



Charter Schools in North Carolina

Innovation *in* Education

A POLICY REPORT BY THE NORTH CAROLINA EDUCATION ALLIANCE

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A Message from the

North Carolina Education Alliance

*I am excited to introduce the North Carolina Education Alliance's new and informative report on charter schools in our state, **Charter Schools in North Carolina: Innovation in Education**. This report provides thoughtful analysis of the issues facing North Carolina's charter schools – past, present, and future. In addition, we have sought to put a human face on charter schools in this report, by profiling four dynamic charter schools involved in the day-to-day work of transforming public education for North Carolina's children.*

Charter Schools in North Carolina: Innovation in Education is consistent with the goals of the Alliance: to serve as a resource network, providing North Carolinians with comprehensive data and information on topics affecting K-12 education. At the North Carolina Education Alliance, we believe that every child can learn and that families need **choices** in education. We are committed to improving the quality of education for **all** North Carolina students, by supporting traditional approaches with proven effectiveness, and by promoting innovative strategies with the potential for greater success.

This report is dedicated to the hundreds of individuals who gave of their time, talents and resources to make charter schools a reality in North Carolina. Their courage will, no doubt, affect the lives of generations of children for years to come. I wish we could have highlighted each charter school in our state, as each one is unique in its educational mission.

I would like to acknowledge every individual who assisted with this report: many thanks to the principals, operators, and board members who gave of their time for interviews and provided us with valuable information. I would also like to thank Estelle Snyder, Melissa Mitchell, Sally Harbin, and Brenda Shipman-Scruggs for their assistance in highlighting particular charter schools.

My deepest appreciation goes to Kristen Blair who made this report possible. Working together, from an idea to a finished project, has been a delight.

Lindalyn Kakadelis

Director, North Carolina Education Alliance

Executive Summary


Overview

*Education is not the filling of a pail,
but the lighting of a fire.*

– William Butler Yeats

From statehouses to corporate boardrooms to community centers, Americans are nearly universally aligned in support of transforming public education. Dismayed by overcrowding, low test scores, and high dropout rates, many people advocate overhauling the educational system in our country. Yet, however unified Americans may be on the need for educational reform, their perspectives diverge greatly on how to achieve it. Recent proposals have ranged from increasing federal funding, to requiring more stringent teacher accreditation, to lengthening school days and terms. Despite more than a decade of discussion, legislative proposals, and counterproposals, many problems remain. Yet, as public debate rages on, a group of concerned parents and educators, advocating freedom and change, is already quietly revolutionizing public education. The persistence of these reformers has resulted in a compelling alternative to traditional public schools – charter schools.

The first charter school welcomed students in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992, just one year after passage of the nation's inaugural charter school legislation. In 1992, California joined the movement by passing its own charter school legislation. The movement has now taken hold across the country, and charter school laws are in place in 41 states and the District of Columbia. Roughly 3,000 charter schools operate nationally, an impressive accomplishment for a movement that has been constrained at times by restrictive state legislation and funding difficulties.

The first North Carolina charter schools opened their doors in 1997, and the movement has grown significantly since that time. The number of charter schools regularly meets or is close to the state cap of 100 schools, but at only 4 percent of the total number of public schools, charter schools remain a tiny fraction of North Carolina's public schools. Clearly, the fact that charter schools now dot the landscape of public schools in North Carolina indicates that much has been achieved, yet more remains to be done.

Charter Schools in North Carolina: Innovation in Education reports on the considerable progress to date of charter schools in the state, provides analysis of current obstacles for growth, and recommends strategies for future improvement. Above all else, this report shows that charter schools are filling a need not met by traditional public schools, as evidenced by the widespread satisfaction of charter school parents and students. The freedom afforded by the structure of charter schools enables each school to find its niche, whether it is through serving specific populations – like at-risk youth, tribal children, or gifted and talented students – or simply providing a more intensive education to propel children to new levels of achievement. This flexibility is proving a powerful lure to students, parents, and educators alike, allowing North Carolinians to experience the transformational power of excellence in education. Please join us as we demonstrate the many ways in which North Carolina's charter schools are redefining public education.



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

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- ◆ North Carolina's charter schools are thriving, providing over 21,000 students across the state with proven and effective alternatives to traditional public schools.
- ◆ While the first North Carolina charter schools opened in 1997, the movement has grown exponentially. Applications to start new schools regularly exceed the number of available spaces, as educators, parents, and students seek the flexibility, educational immersion, and freedom afforded by charter schools.
- ◆ Charter schools are by far the most comprehensive example of public school choice in North Carolina, yet they still comprise only a fraction of the total number of public schools (about 4 percent).
- ◆ North Carolina's charter schools truly are models of innovation, showcasing a wide array of curricula (ranging from a focus on the arts to classical education) and educational management strategies.
- ◆ Charter schools are typically smaller schools and have smaller classrooms, yielding greater individualized instructional time for students.
- ◆ Charter schools have been shown to lift the performance of other non-charter, public schools by interjecting competition into the local educational market.
- ◆ Charter school parents tend to be more involved than parents in traditional public schools and they report greater satisfaction with their child's charter school than his/her previous public school.
- ◆ Despite sometimes offering lower pay, charter schools have had no trouble luring accomplished teachers who value the professional freedom, mission or philosophy, and ability to exert more control over decisions provided by these schools.
- ◆ Compliance with rigid state accountability requirements is the foremost obstacle encountered by charter schools, and could severely restrict the long-term growth of this movement.
- ◆ Providing charter schools with the flexibility to use alternative testing to fulfill state accountability requirements would ease one of the greatest burdens currently faced by charter schools and enable them to pursue full experimentation with teaching methods and curricula.
- ◆ While North Carolina has fairly strong laws supporting charter schools, lifting the current legislative cap of 100 schools would encourage more charter school growth.

Chapter 1:

What is a Charter School?

In the national debate over America's schools, charter schools are increasingly gaining ground as models of innovation. Indeed, during the past decade, reams of studies, articles, and commentaries have argued the merits of this fast-growing movement in public education. Often overlooked, however, is the most basic information of all: *what* exactly is a charter school? Many people, even some parents of children attending charter schools, might find it difficult to explain the nuts and bolts of what they are and what they do. Let's look at the facts.

First, charter schools are *public*, not private, schools. Like traditional public schools, charter schools are free to the students who attend them. Charter schools also receive their funding from taxpayer dollars allocated for public education, as do traditional public schools. Funding for a particular charter school is based on that school's student enrollment. Charters are also eligible for grants, provided by federal legislation, to help with start-up costs.

Second, charter schools earn their name from the document governing their operation. Essentially, they function based on a "charter," or performance contract, between the school and the state where they are located. The charter lays out guidelines to which schools are held accountable if they want to remain open.

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA

How are charter schools in North Carolina created? State law provides that any person, group of people, or nonprofit corporation may apply to establish a charter school. An application is submitted to the State Board of Education for final approval. Once established, a charter school is then governed by an independent, nonprofit board of directors.

North Carolina's charter school movement is still in its elementary years – the first charter schools opened their doors in 1997. Now the movement has grown to the point that North Carolina charter schools serve over 21,000 students.¹ Clearly, though, there is still plenty of room for charter schools to multiply and expand. Of the 2,251 public schools operating in North Carolina in 2002-2003, only 93 were charter schools.² This means that only about 4 percent of North Carolina public schools are charter schools. And as long as North Carolina's current legislative cap permitting no more than 100 charter schools remains intact, charter schools will continue to comprise only a small percentage of the total number of public schools.

