group viewed their schools as being effective in some of the surveyed outcomes while less effective in others. These schools seem to be best characterized as having seniors who feel that their schools helped them achieve some of the listed outcomes while not being helpful in achieving others.

Overall Reactions to Teachers

Seniors were asked how they felt about their teachers at the charter schools and if they considered them better than teachers at other schools. If the answer was yes, they were asked to list one way their teachers were better. At Chavez, Indian River, ISUS, Textron, and Work & Learn, percentages of students who said their teachers were better than teachers at other schools were high, ranging from 72% at Textron to 100% at Chavez. At three schools (CART, Ford and St. Clair), there was a split between those who thought their teachers were better and those who thought their teachers were not better. At CART, 64% felt CART teachers were better than typical high school teachers. At the St. Clair academies, 58% felt the same way, compared to 52% at Ford.

Analysis of written responses from all students who felt that their charter school teachers were better showed various reasons for this sentiment. First, being better is associated with what the researchers ultimately titled *individualized student attention*, indicated by such written responses as “takes more time,” “are more involved,” “more one-on-one,” and “gives students more attention.” Closely related to individualized attention is *caring teachers*, indicated by statements like “more personal,” “more friendly,” “more open,” and “cares for students.” At three schools (Chavez, ISUS and Textron), there were no other reasons given for why teachers were better.

Teachers also were viewed as being better at several schools because of their teaching methods, indicated by such statements as using “hands-on activities,” “more interesting,” “explains better,” or “more fun.” Another reason for being better was *respect for students*, including treating students as equals or treating students as adults. Yet another reason was a range of responses on teacher credentials and knowledge. This included everything from saying teachers have more master’s degrees to saying that they have greater experience in the fields they teach. Real life relevance was cited both as a credential of teachers and in terms of what was taught. Finally, several students mentioned teachers’ *passion* and willingness to push students or make them learn, often referred to as being “more strict.”

Adults as Role Models

Students were asked if any adults involved in their schools acted as role models for them. Eighty-two percent of students said at least one person was their role model and 49% reported that they had more than one role model. Some students mentioned as many as eight or nine role models. At any one school, between 73% and 96% of students had at least one role model.

Teachers were the most common role models. When schools were examined separately, this pattern was the same at most schools. The exceptions were Indian River, where the principal was equally often cited as a role model; Textron, where the principal was more often cited as a role model (with teachers a close second); and ISUS, where counselors were most often cited as role models (with teachers second). Employers were often cited as role models at some schools and, overall, employers were cited as role models by almost 50% of the students.

At all schools a majority of students felt that at least one teacher knew them well. CART had the lowest percentage (70%) of students who said at least one teacher knew them well, and St. Clair had next lowest percent (74%). At all other schools, 90% or more of the students said that at least one teacher knew them well. It is not surprising, therefore, that at all schools, seniors reported on another question that they had talked to teachers or other school staff three or more times about their progress in school.

Classroom Practices Including Teaching Methods

Ten survey questions probed for classroom practices and teaching methods, as well as the role of community members and professionals from business and industry in instruction. Seven questions probed for practices in all charter school classes: (a) use of a person from business or industry when completing assignments, (b) use of the community when completing assignments, (c) assignments that connect learning to the world outside of the classroom, (d) assignments that require students to draw their own conclusions rather than “get the right answer,” (e) assignments that require students to use what they have learned from several subjects, (f) completing a project using sources other than textbooks, and (g) presenting work to a small group of adults whose feedback influenced evaluation or grading. Except for the group presentation/ grading question, which required a *yes* or *no* response, all other questions in this subset asked seniors to report on how many of their charter school classes had at least one assignment that required them to use each practice. Responses were along a five-point scale (0 = *none*, 1 = *few*, 2 = *half*, 3 = *most*, and 4 = *all*).

Three of the ten questions probed for the following practices within English, math, science, and social studies classes since seniors had been enrolled in the charter school: (a) having a class in which no textbook was used; (b) using a lot of activities with some led by students, while

teachers made short presentations; and (c) use of lecture, teacher-led discussions, and assignments. On the question about textbooks, seniors responded *yes* or *no* to indicate if they ever had any math, English, science, or social studies class at the charter that never used a textbook and, if yes, to list those that never used a textbook. Respondents also indicated how many math, science, social studies, or English classes they had since being at the charter school that had the other two practices. Questions had a five-point scale (0 = *none*, 1 = *few*, 2 = *half*, 3 = *most*, and 4 = *all*).

