

Archived Information

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Preface | iii |
| Acknowledgments | iv |
| I. The Charter School in Perspective | 1 |
| A. The Study’s Research Focus and the Scope of This Report | 1 |
| B. Contents of the First-Year Report | 2 |
| II. The State Role | 3 |
| A. Variations in State Policies | 3 |
| B. Research Questions About the State Role | 8 |
| C. Summary | 9 |
| III. Charter Schools and Their Students. | 11 |
| A. Characteristics of Charter Schools | 11 |
| B. The Students. | 15 |
| C. Summary | 24 |
| IV. Why Charter Schools Are Started and What Barriers They Encounter. | 27 |
| A. Who Originates Charter Schools | 27 |
| B. Why Charter Schools Are Founded | 27 |
| C. What Obstacles and Implementation Problems Do Charter Schools Encounter?. | 34 |
| D. Summary | 40 |
| Notes | 43 |
| Appendix A: Overview of the National Study’s Research Design | 51 |
| Appendix B: State Legislative Overview | 55 |
| Appendix C: Supplemental Exhibits for Chapter III | 63 |
| Appendix D: Supplemental Exhibits for Chapter IV | 71 |
| Notes to Appendices | 74 |

List of Exhibits

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. States with Charter School Legislation, by Year of First Enactment as of June 1996 | 3 |
| 2. Estimated Number of Charter Schools in Operation by Initial Start Year | 4 |
| 3. Comparison of Minnesota and Georgia Charter Laws as of June 1996 | 7 |
| 4. Comparison of Arizona and California Charter Laws as of June 1996 | 8 |
| 5. Charter School Enrollment, 1995-96 | 11 |
| 6. Enrollment in Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Public Schools in Ten Charter School States, 1993-94 | 13 |
| 7. Comparison of Grade Level Distribution for Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Public Schools in Ten Charter States, 1993-94 | 13 |
| 8. School Size and Grade Levels for Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Public Schools in Ten Charter States, 1993-94 | 14 |
| 9. Percentage of Newly Created and Pre-existing Charter Schools, 1995-96 | 15 |
| 10. State by State Comparison of the Percentage of Newly Created and Pre-existing Charter Schools, 1995-96 | 15 |
| 11. Enrollment of Newly Created and Pre-existing Charter Schools, 1995-96 | 16 |
| 12. Charter School Enrollment by Race, 1995-96 | 16 |
| 13. Enrollment by Race for Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Public Schools in the Ten Charter States, 1993-94 | 17 |
| 14. Estimated Concentration of Students by Race in Charter Schools, 1995-96 | 18 |
| 15. Estimated Concentration of Students by Race for Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Public Schools in the Ten Charter States, 1993-94 | 19 |
| 16. Estimated Percentage of Students with Disabilities in Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Public Schools in the Ten Charter States, 1994-95 | 21 |
| 17. Estimated Percentage of LEP Students and Students Eligible for Free and Reduced Lunch in Charter Schools, 1995-96, and All Schools in the Ten Charter States, 1993-94 | 23 |
| 18. State-by-State Comparison of Charter Schools: Reported Eligibility and Receipt of Title I Funding, 1995-96 | 23 |
| 19. Reasons for Founding Charter Schools | 28 |
| 20. Percentage of Reasons That Newly Created and Pre-existing Schools Had for Founding Charter Schools | 29 |
| 21. Barriers to Developing and Implementing Charter Schools | 35 |
| 22. Barriers for Newly Created versus Pre-existing Charter Schools | 36 |
| 23. Mean Difficulty of Barriers for Newly Created versus Pre-existing Schools | 36 |
| 24. Possible Dimensions of Difficulties | 37 |
| 25. Percentage of Charter Schools Citing at Least One Type of Barrier Within a Cluster | 37 |
| 26. Barriers to Implementing Charter Schools, by State | 39 |

Preface

This document is the first-year progress report of the National Study of Charter Schools (the Study), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education as authorized by 1994 amendments to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The Study is a four-year research effort (September 1995–September 1999) to document and analyze the charter school movement. By means of reports circulated on-line and in hard copy, the Study will provide descriptive information about how many and what kind of charter schools become operational and about those factors that facilitate or hinder the charter schools' development and implementation. The Study will also conduct analyses of the impact of charter schools on student achievement and on local and state public education systems.

This first-year report presents only descriptive information about charter schools for the school year 1995–96. It is based on a telephone survey designed to collect data from all 252 charter schools in operation across the nation as of January 1, 1996. The Study completed 89 percent of the phone interviews by June 30, 1996, and summaries of these responses are reported here. The survey instrument and responses (with the exception of any information that could identify the specific responses of any school) will be made accessible on the Study's World Wide Web site.

The report is also based on information collected during site visits to 42 charter schools that had been in operation by the beginning of the 1994–1995 school year. The schools were selected within states and within categories of grade level, school size, and their charter school status as either newly created schools or schools that had converted from a pre-existing school. The field visits, made primarily at the end of the 1995–1996 school year, were conducted to: (1) develop a deeper understanding of why charter schools are started, how they are being implemented, and what barriers they have encountered to their development and implementation; (2) collect preliminary information about the schools' educational programs, organizational structures, governance and finance arrangements, and student assessment and accountability procedures; and (3) check on the accuracy of the telephone surveys. Given the preliminary nature of these data, the report draws on examples from the field to illustrate the variety of charter schools and how they are being implemented.

The National Study of Charter Schools is conducted under contract with RPP International of Emeryville, California, in partnership with the University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement (CAREI) and the Institute for Responsive Education (IRE), a nonprofit research organization in Boston.

This first-year report represents a collaborative effort of various researchers from RPP International and CAREI of the University of Minnesota. Paul Berman and Beryl Nelson of RPP along with Patricia Seppanen of CAREI drafted the actual report. Wayne Jennings associated with CAREI and Eric Premack associated with RPP were major authors of the state legislative analysis. Mary Sinclair of CAREI and Kara Finnegan and Sanjay Santhanam, of RPP provided key support for data analysis. Karen Seashore Lewis of CAREI and Paul Berman of RPP provided oversight and critical review of the drafting process.

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Many others read and provided invaluable feedback on successive drafts of the report. We appreciate the thoughtful comments of the Study's Advisory Board both on framing the issues presented in the report and on its substance. The members of the Advisory Board are José Afonso, Massachusetts Department of Education; Rexford Brown, P.S. 1 Charter School; Joan Buckley, American Federation of Teachers; Lee Cronbach, Professor Emeritus, Stanford University; Gary K. Hart, Institute for Education Reform; Ted Kolderie, Center for Policy Studies; Robert L. Linn, University of Colorado; and Robert McClure, National Education Association. In addition William Lowe Boyd, Department of Education Policy Studies at The Pennsylvania State University and Joe Nathan, Center for School Change, Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota—members of the Advisory Board as of January, 1997—provided insightful and helpful advice and feedback.

A group of peer reviewers selected by the Department of Education provided insightful comments on key points of the report. This group included: Mark Buechler, Indiana Policy Center; Gary Sykes, Michigan State University; and Steve Kaufman, National Center for Education Statistics.

A group of reviewers from the U.S. Department of Education reviewed drafts of the report and provided invaluable suggestions for improvement. This group included: Arthur Cole, Director, School Improvement Programs; John Fiegel, Coordinator, Charter School State Grant Program, OESE; Melissa Oppenheimer, Office of the Undersecretary; Jonathan Schnur, Office of the Secretary; and Stephanie Stulich, Planning and Evaluation Services.

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While appreciating the contributions of all of the reviewers, the authors accept responsibility for the content of the report.