Charter schools span the state, representing a broad spectrum of curricula and enterprising teaching methods. Consider the following examples:

- ◆ ArtSpace Charter School in Swannanoa offers an arts-based curriculum and is run by the Partnership for Art at the Core of Education (PACE). Last year, this school earned a "School of Distinction" award after only two years of operation.
- ◆ Greensboro Academy, a National Heritage Academy located in the Triad, makes great use of parent volunteers. This progressive school has dedicated parents working throughout the school, as teaching assistants, lunch supervisors, and office workers. This past year, parents spent their Christmas break redecorating the teacher's lounge. In addition, Greensboro Academy rewards teaching excellence by providing merit pay to teachers based on achievement.
- ◆ The Communities in Schools (CIS) Academy in Robeson County bases its mission on the principle that "each child deserves the basics." This middle

school works with an at-risk and economically disadvantaged student population (80 percent receive free or reduced-price lunch), by focusing heavily on teaching reading skills and comprehension. In addition to emphasizing basic academic skills, school administrators understand the value of continuity in relationships between pupils and adults, particularly for at-risk students. According to the school's executive director, "Every adult knows the students," including bus drivers, who not only drive children to school, but also stay to tutor them and serve them breakfast and lunch.

- ◆ And finally, Omuteko Gwamaziima, a community-based African-centered charter school, operates in Durham. This school's name comes from the Haya language of Tanzania and means "a place of higher learning and spiritual development where youth are grounded in truth."

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All of these schools, along with others highlighted throughout this report, represent the ingenuity and creativity that flourish in the presence of freedom. Such freedom gives schools the flexibility to follow what works and still meet the bottom line – educating North Carolina's children.

CHARTER SCHOOLS VS. TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

While charter schools are themselves public schools, they differ significantly from traditional public schools in a number of ways. Such differences set them apart as pioneers in the education reform movement and enhance their appeal to parents and educators alike.

First and foremost, charter schools are schools of choice. What does this mean? Students are not assigned to charter schools by the district administration. Rather, all students attend as a result of a choice they and their parents or guardians have made to select a school other than the assigned public school in their local school district.

Second, charter schools enjoy greater parental involvement than traditional public schools, a benefit that may well grow out of the proactive role a parent takes in choosing a school for their child. Clearly, putting parents back in the driver's seat when it comes to a child's education yields multiple rewards. Some parents are involved at the ground level in developing and creating charter schools. Others contribute to the school on a volunteer basis. All in all, parents who choose charters for their child seem to have more of a vested interest in working toward a good outcome for both their child and the school. Not surprisingly, parents also generally report high levels of satisfaction with charter schools.

Third, charter schools benefit from their smaller size. Charter schools tend to have significantly fewer children enrolled than traditional public schools, with individual classes having fewer pupils as well. Nationally, median enrollment in charter schools is 242 students compared to 539 in traditional public schools.³ In North Carolina, the average class size in a traditional public school is 21 children; the average class size for a charter school is 15.⁴ Smaller classes mean greater individualized instructional time for students. While some children may not need more individual attention from a teacher and will perform well regardless of class size, other students desperately need this kind of specialized attention. For these students – those not receiving the attention they needed in a traditional public school classroom – more one-on-one time with a teacher is a tremendous boon. Smaller classes also breed more familiarity and improved relationships between teachers, students and parents.

Fourth, because they are independent public schools, charter schools are not constrained by many of the regulatory restrictions that encumber traditional public schools. They have more freedom to experiment with school management as well as with teaching practices. Flexibility with management allows

schools to be creative in allocating resources and relying on management strategies that may not fit traditional norms. For example, some charter schools are choosing to contract with educational management organizations to meet their daily management needs. Teachers are also free to tailor their chosen instructional methods to the student population they serve. In exchange for this autonomy, charter schools are held to the ultimate standard of accountability: perform or you will be shut down.

Fifth, charter schools often have a different focus than do traditional public schools. Some provide a concentration on particular subjects or rely on a specific kind of curriculum, while others serve a targeted group of students. Some charter schools attract gifted and talented students; others serve children who are at-risk or have special needs. This may account, in part, for the fact that charter schools have a higher student turnover than do traditional public schools.

Finally, with regard to funding, charter schools are comparable to other public schools. Charter schools and traditional public schools are eligible for the same state and federal funding. However, estimates indicate that charters save taxpayers roughly \$1,000 per student each year in facilities costs.⁵ This may be due, in part, to the fact that most charter schools do not receive any capital funding for facilities. Charter schools also have much greater flexibility in how they spend their money than do traditional public schools. As a result, they may choose to allocate their money differently than traditional public schools. And research shows that they do, in fact, make different choices – in general, North Carolina charter schools spend less on salaries and benefits than other public schools and more on services and equipment used for instruction.⁶



CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENTS

Who exactly is the typical charter school student in North Carolina? In our state, charter schools tend to have more black and Hispanic students and fewer white pupils than other public schools.⁷ North Carolina charter schools also tend to have a slightly higher percentage of male students than traditional public schools (55 percent versus 51 percent).⁸ There seems to be a growing tendency for charter schools to attract pupils who were not thriving in their traditional public school environment. Charter schools also have a slightly higher percentage of special education children than non-charter schools.⁹ This occurs because some schools form specifically to serve special-needs students; alternatively, some children with learning disabilities choose charter schools because they are not well-served by their assigned public school.

In sum, while charter schools do share some similarities with traditional public schools (they are free to students and offer open enrollment), their striking differences are making them an appealing alternative to parents and students dissatisfied with the status quo. The existence of charter schools is an acknowledgment that children's educational needs are as varied and diverse as their personalities, skills, and talents. Charter schools, equipped with freedom and flexibility, are meeting these needs.

KIPP: GASTON COLLEGE PREPARATORY: COMMITTED TO EXCELLENCE

Every school day, seventh-grader Victoria Bennett knows she will find her principal, Caleb Dolan, standing at the entrance to her school greeting each child by name. Victoria's school, KIPP: Gaston College Preparatory, or GCP to students, is located in rural Gaston, North Carolina. Gaston's unemployment rates are among the highest in the state, the local schools are ranked among North Carolina's lowest performing, and less than 9 percent of local residents hold four-year degrees. But as Victoria says, "GCP is a different story. It's the silver lining in Gaston's dark and gloomy cloud."

KIPP: Gaston College Preparatory is a free, open-enrollment charter school founded on the five pillars of KIPP, the Knowledge is Power Program. The five pillars include: High Expectations, Power to Lead, Choice and Commitment, Extended Time on Task, and Focus on Results. GCP opened in August, 2001 with 80 fifth-graders who, along with their families, chose to believe they could transform 27 acres of peanuts and soybeans into a high quality public school. Each year since opening, GCP has added one grade level, and the student body now numbers 185. With the addition of eighth grade next year, GCP will reach full capacity as a middle school with 240 students.

African-Americans comprise 95 percent of GCP's student body, with over 80 percent of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Entrance into GCP provides



students with a fresh start. Students are accepted without regard to prior academics or conduct. Typically, pupils enter GCP below grade level but make achievement gains very quickly. In 2001-2002, only 49 percent of the first class of fifth-graders entering GCP were performing at grade level in reading. In 2002-2003, 100 percent of those same students were performing at or above grade level on End of Grade math tests, and 99 percent were reading at or above grade level on End of Grade reading tests (these statistics reflect performance of all GCP students, including learning-disabled pupils). KIPP: Gaston College Preparatory is now the sixth-highest performing school in North Carolina. GCP is the only school among these top six schools that works with an educationally underserved community.

