BEYOND THE RHETORIC OF CHARTER SCHOOL REFORM:

A Study of Ten California School Districts

UCLA Charter School Study

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Acknowledgments

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Amy Stuart Wells is the Principal Investigator of the UCLA Charter School Study. Research Associates are Ligia Artiles, Sibyll Carnochan, Camille Wilson Cooper, Cynthia Grutzik, Jennifer Jellison Holme, Alejandra Lopez, Janelle Scott, Julie Slayton, and Ash Vasudeva.

We are greatly indebted to the Annie E. Casey and Ford Foundations for their support of this research project. We would also like to thank the Spencer Foundation for providing fellowship support to five members of our research team during the course of this study. While the support of these organizations was instrumental to our work, the views expressed here are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundations.

Further, we would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board – Richard F. Elmore, Michele Foster, Annette Lareau, Pedro Noguera, and Kenneth Wong – for their extremely thoughtful feedback and encouragement. We also thank Bruce Fuller and Eric Rofes for their helpful input and critique of our work in progress. In addition, we would like to thank several people at UCLA who have made this report possible, including Audrey Gallego, Khue Duong, Raquel S. Hunter, Quiana Whitfield, Allen Choi, Lisbeth Espinoza, and Ricky Lee Allen. Thank you also to the folks at the Widmeyer-Baker Group, especially Edward B. Fiske and Samuel Lubell, for all their hard work on this report.

And most importantly, we want to thank each and every educator, parent, community member, and policy maker whom we interviewed. Without their thoughts and insights, this report would not be possible.

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of findings from one of the first intensive studies of charter school reform in California, the second state to pass charter school legislation and the state with both the second largest number of charter schools and the most students enrolled in these schools. Charter school reform allows groups of parents, educators, and entrepreneurs to create more independent schools, free from many state and local regulations.

The purpose of this two-and-a-half year study was to examine many of the most prominent claims of charter school advocates against the day-to-day experiences of educators, parents, and students in charter schools as well as in nearby public schools.

We conducted case studies of 17 charter schools in 10 school districts across the state. We sampled for diversity at both the district and school level in order to capture the range of experiences within this reform movement.

While charter reform as a public policy tool prescribes no particular school-level practice or singular reform strategy, it is appealing to educators and policy makers due to claims about how charter reform will spur much-needed change throughout the public system.

Claims About Charter School Reform

Claims about charter school reform include:

- **Accountability:** Charter schools, more than other public schools, are more accountable for student outcomes; given the threat of having its charter revoked, a charter school will work harder to meet its stated performance goals.

- **Autonomy and Empowerment:** In exchange for greater accountability, charter schools are granted autonomy from the bureaucratic, rule-based public system; empowered by this flexibility, charter school educators will better serve students and families.

- **Efficiency:** Charter schools are more efficient; freed from bureaucratic demands, charter schools will be able to do more with fewer resources.

- **Choice:** Charter schools provide more choices to more families, particularly those who traditionally have had the fewest choices in the public educational system.

- **Competition:** Charter school reform, by creating a competitive market, will force change in the entire public system.

- **Models of Innovation:** Charter schools are more innovative, creating new models of schooling and serving as laboratories from which other public schools can learn.

The findings that emerged from our investigation of 10 school districts and 17 charter schools across the state shed light on how charter schools' experiences compare to the stated claims of reform advocates. The following are the study's 15 major findings:

Finding #1
Charter schools in California are, in most instances, not yet being held accountable for enhanced academic achievement of their students. They are more likely to be held fiscally accountable.

Finding #2
School boards are ambivalent about their responsibilities to monitor charter schools; many are reluctant to become involved.

Finding #3
Charter schools have multiple constituencies to whom they see themselves as accountable.

Finding #4
Charter schools vary widely in the amount of operating autonomy they need or want and in the demands they make on districts.

Finding #5
The amount of public funding that charter schools receive for operating expenses ranges widely from one district to the next and even within the same district.

Finding #6
Private resources are usually necessary for the survival of charter schools.

Finding #7
Charter schools vary widely in their ability to generate private sources of revenue.