Using the mean for scaled questions, data analysis showed the following patterns. Projects that required using sources of information other than a textbook received the highest mean (approximately 2.8), indicating that a senior had completed a project using sources of information other than a textbook in at least half, but not most, of classes taken at the charter school. Practices receiving a mean score from 2.1 to 2.3 were assignments that connected learning to the world outside of the classroom. These assignments required that students draw their own conclusions rather than “get the right answer,” and that students use what they had learned from several subjects. Thus, any one senior was likely to have at least half of charter school classes in which students felt what they were learning was connected to the world outside of the classroom.

Data analysis showed low mean scores (approximately 1.3 in each case) on classes that had assignments that required using persons from business and industry when completing them, as well as use of the community in general. Thus, any one surveyed senior had few charter school courses that had assignments that made use of community and business representatives. Assignments and, by inference, learning, essentially occurred within classrooms and within the school.

Mean scores also were calculated on the two questions about teaching methods in math, social science, English, and science classes (lecture; teacher-led discussions and assignments; and classes that had a lot of activities with some led by students, while teachers gave short presentations). Comparing these showed that respondents had more academic classes where teachers used mostly lecture, teacher-led discussion and assignments than they had classes where teachers used a lot of activities with some led by students. On the five-point scale (0 = *none*, 1 = *few*, 2 = *half*, 3 = *most*, and 4 = *all*), the mean for classes with lectures was approximately 2.4, versus approximately 1.6 for student-led activities with short teacher presentations.

Examined individually at most schools, students had a majority of classes that were lecture, teacher-led discussion, and assignments. At two schools (Ford and Work & Learn), half, or nearly half, of the classes had a lot of activities, some led by students and others with short teacher presentations. St. Clair students had the highest number of classes with teacher-led activities versus student-led activities. Chavez was the school where teachers in academic subjects relied most heavily on the lecture methods, according to seniors.

Approximately 41% (4 out of 10) seniors reported that they had a math, English, or social studies class that never used a textbook. These students also listed courses that never used a textbook. English was the most frequently identified course that never used a textbook, followed by social studies. Math and science courses were the least frequently mentioned. There were 98 citations for English, 64 for social studies, 47 for science, and 41 for math.

ISUS, Work & Learn, and CART students were more likely to have a math, science, English, or social studies class that never used a textbook (50% at CART, 56% at ISUS, and 95% at Work &

Learn). St. Clair seniors were least likely to have any charter school academic classes that never used a textbook, with about 1 out of 10 saying he/she had a course without a textbook. About 2 out of 10 seniors from Indian River and Chavez had academic classes without textbooks, and about 3 out of 10 students at Ford had non-textbook based academic classes.

Presenting work to a small group of adults with feedback influencing grading was the final classroom practice of interest to the researchers. Nearly 57% of all seniors reported that they had a charter school class in which they had presented their work to a small group with feedback influencing evaluation or grading. Approximately 9 out of 10 seniors from Chavez and Textron reported that they made a presentation to a group with feedback influencing the grade, compared to a low of 3 out of 10 from the St. Clair academies. At Ford and Indian River, approximately 8 out of 10 students made group presentations with grades being affected; at ISUS, approximately 7 out of 10, and at Work & Learn, approximately 5 out of 10 students made group presentations with feedback influencing evaluation or grades.

Participation in Real-World Activities

Students were asked if they were involved in any of the following 11 real world activities: (a) completed classes identified as early preparation for a certain career; (b) produced a marketable product such as a house or computer network; (c) placement at a worksite (a paid or unpaid internship/fellowship) to support classroom learning for at least two weeks; (d) paid or unpaid job required by the school; (e) a job shadow; (f) an apprenticeship, defined as a formal training for a specific career; (g) worked in a school-based business such as a store; (h) received advice from a mentor who worked in a business, trade, or industry; (i) completed a research project of six months or longer with people from the community; (j) completed classroom lessons on work skills and behaviors; and (k) completed lessons on resume writing, applying for a job, and interviewing.

Approximately 9 out of 10 seniors completing the survey completed lessons on resume writing, applying for a job, or interviewing. Similarly, nearly 9 out of 10 had classroom lessons on work-related skills and behaviors. About 8 out of 10 had completed classes identified as early preparation for a specific career, and about 7 out of 10 received advice from a mentor in a business, trade, or from industry. Six out of 10 completed an internship of at least two weeks and the same numbers had a job shadow. About 4 out of 10 created a marketable product, and similar numbers had a part-time job required by the school. About 3 out of 10 completed an apprenticeship, and the same number completed a six-month research project along with community members. Only about 2 out of 10 students worked in a school-based business.