Every GCP student is expected to spend a considerable amount of time on task. Victoria and her classmates attend school Monday through Thursday, from 8am-5pm, on Fridays from 8am-4pm, alternate Saturdays from 9am-1pm, and for two weeks in July. "We're here to work, and we work hard," says Paris Gatling, a seventh-grader at GCP. Every student, parent, and teacher signs a Commitment to Excellence contract pledging to work harder, behave better, and think more than ever before to achieve their mission of success now, in college, and in life.

Dolan, who is also a co-founder of the school, is often asked for GCP's secret. His answer is simple: "We use everything we know to teach kids well. We spend more time in school, work harder, and are always thinking of ways to improve instruction." Dolan also attributes the school's success to the flexibility allowed charter schools. "It is important as a school leader to have the ability to control how money is spent, and to hire and fire," Dolan says. "Without strong leaders and an incredibly dedicated group of teachers, it would be difficult to make such an impact." In his school, teachers are available nightly for advice via cell phones, parents commit to read to their children each evening, and students spend almost 70 percent more time in class receiving instruction than the average public school student.

Not all learning at GCP is confined to the classroom. "In order to raise our students' expectations, we expose them to educational opportunities and experiences not found in our rural community," says Tammi Sutton, GCP co-founder and teacher. Victoria and her classmates work to earn monthly field lessons throughout the state as well as a week-long out-of-state field lesson at the end of the school year. "Incentives like these not only educate students, but serve as powerful motivators for achievement. We refuse to allow poverty to limit our students' experiences and expectations," Sutton says.

During the summer, students have the opportunity to attend Science and Technology Camp and Drama Camp through relationships the school has developed with the Science, Engineering, Math, and Aeronautics Academy in Warrenton and the Lakeland Cultural Arts Center in Littleton. Both organizations allow GCP students to attend their camps free of charge. Because GCP depends primarily on federal and state grants and private sources for funding, partnerships with outside groups like these bring enormous value to the school.

As a rising eighth-grader, Victoria does not like to imagine her plight had she not attended GCP. When she entered as a fifth-grader in 2001, she described herself as a gossip who liked to chase boys. Today, Victoria says she is brilliant, ambitious, and able to keep her head up through thick and thin. She credits her current outlook to the sense of pride and courage instilled in her by her teachers. Victoria looks back on coming to GCP as a turning point in her life. "My teachers expect nothing but the best of me," she says. "They are not looking for me to fail, only for me to do my best. When my home life was shattered, my teachers were there." When asked what she sees for herself and her classmates after she finishes eighth grade next year, Victoria is clear. "I hope we are able to continue as students at GCP High School. GCP has a major impact on our academics, our hearts, and our lives," she says.

Chapter 2:

Freedom with Accountability

Charter schools are at the vanguard of the movement for more educational freedom. Indeed, they are the first American public schools functioning without burdensome restrictions, and this freedom sets them apart from all other public schools. In exchange for their freedom, however, charter schools are held to high standards of accountability. Not only are charter schools judged on the strong academic performance of their students, but they are also evaluated based on the explicit standards specified in their charters.

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

First and foremost, charter schools are independent, or deregulated, schools. Practically speaking, what does this mean? Basically, charter schools have the power to make decisions for themselves about their day-to-day management as well as the instructional methods that best suit the needs of their student body. Deregulation acknowledges that the "one size fits all" approach to education has been particularly ineffectual in meeting the needs of all children.

What does this look like in terms of a school's day-to-day operations? Charter school boards are free to sample from a varied menu of options for running their school. They may hire their own teachers, employees, or school administrators, and they may contract out for a host of services, ranging from food service to maintenance help to transportation. Charters may also choose to meet some of these needs by purchasing services from the school district in which they are located. Ultimately, charter schools are free to leverage their resources and needs in the community at large, allowing them to be creative in meeting their financial bottom line. For example, the Sallie B. Howard School in Wilson rents out rooms to churches, tutoring organizations, and Hispanic dance groups to earn money to offset costs for special events like teachers' dinners. In addition, this resourceful charter school

has formed a partnership with "TechKnowledge@," a local technology business, to support all of their technological needs. Sallie B. Howard School also gives back to the community, by providing English as a Second Language (ESL) classes on the weekends for interested community members as well as parents – a useful service considering one-third of the student population is Hispanic.

Some charter schools elect to delegate their day-to-day operational decisions to an educational management organization (EMO). Such companies, whether nonprofit or for-profit, contract with charter schools to oversee the daily functions of the school – another example of business intersecting with education. For example, National Heritage Academies, a for-profit educational management company started in 1995, runs five charter schools in North Carolina, with 34 other schools operating in Indiana, Michigan, New York, and Ohio. KIPP, or the "Knowledge is Power Program," is another example of an organization that helps educators start and operate public schools. KIPP is a national, nonprofit company that trains school leaders in the organizational and instructional mechanics of running a public school. KIPP supports one charter school in North Carolina: Gaston College Preparatory, the sixth-highest performing school in the state. Overall, contracting with educational management organizations is becoming an increasingly popular way for charters to address their operational needs.

The benefits of freedom are visible in charter school classrooms across the state, as instructors have the flexibility to teach in ways that suit their students. For example, the Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy in Rutherford County uses the classical model of education to teach based on children's developmental stages. Teachers rely on dialectic, logic and rhetoric, along with instruction in Latin and Greek vocabulary in their educational approach. The school values the

study of Latin in providing a strong foundation for learning English and other languages. While many North Carolina charter schools pursue the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, teachers are not constrained by an instructional mandate. This flexibility can be especially beneficial when teachers are working with targeted groups of students, like special needs or gifted children.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

State law requires that charter schools design their programs to meet student performance standards specified by both the State Board of Education and the individual school's charter. All charter schools in North Carolina participate in the ABCs Accountability Model, North Carolina's school improvement program in place since 1995. The ABCs measure both student performance and growth, through End of Grade exams (in grades 3 through 8), and End of Course tests (in grades 9 through 12). Since the advent of "No Child Left Behind," the federal education law, the ABCs have also begun to include a measure called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) which looks at whether schools are meeting performance targets for subgroups within the school. If a school misses one of its targets, it does not meet AYP. In 2002-2003, a higher percentage of North Carolina charter schools met their AYP than did their non-charter counterparts.¹⁰ While it is true that students generally tend to come into charter schools at a lower achievement level than their peers in other public schools, charter pupils are gaining ground at a faster rate than other non-charter students.¹¹ In fact, four out of the five top-performing schools on the State Reading exam in 2000-2001 were charter schools: Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy, Raleigh Charter High School, the Woods Charter School, and Quest Academy.¹²

Of course, charter schools have another significant level of accountability – their required adherence to the goals of their charter. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are evaluated not only on their academic performance, but also on their ability to conform to the mission and goals expressed in their

charter. And if they fail to do so, they face the ultimate accountability outcome: closure.

MORE FREEDOM...MORE FLEXIBLE STANDARDS?

While most people agree that strong academic standards provide necessary parameters for charter schools, others might argue that state standards have become too intrusive. Why is this a concern? In the long run, charter schools may be prevented from doing the very thing they set out to do: innovate. Indeed, this issue is at the crux of one of the problems that charter schools face: adherence to state testing requirements makes it more difficult for them to experiment with different teaching methods and curricula. Since children attending charter schools must master content reflected on ABCs testing models, there is less opportunity for flexibility in the day-to-day activities of the classroom.

