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Charter Schools: Why More Study Is Needed

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The debate over raising the cap on charter schools has prompted legislation (HB 30) for a study of charter schools. A recent report by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research questioned the achievements of charter schools and recommended keeping the 100-school cap. While the report addresses some important issues, the proposed legislative study ideally would build on this report by recognizing the diverse range of measures of success that are appropriate for charter schools.

With its wealth of student data resources, the state is in a unique position to conduct an in-depth evaluation of charter schools. Charter schools have served an even broader population than traditional schools, ranging from incarcerated youths to students taking college-level exams. Using state data, the legislative study has the opportunity to account for each school's individual mission and student population and evaluate them accordingly.

Charter Missions Differ From Traditional School Missions

In order to adequately evaluate charter schools, we must first understand their missions and how they relate to the overall goal of public education. The mission of the state, and therefore the traditional public school, is to provide a sound basic education to all North Carolina children. To measure its progress in this regard, the state has developed standard courses of study and tests students on whether or not they have learned this curriculum.

The *Leandro* court case and standardized test results have demonstrated that some groups of students – including a majority of low-income and minority students – are not reaching grade-level. In response, the state has devoted extra resources to such students. Furthermore, the ABC accountability system that rates schools and rewards teachers is designed in such a way that schools have an incentive to focus on students who test just below proficient – Level II (basic) – to bring them up to “proficient” (Level III). Ultimately, although mainstream schools serve all comers, their greatest target group is those with the greatest potential for improvement: students performing at and just below grade level. In this respect, traditional public schools differ greatly from charter schools.

Whom do charter schools serve? The governing body of each charter school decides for itself who its target population will be. Many charters serve at-risk populations. This means their students are more frequently *two* steps below proficient and are more likely to drop out of school. Other charter schools offer high-level International Baccalaureate tests and attract top achievers. Clearly, these schools have very different students – and very different missions.

What does success mean? For the first group of charters – those serving at-risk students – the first concern must be to keep students in school. Many of these students are disengaged from school, behind in classes, and already unable to graduate on time. They are more likely to drop out than the average public school student. For these students, even if their test scores are low, the very fact that the school keeps them enrolled and engaged can be considered a mark in the success column.

Charter schools that target high achievers have a different mission. Although all charter schools enroll students based on a lottery of applicants, the students who apply to each charter do so because they think it suits their needs. Therefore, a school that offers many Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses is more likely to have a student population achieving at or above grade level. Such a school has a built-in set of accountability measures unique to its population: testing and passage rates on AP and IB exams.

Charter Schools Cannot Be Studied In A Vacuum

The varied missions and populations of charter schools make it impossible to fairly evaluate them as a single group. As the General Assembly considers ways to study the effectiveness of charter schools, we suggest the following:

1. **Group charters by their target populations.** Where appropriate, compare charter schools to alternative schools rather than mainstream public schools. For example:
 - Crossroads Charter High and Kennedy Charter in Charlotte are classified as alternative schools. Derita Alternative School, also in Charlotte, would be an equivalent non-charter public school. On the most recent (2005-06) end-of-course tests, 18 percent of Crossroads students and 15 percent of Kennedy students received passing scores, compared to 17 percent of Derita students. Because these alternative schools serve high risk populations, all three schools compare poorly to the overall Charlotte-Mecklenburg district average of 66 percent. While the results are about equal, Crossroads Charter slightly outperforms the non-charter alternative school.
 - The state ABC program reports the progress made by schools in maintaining and improving student achievement (“growth”). Categories range from Honor Schools of Excellence to Low-Performing Schools. In 2005-06, Crossroads received no recognition in terms of ABCs growth. Kennedy and Derita, which both serve 6th to 12th graders, met expected growth.
2. **Use statistical pairs of students.** Use a statistical matching method that pairs charter students with traditional school students with similar demographic and achievement backgrounds. Where possible, pair each charter student with a student who still attends the charter student’s base school.
 - Include comparisons of the percentage of at-risk students who have dropped out since the previous year. Dig further and include a measure for traditional school students who had high risk factors for dropping out and instead transferred to a charter school. Statewide, 55 percent of economically disadvantaged students graduate within four years, compared to 69 percent of all students. The ability of some charter schools to keep students in school may be obscured by the greater proportion of at-risk students that they serve and the longer time that it can take such students to graduate. Still, the good news is that some of these students are actually graduating.
 - If a charter student’s traditional school counterpart has dropped out of school, discard the charter student’s test scores from the school average. The charter should not be penalized for keeping low achieving students in school.
 - For high achieving students, compare enrollment and passage rates on college-level exams. For example, Raleigh Charter High and Enloe High offer comparable curricula. Both Raleigh schools offer college-level courses, and both can be found in the top 60 on *Newsweek*’s 2007 list of top public high schools in the nation. *Newsweek* reports that 97 percent of graduating seniors at Raleigh Charter High received passing grades on at least one IB or AP test, compared to 57 percent of graduating seniors at Enloe High in Raleigh.
3. **Keep size in mind.** Statistically speaking, data on a school with 500 students is much more forgiving than data on a school with 50 students. Each student in the large school represents one-fifth of 1 percent, while each student in the small school represents 2 percent. Since charter schools tend to be small, they are subject to more volatile statistics.
4. **Acknowledge closures.** Charter schools that perform poorly are closed. The surviving charters should not be penalized for the performance of inactive schools. On the other hand, the closure rate is part of the accountability mechanism for charter schools – a high closure rate would indicate that charters are a riskier investment. In either case, closures must be acknowledged.
5. **Broaden the study beyond academic success.** Interview parents and students. Do students feel safer? Better prepared for work or higher education? More likely to finish high school or continue their education?
6. **Look at exit rates and waiting lists.** Charter school enrollment is voluntary. The rate of students exiting charter schools for traditional schools is one indicator of student and parent satisfaction. The length of a charter school’s waiting list is a tribute to its reputation and a commentary on other public schools. According to the DPI Office of Charter Schools, more than 5,000 students are currently on waiting lists for charter schools.
7. **Identify best practices.** Focus on factors that enhance a charter school’s chances of success. New charters can model these practices, and state officials can look for these factors when deciding whether to grant a new charter.

Finally, each charter school has an individual charter with the state. Each has a unique mission. And each must have been considered a viable option in order to win approval from the state in the first place. In holding charter schools accountable, the state should look at what each school has said it will do, and how well it has met its own charge.