Finding #8
Charter schools often depend heavily on strong, well-connected leaders.

Finding #9
Charter schools exercise considerable control over the type of students they serve. Thus, in some cases charter schools have more choice than do parents.

Finding #10
The requirement that charter schools reflect the racial/ethnic makeup of their districts has not been enforced. Other demographic differences between charter schools and nearby public schools exist and vary by local context.

Finding #11
Teachers in charter schools value their freedom, relatively small classes, and esprit de corps or collegeality, but heavy workloads are an issue.

Finding #12
Although not obliged to do so, most charter schools continue to employ teachers with regular state credentials.

Finding #13
Teachers in conversion charter schools continue to belong to teachers unions, but those in start-up schools do not.

Finding #14
There are no mechanisms in place for charter schools and regular public schools to learn from each other.

Finding #15
Public school educators' belief that charter schools have an unfair advantage inhibits competition.

Looking across all of the 15 findings from this study, it is clear that in the majority of cases, the experiences of charter schools do not support the advocates' claims. Claims about greater autonomy leading to greater satisfaction and decision-making capacity are supported, in part, by the data. Most charter schools do tend to have greater autonomy from district and state directives – although the degree varies greatly across schools and districts. However, the simple notion that autonomy in and of itself is a good

thing is not supported by the data. Rather we have learned that in many cases charter schools have relied heavily on the support and services available to them through their local districts or other entities.

Similarly, charter school teachers do express a sense of empowerment, derived from their freedom to create smaller, more intimate school communities and their enhanced professional identities. Still, they face difficult working conditions in some cases and wonder how long they can keep up with the pace of work at their schools.

While the above-mentioned issues do, in part, support claims made about charter reform, the bulk of our data controverts advocates' claims. For example, the evidence shows charter schools are not more accountable for improving student outcomes than are other public schools in California. This has happened for several reasons, namely: there has been no consistent statewide assessment system in California since the charter school law was passed; charter school founders engage in this reform to accomplish a wide range of goals; charter proposals themselves are often vague regarding specific outcomes; and school district officials often lack information about charter schools' performance and are ambivalent about their responsibilities over charter schools. Unsure how to measure and hold schools accountable for performance, districts tend to monitor charter schools' use of fiscal resources, which is the accountability role they are most likely to play in the regular public system.

Furthermore, there is no evidence that charter schools can "do more with less." Rather, much of the evidence illustrates that charter schools rely heavily on supplemental private resources and do what they can to extract a greater share of public dollars. In this way, we see charter school reform at the forefront of efforts to privatize public education, as the reform forces these schools to rely on private funds. The wealth of the local community and the presence of well-connected leaders determines, in many instances, whether a charter school can garner the necessary resources.

On other issues, this study's data speak to some of the claims about charter reform, not by confirming nor disconfirming them, but by reframing the terms of the debate. While advocates claim that charter reform will give parents more choice, our study suggests that the issue is considerably more complicated. We found that charter schools are both the chosen and the chooser. Charter schools have more control than most other public schools in California over who is recruited and who can attend. We learned that charter schools make use of various strategies for choosing parents and students – e.g. targeted recruitment and requirements such as parent or student contracts that dictate what families must give to the school.

While this ability to choose their students and families allows charter schools to create a community identity, which can foster a shared vision for change, our findings raise questions about which parents have the range of choices the charter policy assumes. Without transportation, faced with sometimes demanding parent contracts, and with limited access to information about the practices of charter schools, some parents face serious constraints on any choices they might make. Since charter schools are not held accountable for their success in enrolling a student body that reflects the racial/ethnic make-up of their host district, these facts about charter reform in California suggest that the debate over charter schools and choice is often silent on critical policy questions.

In addition, our data also show that regular public schools in districts with charter schools feel little to no pressure from the charter schools to change the way they do business; in other words, our data do not support the notion that charter reform, via competition, will spur changes in the wider system. In fact, the existence of charter schools may mean that these public schools receive students not accepted at or asked to leave the

charter schools, or that they lose their most involved parents to the charters. Futhermore, overcrowding in many California schools hampers the concept of competition for students.