One possible resolution to this problem would be for charter schools to have greater leeway in their use of assessments. Schools might be allowed to choose among nationally-normed achievement tests – like the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, the Stanford 9, or the TerraNova Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills – to evaluate student performance. Not only are these tests useful measures for tracking student achievement, but they also provide a benchmark for comparing North Carolina students to their peers nationally – an outcome not achieved through the ABCs.

In the final analysis, the success of charter schools is proof positive that the concept of freedom in education works. And high standards ensure that charter schools teach the basics and teach them well. Ultimately, unlike traditional public schools, charters operate under a system that is reflective of the world we inhabit and the functioning of our marketplace – a system characterized by freedom and accountability. Yes, freedom brings new challenges, but inspiration and creativity are bound to follow. Consider the words of Thomas Jefferson: "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it."

THE HALIWA-SAPONI TRIBAL SCHOOL: STANDING TALL

The Haliwa-Saponi tribe and the school bearing its name have a fascinating and intertwined history. Over 300 years ago, the descendants of the Saponi, Tuscarora, and Nansemond tribes merged, forming the third-largest tribe in North Carolina. The name, "Haliwa," is drawn from the beginning letters of Halifax and Warren Counties, where most of the tribal members live. The Saponi name was added in 1979 to reflect the mostly Saponi blood of the tribal members. In 1953, the late Chief W.R. Richardson reorganized the tribe and under his leadership, the tribe gained recognition from the state of North Carolina.

The original Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School opened as a private school in 1957 with 206 students. After operating for 12 years, the school closed in 1969. In 2000, the charter school movement enabled the school to reopen. Currently, this charter school, labeled a "School of Progress" by the State Department of Public Instruction, serves students in grades K-7. For Dr. Ogletree Richardson, the school principal and a graduate of the original school, the reopening was the fulfillment of a dream. She says, "I always had in the back of my mind that the bell would one day ring again at the school."

Dr. Richardson's dream was made possible by the efforts of both parents and tribal members in preparing the facility. When the school opened, tribal members, parents, and students worked tirelessly to care for the grounds and the school; tribal members also helped with the renovation of buildings on the site, resulting in grounds and a school that are now in immaculate condition. Parents provide ongoing, critical support as well. Last year, the Haliwa parents' fundraiser brought in \$10,000 for the school, an amazing amount for a school in a rural area where most of the students qualify for a free or reduced lunch.

All of the students at the Tribal School recognize the value of a good education and develop a zeal for learning at a very early age. "It's a place to get an education, so you can make it in life and not struggle. So you can be successful in your life," says Cody, a fifth-grader. Without exception, all of the students appreciate the differences between their school and a traditional public school. According to Kristen, another Tribal School student, "No other school is like this one. This school teaches me more than all of the other schools that I attended."

Teachers join students in their loyalty to and appreciation for the Tribal School. When asked about teacher turnover, Dr. Richardson proudly indicates that she has 100 percent retention of her teaching staff. The students believe their teachers are fair and can depend on them to help when they don't understand the work. Because of the school's small size (126 students last year and 150 next year), teachers are able to provide the individual attention that students often need to understand a difficult concept. In addition, teachers present the curriculum in a manner that students perceive as fun, and that affirms their cultural heritage.

How is this cultural emphasis woven into curriculum? First, visitors are welcomed into a classroom with a traditional Native American greeting. In addition, the study of Native American fancy shirts includes math, art, and social studies. To fulfill the math element, students must accurately reproduce the symmetry of the design on each shirt. The replicas of each shirt must have the exact color combination reflected on the original shirts. For the social studies portion, pupils study the tribe the shirt represents; as a result, second grade students can look at a fancy shirt and tell the name, geographical location, and history of the tribe. Students' school activities also incorporate their tribal background. At the end of April, children participate in an annual Pow-Wow with dance and drumming contests, and 2,000 students descend on the school adorned in native regalia.



The success of the school is due, in large measure, to an effective and well-respected leader. But while Principal Richardson is clearly seen as the authority figure, her students obviously love her and speak of her fairness. Says one student, "I like Mrs. Dr. Ogletree. She is nice to us and settle (sic) things right from wrong. She gets things settled in one minute." When asked about discipline problems, Dr. Richardson proudly says that there are little to none. Only one student has been asked to leave. But to one student, the principal and school are extra special. "My grandma is the principal," says Joseph, Richardson's grandson.

Overall, the Tribal School is instilling confidence and cultural pride in its students. The pupils are proud of the fact that they are part of a school attended by their parents and grandparents. "This school means a lot to me because my grandfather went to this school when he was a little boy," says Garrett, a fourth-grader. Another student has pictures from years ago of her mother in a classroom at the school. But it may be Jeremy's words that best express the uniqueness of the Tribal School and the sense of belonging and pride it instills in the students who attend. "The Haliwa-Saponi Tribal School means to me a place for people of my tribe to stand tall," he says.

Chapter 3:

Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS SCHOOL CHOICE?

While many Americans are familiar with the term "school choice," most would have difficulty explaining the numerous ways it is implemented nationwide. In its most basic interpretation, the term "choice" means that parents, not school systems, decide where children go to school. It's that simple. Rather than using home residence as the determining factor in school assignment, choice allows parents to make the decision themselves.

School choice provides the greatest benefit to economically disadvantaged students. In practice, more affluent families already exercise choice. If parents with means are unhappy with their assigned public school, they may choose to send their child to a private school, or they may decide to relocate to a school district with higher-performing schools. Underprivileged students, on the other hand, are usually restricted to their assigned public school. True choice allows *their* parents to have the opportunity to make school selections based on the merits of a school rather than by default.

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Here are some of the different ways choice is exercised:

- ◆ **Public school choice:** A number of states permit parents to choose a school for their child within the public school system. Some states offer this option throughout the state, while others only offer choice in selected districts. In North Carolina, a small number of counties have an open enrollment policy, which allows parents to specify their public school preferences, provided they are within the borders of the residential school district.
- ◆ **Publicly funded tuition scholarships:** Some cities or states offer parents greater options by providing publicly-funded tuition scholarships for students, usually because they are attending a failing school, or because they qualify based on income criteria. These scholarships can then be redeemed at private or public schools.
- ◆ **Privately funded tuition scholarships:** These programs are funded by private organizations and provide tuition assistance for underprivileged children. An example of this kind of program in North Carolina is the Children's Scholarship Fund – Charlotte, a privately funded scholarship program providing tuition assistance to lower-income students in the Charlotte area. Scholarships may be redeemed at public, private, or religious schools of choice. This program currently provides scholarships to more than 400 students using 60 different providers.
- ◆ **Tax credits or tax deductions:** Depending on where they live, parents may be eligible to claim tax credits or tax deductions on their state income taxes for specified education expenses.
- ◆ **Homeschooling:** A growing number of parents exercise choice by educating their children at home. Estimates indicate that around two million children are taught at home nationally, and over 50,000 students are homeschooled in North Carolina.¹³
- ◆ **Charter schools:** Charter schools are deregulated public schools with open enrollment. Charter schools are by far the most comprehensive example of public school choice in North Carolina, yet they still comprise only a fraction of the total number of public schools.
- ◆ **Magnet schools and programs:** Magnets offer specialized programs concentrating on certain subjects like science and technology, arts and humanities, or classical studies, among others. Magnet programs operate either within a public school or they may include the entire school.

DO CHARTER SCHOOLS TAKE MONEY AWAY FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Charter schools *are* public schools. They do not siphon money away from the public education system; rather, they are another destination for that money *within* the public school system. In fact, charter schools receive the same state and federal funding as traditional public schools. Funding per pupil follows each student to the school he or she attends, whether it is a charter or traditional public school. In most states, including North Carolina, charter schools do not receive any capital funding to defray the costs of facilities. Nationally, less than one-fifth of all charter schools are recipients of capital budget funds to offset costs of purchasing or renovating a facility.¹⁴

HOW DO CHARTERS AFFECT THE PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM?