When schools were examined individually, 90% or more of those completing the survey at each school participated in at least 1 of the 11 real world activities. Completing lessons on resume writing, applying for a job, and interviews had the highest participation rates (all schools had 80% or greater participation, and four schools had 95%-100% participation). Classroom lessons on work skills and behaviors also had high participation rates (80% or greater participation at seven schools, 68% participation at one school). In comparison, the rates of participation in a school business were low in all schools (25% or less participation). Receiving advice from a business, trade, or industry mentor was fairly high (75%-90% at seven schools and 55% at one school). Participation in career classes fluctuated from 80% or more at five schools, to only 30%-50% at three schools.

Participation and Learning in Select Areas

Students were asked if participation in real-world activities had helped them learn in 14 areas. Seniors circled a *yes* or *no*. The areas were (a) thinking about a career you may or may not want as an adult, (b) knowing what you want to do after graduation, (c) learning how to do a specific job, (d) learning about your talents and abilities, (e) learning how to organize and manage your time, (f) learning how to get along with others that different from you, (g) learning how to work in a team or small group, (h) learning how to accept feedback from others, (i) learning how to motivate yourself to get important things done, (j) learning how to ask for help when needed, (k) developing better reading skills, (l) developing better writing skills, (m) developing better math skills, and (n) developing better speaking skills.

Percentages and numbers of seniors completing the survey who felt that their participation in real-world activities was helpful exceeded 50% for all 14 areas. Thinking about careers and learning how to work in a team or small group garnered the highest percentage and numbers. Approximately 9 out of 10 seniors felt that participation in real-world activities had helped them in these two areas. In comparison, percentages of students who felt that real-world practices helped them in math, reading, and writing dropped to 55 to 60%. In other words, approximately 6 out of 10 seniors felt that participation in real-world activities had helped them learn academic related skills.

When data were analyzed according to each school, the above findings held up. That is, high numbers of seniors completing the survey for any specific charter school felt that participation in real-world activities had helped them learn the 14 areas listed in the survey. Likewise, percentages that felt participation in real-world activities had helped them learn academic skills decreased.

Conclusions

The findings above resulted in eight major conclusions based on the data. These conclusions represent all surveyed students (sometimes referred to as the classes of 2002) and all schools, while recognizing that variations exist across represented schools. In other words, the aim here is to make statements regardless of the represented charter school.

1. Surveyed Students Shared Some Common Characteristics

Students completing their final year at the eight charter high school sites shared a number of characteristics. Generally, their attitudes towards school and life were positive, they were very involved in community and extracurricular activities, and they were likely to have a paying job while attending school. Family involvement for most was neither high nor low. Most students did not need many adult reminders to do their schoolwork. An overwhelming majority of surveyed students had made post-graduation plans and had some kind of a career in mind.

2. Education of Parents or Guardians Varied With Schools

The educational levels of parents or guardians varied across schools. Three schools (Ford, CART, and Indian River) had a majority of parents or guardians with at least some college, and many had a degree. In contrast, at two schools (Chavez and Textron) most parent and guardian education was at the level of high school or lower. At the four St. Clair academies, there were an equal number of parents and guardians with high school degrees as those with at least some college (around 40% each). However, at these four academies it was unlikely that a parent or guardian had earned a college degree.

3. Planning for More Education after Graduation

Overwhelming numbers of the charter high school classes of 2002 planned to continue their education, with 6 out of 10 combining work with more education. By a wide margin, members of the class of 2002 had decided what they would be doing after graduation during their last year in high school. Slightly more students planned to attend a four-year college than those heading to a two-year college or technical school. Those starting at a two-year college planned to transfer and ultimately graduate from a four-year institution.

4. Feeling Positive about High School while Noting Differences from Other Schools

Large numbers of the classes of 2002 felt positive about their charter high school experience. An overwhelming number liked attending their charter high school. In response to a question on overall effectiveness given 10 outcomes, the typical surveyed senior gave the school at least a rating of a 3 on a 4-point scale. Outcomes did not include traditional measures of academic achievement.

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 a 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 students. Second, teaching and learning at the charter schools was perceived as being more personal and individualized, along with being more relevant to post-graduation aspirations and intentions compared to other schools.

5. Positive Reactions to Charter High School Teachers

Large numbers of the classes of 2002 regarded their charter high school teachers as being better than teachers at other schools, although in three schools up to 40% who answered felt otherwise. Those who felt that their charter school teachers were better reported that teachers at the charter school provided more individualized attention, were more caring teachers, taught in ways that resulted in better explanations and overall more interesting lessons, and were teachers that respected students.

Many students regarded their teachers as role models, again indicating positive regard for teachers. Furthermore, large numbers of the class of 2002 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.