Early concerns about the choice movement and charter schools were that these programs would pull the best students out of the public school system, a term called "cream-skimming." Critics feared that the students left behind would suffer. These concerns have proven to be unfounded. Charter schools have interjected competition into public education, compelling other public schools to improve. Put simply, competition begets productivity.

A recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research of the effect of charter schools on other public schools in North Carolina supports the notion that competition improves the performance of public schools. This study noted important gains in achievement in North Carolina's traditional public schools due specifically to the introduction and growth of the charter school movement. In fact, researchers found that charter school competition in North Carolina increased traditional school performance by about one percent – more than half of the average achievement gain in 1999-2000.¹⁵

Harvard economist Caroline M. Hoxby has also found competition to be a galvanizing force for public schools. Hoxby examined the impact of charter schools

on public school systems in Michigan and Arizona (which enacted charter school laws in 1994), along with a tuition scholarship program in Milwaukee. She found that competition from charter schools in Michigan and Arizona resulted in an improvement in math and reading scores for *traditional public schools* in both states.¹⁶ This increased achievement for public schools occurred above and beyond any achievement trends noted before these schools were subject to competition from charters; the increase in achievement was also above and beyond any improvements enjoyed by public schools not facing competition from charters.¹⁷ Thus, rather than decimating public schools, charter schools and educational choice in these areas fueled competition – the "proverbial rising tide that lifts all boats."¹⁸

Yet, competition is not the only benefit derived from a more diverse school system. Charter schools also serve as models of innovation by forging ahead with new ways of educating children. More and more, public school officials are adopting some of these practices as well, to the benefit of public school students. Witness the flexibility of the Asheville City School officials, who were willing to enter into a partnership with KIPP, the Knowledge is Power Program, to form the KIPP Asheville Youth Academy, a non-charter public school. This innovative partnership began two years ago in response to community concerns that the public education system was broken. The KIPP Asheville Youth Academy bases its methods on the concept "there are no shortcuts" when it comes to success, offering more time in class to learn through an extended day program and a longer school year.

In sum, charter schools are affecting public schools, but not in the harmful ways once feared. Rather, competition and innovation from charter schools are propelling other public schools toward greater achievement and success. As U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige has said, "Opponents predicted charters would terminate public schools as we know them. They were wrong. Charters made the public schools stronger because they had to respond to the competition."¹⁹

Chapter 4:

A Parent-Teacher Partnership

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

The importance of parents as a child's first teachers cannot be overstated. While many parents believe their influence as educators diminishes with their child's entrance into the school system, the truth is, the significance of their role continues well into the school years. Indeed, the impact of parental involvement on student achievement is well-documented. Children whose parents are invested in their education experience greater academic success and achievement than pupils whose parents are uninvolved. Involved parents not only benefit their own children in terms of academic outcomes, but their input lifts the school as a whole. Parental assistance is vital to a school's success, whether it involves school governance, mulching the school grounds, or serving as bus or hall monitors.

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This ripple effect from parent to child to school is particularly beneficial for charter schools, as they enjoy greater parental involvement than traditional public schools. This higher level of parent participation may occur in part because parents are often involved in the creation of charter schools. In fact, in a study of more than 35 charter schools (located throughout seven states), the Hudson Institute found that more than one-third of these schools had been founded by parent groups, either by themselves or in alliance with educators.²⁰ In addition, the role a parent is required to play in actively choosing such a school may be a harbinger of an increased commitment. Either way, the school profits. A recent Manhattan Institute survey assessing the opinions of 300 New York parents with children enrolled in charter schools found that 58 percent of parents met with their child's teacher four or more times per year. In addition, a majority of parents indicated that the teacher had contacted them to discuss their child's performance four or more times throughout the school year.²¹ The Hudson Institute report found that while few of the schools they evaluated had formal

work requirements for parents, most schools benefited from "hundreds" of hours contributed each week by parent volunteers.²² National trends indicate that parental involvement is related to household income and parents' level of education.²³ This makes the level of parental support enjoyed by charter schools that much more impressive, since many charter school students hail from economically disadvantaged homes.

While parental involvement is a hallmark of charter schools, parental satisfaction is also one of the primary selling points of these unconventional schools. In fact, seven out of 10 American charter schools have a wait list, indicating that charter schools benefit from both positive parent appraisals and word-of-mouth marketing.²⁴ The ability to choose a school also resonates with parents and influences their level of satisfaction. A recent U.S. Department of Education report found that "parents whose children attended either public, chosen schools or private schools were more likely to say they were very satisfied with their children's schools, teachers, academic standards, and order and discipline than were parents whose children attended public, assigned schools."²⁵ Other surveys bear out the fact that parents tend to greatly prefer their child's charter school to their previous public school. The Manhattan Institute survey found that parents in charter schools were twice as likely to give their child's charter school a grade of "A" overall than the school that their child had previously attended.²⁶ North Carolina parents overwhelmingly view their child's charter school as being successful in adhering to its mission. In the *North Carolina Charter School Parent/Guardian Survey 2001*, 90 percent of parents indicated that the charter school their child attended was following its mission "well" or "very well."²⁷ Thus, charter schools yield a two-pronged benefit for parents: they provide a viable alternative to assigned public schools and they create and foster a greater opportunity for parental involvement.

CHARTER SCHOOL TEACHERS

As a group, charter school teachers are dedicated professionals who are strongly motivated by their academic freedom and ability to reach children without the impediments of bureaucratic red tape. Some teachers use their frustration with traditional public schools as a galvanizing force to found a charter school. The City on a Hill charter school in Boston, Massachusetts was founded by two public school teachers who had reached a point of frustration with public education and wanted to try something new and different.²⁸ St. Paul's City Academy, the country's first charter school, is another example of a charter school initiated by teachers. The founders of this school were motivated to start a school that would reach students who were falling through the cracks in traditional public schools, by either dropping out or being pushed out of school.²⁹ Other teachers may not elect to start a charter school, but are nevertheless won over by the spirit and excitement they observe in these schools. For Beth Napleton, a teacher from Manhattan, a visit to KIPP: Gaston College Preparatory changed her life and career. "When I visited GCP, the students' enthusiasm was infectious. I couldn't stop thinking about the kids and their perseverance despite the obstacles they faced," she says. Within 12 weeks from her initial visit, Ms. Napleton packed her bags to move from New York to North Carolina to teach at GCP. She says, "I haven't looked back since."

It is not surprising, then, that personal fulfillment and a sense of empowerment characterize a charter school teacher's career. In fact, according to a Hudson Institute report, teachers chose to teach at charter schools in part because they had more control over decisions and resources and had greater freedom and flexibility. These teachers also valued the familial atmosphere of their smaller schools as well as the dedicated staff and enhanced accountability.³⁰ A survey conducted by the Pioneer Institute for Public Policy Research assessing attitudes of charter school teachers in Massachusetts found that a school's mission or

philosophy was the top reason teachers gave to explain their choice to teach at a charter school. Teachers working at charter schools also reported greater ease in collaborating with other teachers and in participating in decision-making than at their previous schools.³¹

How qualified is the typical charter school teacher? Overall, the average number of years of teaching experience for a North Carolina charter school teacher is 8.5 years.³² Nationally, charter school teachers are more likely to be graduates of more selective colleges than are their traditional public school colleagues.³³ While certification requirements vary widely across the country, North Carolina requires that 75 percent of teachers in charter schools serving grades K-5, and 50 percent of teachers in charter schools serving grades 6-12, hold teaching licenses. However, states like Arizona and Florida do not require certification at all.

In terms of teacher compensation, salaries nationwide are comparable to those of teachers at traditional public schools, although some charter school teachers earn slightly less than their public school colleagues. While most traditional public school teachers are hired by the school district under collective bargaining rules, most charter school teachers are hired by their schools on a contract basis. This lack of union interference is a bonus for schools, and the increased flexibility they enjoy with regard to certification does not result in a lack of teacher quality. A report by the Pacific Research Institute notes, "Contrary to what many charge, charter schools employ teachers of high quality, whether 'certified' or not. Those teachers are, on the whole, pleased with their experience in charter schools, where the labor strife so typical of government education is notably absent."³⁴ Thus, while charter schools may not always offer the highest pay, their ability to provide freedom, personal satisfaction, and parental involvement has proven to be a powerful lure for teachers seeking a greater influence and impact on public education.

THOMAS JEFFERSON CLASSICAL ACADEMY: EQUIPPING STUDENTS WITH THE TOOLS TO LEARN

When we teach children subjects like English or World History, are we really teaching them how to learn? Such is the question posed by proponents of a classical method of learning. Interest in the classical method, practiced since medieval times, was rekindled by English writer Dorothy Sayers' 1947 essay, "The Lost Tools of Learning." In her essay, Sayers questioned whether contemporary instructional techniques really worked, or whether they instead resulted in pupils who learned "everything except the art of learning." As a result, Sayers advocated a return to centuries-old instructional practices, employing the tools of grammar, logic and rhetoric, as developmentally appropriate.

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This classical model of instruction serves as the foundation for the curriculum taught at Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy, a public charter school in Rutherford County serving grades 6-12. Not only does this progressive school offer students an intellectually rigorous curriculum, but it also provides a valuable alternative for parents and children living in the region who are unhappy with their assigned public school. In fact, TJCA is the only non-sectarian school of choice operating within a one-hour drive from communities in Rutherford, Cleveland, and Polk counties.

Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy opened in 1999 with 147 students in a refurbished 75-year old public school building. During its first year of operation, the school faced many challenges, largely due to difficulties with finances and facilities. The main building required a new furnace and significant renovations, and the connecting high school building contained asbestos that had to be removed. Yet, in spite of early obstacles, attendance at the school has grown exponentially. The student body has more than doubled from its initial size – to 350 students – and next year, enrollment is expected to grow to 400 students.

There is a waiting list of pupils who would like to attend but cannot because of limited space – proof positive of a successful school.

Students at TJCA hail from diverse backgrounds, educationally as well as economically. While some students attending TJCA are strong academic achievers, others arrive with a history of academic failure at other schools. Parents of academic underachievers choose TJCA, hoping the rigorous and stimulating curriculum will spark an academic transformation in their child. In addition, almost 40 percent of TJCA families live below the poverty threshold. This may result, in part, from economic hardship in the community at large. Over the past five years, textile plants have been closing, and the unemployment rate in Rutherford County is now almost 12 percent – one of the highest in the state.

Yet, these early growing pains have not diminished the quality of education at TJCA. Results on a variety of assessments bear out the fact that students are making impressive gains. The school boasts the eighth highest SAT scores in the state: In 2003, the average SAT score for TJCA was 1139, over 100 points higher than both the national average and the state average. In addition, this past year, six seventh-graders at TJCA were accepted into the Duke University Talent Identification (TIP) Program.

The school's success can be attributed to strong administrative leadership combined with the ability to exercise flexibility in instruction and finances (due to TJCA's status as a charter school). Headmaster Joe Maimone brings proven business management skills to the school's day-to-day operational decisions, with an MBA from the University of Chicago and experience as the former Managing Director of Bankers Trust Company in New York. In addition to founding the school with his wife, Georgia, Mr. Maimone has served as Headmaster since the school's inception. Mr. Maimone is an advocate of the instructional flexibility that allows teachers to spend less time

preparing for tests and more time teaching a rigorous and intensive classical curriculum (with students *still* scoring well on state tests). And the school utilizes the financial freedom allowed charter schools, as approximately 85 percent of the budget is set aside for teachers and classroom materials.



The commitment and ingenuity of teachers like Sally Harbin also contribute to this school's prosperity. As one of five or six teachers when TJCA opened its doors, Ms. Harbin started out teaching all of the history, English, and literature courses offered at the school. Because of TJCA's designation as a charter school, Ms. Harbin has been able to combine a classical curriculum with a full range of creative instructional techniques, including experiential learning. While teaching students about Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel as part of a segment on the Renaissance, Ms. Harbin had them lay on the floor beneath their desks. They simultaneously listened to Renaissance music and painted a picture on paper taped to the underside of their desks, essentially, painting upside down as Michelangelo had done when he painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. When studying Leonardo DaVinci's inventions,

students were given a brown paper bag filled with 15 items (ranging from string to toothpicks) and were instructed to invent something. The inventions, created with mundane items, were "pretty awesome," according to Ms. Harbin. Ms. Harbin's capabilities have not gone unnoticed: in 2001, she was named Wal-Mart Teacher of the Year for Rutherford County.

What impact does this commitment to academic excellence have on students, academically as well as personally? According to Kim Hutchins, a graduating twelfth-grade student, "Saying that the decision to enroll at TJCA has changed my life would be the understatement of the decade." Kim came to TJCA in its second year of operation as a painfully shy eighth-grader who felt out of place in her previous public school. Attendance at TJCA renewed her self-confidence and turned around a stalled academic career. How did this happen? Kim says teachers at TJCA devoted whatever time was necessary to ensure that she and other students understood what was being taught. Kim also found uniforms to be a great equalizer among students; she no longer felt awkward because she could not afford the latest fashions, as all were dressed alike. The result? Kim has had an academic career studded with honors and achievements, ranging from TJCA's 2002 Gryphon Award (given to the school's most outstanding student) to election as President of her school's National Honor Society chapter. In addition, she is universally praised by teachers and school administrators describing her lovely demeanor and personality. Kim has been accepted into the Bonner Scholars Program at Berea College on a four-year scholarship, and will be the first member of her family to attend college.

Clearly, TJCA is revolutionizing education for its students by equipping them with the tools to learn. And in the process, TJCA is raising the sights and nurturing the dreams of students like Kim Hutchins, proof that academic freedom and educational opportunity have the power to transform lives.

Chapter 5:

The Law

The charter school movement is becoming a force to be reckoned with, backed by parent-constituents who are dissatisfied with the quality of public education. And legislators are listening. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia have enacted charter school legislation. These laws vary widely from state to state. The variation among laws is noteworthy as the strength of a state's law has a direct bearing on the ability of its charter schools to succeed. Research has shown that states can either stifle or promote charter school growth through the approach they take in crafting legislation. In a recent report on charter school laws, the Center for Education Reform has found that the strength of a law is often a predictor of overall success. In fact, this report demonstrates a direct positive correlation between the strength of a charter school law and the academic achievement of charter school students: the stronger the law, the greater the student achievement.³⁵

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SPECIFICS OF A CHARTER

So what exactly is a charter? A charter is a performance contract between a school and the state. This contract specifies a range of requirements and policies to which the school must adhere, including, but not limited to: school operations, enrollment, duration of a charter, facilities, teacher licensing, transportation, reporting requirements, student discipline, and grounds for termination. Eligible applicants include nonprofit corporations, an individual, or group of people. In practice, this may translate into a group of parents, teachers or educators, or a nonprofit organization or community group. All applications for new charter schools are submitted to the State Board of Education for final approval. Once



approved, charters are granted to the board of directors of the new school. In North Carolina, current legislation specifies that the initial term of a charter is five years. At the end of this term, schools may apply to renew their charter for another five-year term. Renewal is not automatically guaranteed. If certain conditions are not met, the State Board of Education may choose to terminate the charter. Reasons for termination may include financial mismanagement, failure to meet student performance requirements, violations of law, or other violations of standards set forth in the charter. North Carolina currently has a closure rate of 18 percent for charter schools, a relatively high figure compared with states like Pennsylvania and Colorado which both have a closure rate of 3 percent.³⁶ Such a closure rate merits examination, as it may indicate that numerous North Carolina charter schools are not receiving the resources they need to be successful.