6. Four Characteristics of Charter High School Classroom Practices and Methods

Charter high school classroom practices had four characteristics. First, practices were essentially school-based. That is, learning within the represented charter schools occurred within classrooms with less use of community resources and individuals from business and industry. From a list of 10 practices, members of the classes of 2002 had relatively few assignments that required them to utilize community resources or individuals from business and industry. In other words, like most high school students, the surveyed students were less likely to use community resources, including individuals from business and industry, when completing an assignment.

Second, surveyed students had academic classes that were teacher-directed, and where the mode of instruction was didactic with the teacher up front delivering the instruction. Members of the

class of 2002 reported having more math, social studies, science, or English classes in which teachers used mostly lecture, teacher-led discussion, and assignments, versus classes with a lot of activities with some led by students while teachers gave only short presentations. However, some evidence points to teachers of academic subjects being less dependent on textbooks, since 1 out of 4 surveyed students reported that they never used a textbook in such classes.

Third, students completing the survey tended to have classes in which they planned and completed a project using sources of information other than textbooks. From a list of 10 practices, projects received the highest mean compared to all other practices, indicating that any surveyed student had completed a project using sources of information other than a textbook in at least half of classes taken at the charter school.

Fourth, many surveyed students (almost 6 out of 10) had at least one class that had assignments that required presenting work to a small group of adults with feedback influencing grading.

7. A Distinctive Characteristic: Personalization

The most distinctive characteristic of charter high schools represented in the survey is *personalization*. That is, interactions between teachers and students are more personal and less distant compared to the typical high school with an emphasis on covering content. Personalization was an obvious theme in the comments students made about how their charter schools were different from other high schools and what made their teachers better than teachers at other schools. Collectively, the analysis of comments pointed to how represented charter schools were widely described as a community and a family and as a place in which students felt cared for and received adult attention.

8. Many Real World Practices With Fluctuations Across Schools

Practices that aim to connect students to adult experiences typical of the world outside the classroom as a context for learning were present in all represented schools but fluctuated across schools. Compared to in-school practices, fewer students reported participating in out-of-school practices such as internships of at least two weeks and job shadowing. Few surveyed students participated in school-based businesses, indicating that these are relatively rare in the represented schools.

The most prevalent practices within all schools were lessons for writing a resume, applying for a job, and interviewing, followed by classroom lessons related to work skills and behaviors. Approximately 9 out of 10 members of the classes of 2002 reported they had both types of lessons. Participation in classes focusing on investigating careers fluctuated across schools, as did receiving advice of any kind from a business, trade, or industry mentor.

Formal apprenticeships were the least likely practice in the represented schools, with 3 out of 10 students reported having participated in them. Likewise, completing a six-month research project that required some involvement of community members was less common.

The perceptions of students on how participation in real-world practices helped them to learn within 14 areas resulted in a mixed picture. On one hand, most seniors (9 out of 10) felt that their participation in real-world practices helped them think about future careers and helped them work in small groups. On the other hand, fewer numbers (approximately 6 out of 10) felt that participation helped them to learn math, reading, and writing skills.

Summary

This report, part of a larger study on charter high schools, presented the findings and conclusions of a survey administered to 420 members of the graduating classes of 2002 from eight different field study sites with a total of 11 high schools with charter school status. Findings grouped into four sections present a student perspective on charter high schools, as well as provide information about students attending charter high schools. As a group, the surveyed potential graduates shared some common characteristics, including being positive about school and their life, and being quite involved in their communities and active in extracurricular activities. Most planned to pursue more education, with most expecting to graduate from a four-year higher education institution.

Within classrooms, didactic and teacher-centered practices were prevalent, as were the use of projects and presentations to small groups with feedback affecting grading. Less prevalent were practices that required students to use community resources or persons from business and industry to complete assignments. However, the involvement of business and industry representatives fluctuated across schools, as did the presence of real-world practices. The two most prevalent real-world practices were lessons in resume writing, applying for a job, and interviewing, and lessons in job-related skills and behaviors. Internships of at least two weeks and job shadowing were the next most prevalent real-world practices.

From the perspective of students, charter high schools received high marks. Overall, surveyed students felt very positive about their charter schools experiences and especially about their charter high school teachers. Caring teachers and a learning environment characterized as being personalized appear to be the distinctive features of the charter schools attended by the survey students.

Elena Tabachnick, CEW Assistant Researcher, compiled and analyzed data and wrote the initial report. Project Director, Jake Blasczyk, reviewed and critiqued the initial report with the result being this final report. For further information or to comment on this report contact Jake Blasczyk at 608.263.6786 or jblasczyk@education.wisc.edu.