THE EFFECT OF CAPS ON EXPANSION

What is a cap and what role does it play in influencing the number of charter schools? A cap is a statutory limit on the total number of charter schools permitted in a state or school district, or on the total number of students served by charter schools. Currently, North Carolina has a legislative cap of 100 charter schools statewide. In addition, North Carolina legislation specifies that the State Board of Education may authorize a maximum of five charter schools per district per year. To date, North Carolina has not approved legislation to raise the cap or do away with it altogether.

Nationally, arguments abound as to whether eliminating caps is a good idea. Charter school opponents and agnostics support limiting the number of charter schools because they would like to see a proven track record of success. While this approach seems sensible, it has proven problematic as it inhibits growth and deters potential applicants once a cap has been realized. In fact, states with the most vital and dynamic charter school programs have been given great flexibility and few constraints as to the number of schools. For example, Arizona has one of the strongest charter school movements in the country; the Center for Education Reform ranks Arizona as the top state in the nation in terms of the strength of its law.³⁷ Arizona grants schools a great deal of freedom by permitting unlimited charter schools; additionally, the term of an initial charter is 15 years, providing a significant span of time for schools to demonstrate success before they must face renewal. How does the charter school movement respond to this freedom? Arizona is home to 491 charter schools, roughly five times the number in North Carolina. While North Carolina has fairly strong laws – the Center for Education Reform rates it the twelfth-strongest in the nation – it clearly lags behind innovative states like Arizona in terms of encouraging strong charter school activity. Overall, laws which provide autonomy and flexibility produce the most schools. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that Arizona, California and Michigan are home

to over 1,200 schools – more than one-third of the nation's almost 3,000 charter schools.

Removing the cap in North Carolina would encourage more activity and would certainly increase the number of applicants for charter schools. Nationally, some states have chosen to raise their caps, while others, like Minnesota, have done away with caps altogether. Eleven states have no legislative cap at all and allow unlimited charter schools. They are: Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Other states permit unlimited charter schools *if* they are sponsored by local school boards. States with this stipulation include Indiana, New Hampshire, Utah, and Michigan (Michigan's policy is slightly broader, allowing sponsorship by local school boards, intermediate school boards, or community colleges).³⁸ Oklahoma also permits unlimited charter schools based on certain provisions for student population, while Missouri allows unlimited charter schools in St. Louis and Kansas City.³⁹

Overall, the landscape of charter school legislation is highly variable, changing from year to year. The main constant seems to be that states that invest heavily in these schools and provide them with maximum flexibility and regulatory leeway enjoy the best results. In other words, state legislators who believe in charter schools and are willing to take risks with them are rewarded with a robust charter school movement and strong academic achievement. As John F. Kennedy has said, "There are risks and costs to a program of action. But they are far less than the long-range risks and costs of comfortable inaction."

In sum, research indicates that legislation has a powerful impact on the direction and success of the charter school movement in each state. Certainly, drafting and passing well-founded, strong legislation involves an element of risk, but the reward – a more vital and innovative public school system – is well worth the effort.

THE JOHN H. BAKER CHARTER SCHOOL: A LIFELINE FOR TROUBLED KIDS

Although the John H. Baker Charter School is often referred to as the "jail school," this description is incomplete. In addition to providing a "jail school," the Baker school also includes two off-site campuses, one in Garner and another at Haven House in Raleigh. The jail location allows incarcerated students to keep up with their education, earn a GED, or learn a trade through a partnership with Wake Technical Community College. The two off-site campuses serve students who have received long-term suspensions or cannot attend Wake County schools. One student who was homeless and living out of his car was trying to work at a full-time job and attend a Wake County High School. Haven House helped him find a home, while the Baker School allowed him to finish his education. His current plans include study at North Carolina State University in December.

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Clearly, the task of providing a suitable education for Baker students is a monumental one. The school provides instruction to 50-55 students who are at opposite ends of the spectrum academically. Some pupils are gifted AP students while others have a variety of learning difficulties. One 17-year-old ninth-grader with a three-year-old child came to the Baker school unable to read. Amazingly, in spite of her illiteracy, she had been promoted to the ninth grade. After one year at Baker, she now reads at the third-grade level and can read to her child.

While educating at-risk kids has its challenges, the Baker school is well-equipped through Principal Marti Wilson's strong but compassionate leadership. In the three schools Ms. Wilson oversees, almost every student is identified as a troubled youth. According to Principal Wilson, her students are "throwaway kids." For a variety of reasons, parents, society, or the school system have abandoned them, often through no fault of their own. And this abandonment is complicated by the

fact that many students have current or prior problems with drug and alcohol abuse. The Baker School intervenes at a critical juncture and offers these kids a stepping stone so that they do not become "throwaway adults."

How does the Baker school become the bridge from delinquency to success? Students are treated with both firmness and guidance; however, any discipline is administered with the knowledge that these students are quite vulnerable. Baker uses a checklist system (three checks and you must leave for the day) as a means of discipline, but as Principal Wilson points out, "We cannot be too rigid because these students already see themselves as failures and we do not want to give them another reason for failure." School administrators believe that while students may have behavior and anger management problems, the goal is to change their behavior, not kick them out of school. Among students, the checklist system is largely supported, if not enjoyed. When the students are questioned about the school, some complain about the checklist, but none suggest that the system be eliminated.

In addition to providing firm discipline, school administrators also demand active participation from pupils. Students wishing to attend the Baker School must write an essay stating their educational goals and explaining why they want to attend the school. They must also indicate what they feel they can contribute. Finally, students must take part in a personal interview with the principal. As Wilson affirms, just showing up is critical for educational progress. She says, "Students must attend regularly. If they are not here, they cannot pass."

Baker students may find regular attendance more difficult than the average student. This is because many of them live complicated lives outside of school. Most of the boys are fathers; many of the female students are also parents themselves, pregnant, or on the verge of homelessness. These life issues are formidable challenges to address, but many of the Baker students tackle them and go on to experience educational success. Consider the stories of three young women, two with children, who

had each attended the Baker School and then an alternative school. One girl was a runaway at 15, escaping an alcoholic parent and an abusive situation. A second girl was in seven "out of home" placements because of a crack-addicted mother. If this young woman had not been assigned a Guardian Ad Litem who knew about the Baker school, she would now be homeless. The third girl had received a long-term suspension because of an anger management problem. The first two girls have gone on to finish high school and are now attending community college. The third just finished high school and will enter college in the fall. Clearly, each of these young women has overcome incredible odds to reach this point in her life. All of the girls agree that they would not be on the path to achievement without the intervention of the Baker School.

Parents of Baker School students voice strong support for the critical role the school has played in their children's lives. Spend time with them and you'll find the prevailing view that the school was a life-saving option for their children. In fact, four of the five parents who were interviewed for this article don't place blame with the Wake County Public School System for their children's problems. Only one criticized the school system's reason for suspending their child from school. But the parents did express regret and concern that the school system didn't fully inform them of the educational options for their at-risk children. According to the parents, none of the school administrators told them about Baker. All said they learned of the school by accident.

Overall, the John H. Baker School is meeting a need in Wake County that is unparalleled. The school is providing at-risk students with the education and training they need to turn from delinquency and become responsible adults. While a typical Baker classroom may be heavy with attitude, school administrators understand that these students are really just kids in need of attention and a lifeline. The Baker Charter School is providing that lifeline.



Chapter 6:

Charting a Course for the Future

Since the first North Carolina charter schools opened their doors in 1997, educators, policy-makers, and parents have watched closely to see how these schools would fare. The answer, as evidenced in this report, is that charter schools are succeeding and are reshaping public education as we know it. The charter school movement in North Carolina is now almost a decade strong, providing valuable lessons about what works and what does not. As with any new enterprise, charter schools have experienced some growing pains along the way, and educators are learning from these challenges.

EXAMINING THE PAST

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What lessons can be gleaned from the experience of North Carolina's charter schools? First, charter schools need autonomy on all levels – regulatory, instructional, and financial – to be successful. Obviously, these freedoms must have some parameters placed on them in order to protect the interests of students, parents and educators. However, at times, some of these restrictions have become excessive and have made it difficult for charter schools to fulfill their mission.

One problem lies in the area of accountability and testing. Since North Carolina charter schools are subject to compliance with the ABCs Accountability Model and are not given a realistic opportunity to come up with a suitable substitute, schools may be in the position of administering a test that is not reflective of content mastered in their classrooms. If a charter school has elected to follow the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, the curriculum assessed by the ABCs, then there is no mismatch between what is taught and what is measured. However, for charter schools that deviate significantly from the state curriculum, the accuracy of the ABCs as a valid assessment tool is highly questionable. While these schools seek to teach curricula consistent with universally accepted *national* norms – such as the Iowa Tests, the SAT, or ACT exams – schools nevertheless end up having to test students on their knowledge of North Carolina's curriculum. According to one principal of a North Carolina charter school, the high school Algebra II End of Course (EOC) exam has changed each year, to the point that the algebra textbooks his school currently uses are becoming more and more ineffective at preparing students for the state test. Are his students



learning Algebra II? The answer is an emphatic "yes." However, the test that they are required to take (EOC) does not examine retention of material covered *in their classroom*. The question is clear: Do these schools really enjoy full instructional freedom if their success or failure is measured by student performance on a *state* test measuring *state* curriculum?

A second obstacle that many charter schools encounter has been in the area of finances. Many charter schools struggle financially to pay their bills, particularly in the start-up phase, as they do not receive capital funding for facilities. Yet a number of these schools have addressed their funding shortfall with creativity, ingenuity, and no small amount of persistence. Consider Union Academy in Monroe, whose school community, parents, students, and staff worked together to upgrade an empty warehouse into usable classrooms. They built partitions, cleaned bathrooms, and rebuilt surplus desks. One student's grandparents donated property, which has since become the site of a development project involving the whole school. On Fridays, this school has a "Dress Down to Build Up" day, where students make a \$1 donation for the privilege of trading their customary school uniform for casual dress. Arapahoe Charter School in Arapahoe, is yet another school community able to push beyond financial impediments to find a way to meet its start-up needs. Amazingly, 85 community members worked together to clear a forest that occupied the site where the school was to be built.

SUCCESS FOR THE FUTURE

In the final analysis, this report, along with the school experiences of thousands of North Carolina students, demonstrates the transformational power of educational excellence provided by charter schools. Yet more can be done to maximize the future success of the charter school movement. The current legislative cap of 100 charters limits the number of schools that may operate each year. This cap significantly impedes the expansion of education options for families across

North Carolina. Eliminating this cap would remove onerous restrictions and would allow parents, teachers, or members of the community around the state to form more schools. Second, charter schools should be granted greater flexibility in meeting accountability provisions. Legitimate alternatives to the ABCs Accountability Model, such as nationally normed tests, ought to be a viable option for fulfilling accountability requirements. Third, charter schools ought to be granted greater flexibility in their hiring of teachers – schools should be permitted to hire more uncertified teachers, provided they are qualified applicants. This might mean relaxing current restrictions, or doing away with certification requirements altogether. If charter schools truly have the freedom to hire and fire, then they are fully capable of trimming their staffs of ineffective teachers. Finally, if deregulation is a serious goal, charter schools should not be burdened with excessive and onerous reporting requirements under the guise of compliance with federal education legislation (No Child Left Behind), particularly since many of these schools are small and operate with a limited administrative staff.

As with any new enterprise, charter schools have experienced both the joys of success and the agony of failure. But this movement points the way to revolutionizing public education. Free to design curricula and educational experiences that meet the individual needs of its students, charter schools are laboratories for innovation. Unfettered by the regulatory strictures that hinder traditional public schools, charter schools have the freedom to pursue excellence. Such freedom is bound to reap long-lasting and impressive benefits for the next generation. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Everything that is really great and inspiring is created by the individual who can labor in freedom." As the next chapter in the history of these pioneering schools is written, educators, parents, and students must unite to protect and advance the freedom to innovate, to experiment, and to progress in public education. There is work yet to do.

Resource List

STATE/REGIONAL CONTACTS

North Carolina Office of Charter Schools
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction
 301 N. Wilmington Street
 Raleigh, NC 27601
 919.807.3300
www.ncpublicschools.org/charter_schools/

North Carolina Charter School Advisory Board
www.ncpublicschools.org/charter_schools/advisory.html

North Carolina State Board of Education
 6302 Mail Service Center
 Raleigh, NC 27699-6302
 919.807.3304
 Fax: 919.807.3198
www.ncpublicschools.org/state_board/

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North Carolina Education Alliance
 200 West Morgan Street, Suite 206
 Raleigh, NC 27601
 704.231.9767
 Fax: 919.821.5117
www.nceducationalliance.org

North Carolina League of Charter Schools
 200 Stags Trail
 Chapel Hill, NC 27516
 919.967.1029
www.charterleague.org

North Carolina School Choice
 200 Stags Trail
 Chapel Hill, NC 27516
 919.967.1029
www.ncschoolchoice.org

Parents' Network for Better Education
(Parent Consortium--SE)
 877.881.9800
www.theparentsnetwork.org

NATIONAL CONTACTS

U.S. Department of Education
 400 Maryland Avenue, SW
 Washington, DC 20202
 800.872.5327
 Fax: 202.401.0689
www.ed.gov/index.jhtml

U.S. Department of Education Charter School Web-site
www.uscharterschools.org

National Charter School Alliance
 1295 Bandana Boulevard, Suite 165
 St. Paul, MN 55108
 651.644.6115
 Fax: 651.644.0433
www.charterfriends.org

National Charter School Clearinghouse
 5242 West Camelback Road
 Glendale, AZ 85301
 623.463.6814 or 866.954.1414
 Fax: 623.463.6815 or 866.954.1415
www.ncsc.info

National Association of Charter School Authorizers
(NACSA)
 1125 Duke Street
 Alexandria, VA 22314
 703.683.9701
 Fax: 703.683.9703
www.charterauthorizers.org

Center for Education Reform
 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 204
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www.edreform.com

Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation
 One American Square, Suite 1750
 Box 82078
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 317.681.0745
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www.friedmanfoundation.org

Notes

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