At the same time, we saw that the charter schools we observed, in all but one case, were not serving as models of innovation from which educators in other schools could learn. We found that there were no mechanisms in place for charter schools and regular public schools to learn from each other. Also, there was little communication among the schools, especially in situations in which the charter schools were more independent or when they were established to be in direct competition with the public schools. While we do not have enough data from public schools to draw broad conclusions about the "ripple effects" of charter reform, we do have sufficient data to suggest that charter reform, to date, has not spurred competition between charters and other public schools, nor have charter schools become models of change and reform throughout the system.

Implications

We draw the following set of public policy implications from our findings:

- If charter schools are to be held accountable, a new system of accountability must be devised. Such a system must be broader and more comprehensive than a single standardized test, recognize the range of academic and non-academic goals of charter school operators, and balance these goals against the public's need to know how these more independent schools are spending tax dollars.

  Furthermore, charter school petitioners should be required to be more specific about their goals and intended outcomes in their charter proposals. This information should be made public so that charter schools are accountable to taxpayers and voters. And finally, the measure of academic achievement of students in charter schools should be longitudinal and not one-shot test scores compared to the public school down the street. The self-selection bias inherent in charter schools or any school of choice needs to be factored into analyses of charter school accountability.

- It is time to rest the tired rhetoric that all bureaucracy is bad and all autonomy from bureaucracy is good. There are many charter schools in California that could not exist without the ongoing support of their local school districts. In fact, policy makers and educators have a lot to learn from charter school operators about which aspects of autonomy are most important – e.g. the freedom to hire teachers – and which aspects of the bureaucracy are most supportive. Our data suggest there will not be a lot of agreement across charter schools on these particular aspects, but more information on this issue could help frame future debates about how to provide public schools with more autonomy while maintaining supportive bureaucracies.

- To the extent that charter school reform is going to provide students and communities most in need with better educational programs, federal and state funding for charter schools should be targeted to low-income communities that lack corporate sponsorship to start charter schools. Furthermore, information about charter school funding sources should be disseminated broadly so that the long-term implications of privatization of public education through charter school reform can be publicly debated.

- If a central goal of charter school reform is to provide more choice to parents who have had the fewest options, our data suggest that charter schools have too much choice over who attends. In order to assure more parental choice, information about charter schools must be disseminated broadly and the ability of charter schools to maintain stricter discipline codes and mandatory parental involvement contracts must be curtailed.

Furthermore, states and districts would need to provide transportation for students who choose charter schools but lack the means to get to them.

- Political rhetoric about competition as a force to improve education is empty in places where overcrowding is an issue. Furthermore, educators who feel they are being asked to compete on an uneven playing field are less likely to respond to competitive forces in the manner economic theory would suggest. Thus, any policy that tries to infuse competition into public education should take these two issues into account.

- If charter schools and regular public schools are going to learn from each other, districts or states will need to help facilitate this interaction. Bringing educators from the different sectors together to share information would be a first step. Also, framing charter school reform as a collaborative, as opposed to competitive, reform movement would help.

- Further research is needed on charter schools, especially research on equity, access, resources, accountability, impact on the public system, and classroom practices.

For all the excitement and satisfaction that this reform has brought to communities able to sustain viable charter schools, the charter school reform movement, at least in California, has failed to live up to many of the claims put forth by its proponents. Furthermore, the debate over charter schools and choice is often silent on critical policy questions related to equity and access for students. We argue that it is time to reassess this "magic bullet" of school reform and to raise harder questions about equity.

Introduction

All over the country, groups of parents, educators, and entrepreneurs are creating independent schools, known as charter schools, that are publicly funded but free from many state and local regulations. The charter school reform movement has spread quickly in the last eight years. To date, 33 states have passed charter school laws, allowing more than 1,000 charter schools to open their doors.

Unlike more partisan reform efforts, the charter school concept has been embraced by diverse groups of policy makers, educators, parents, and activists as one, if not the best, solution to many of the perceived woes of public education. Supporters claim that charter schools will be held accountable for student outcomes while enjoying autonomy from the public system; operate more efficiently than regular public schools by doing more with less or equal funding; provide more educational choices to parents and students, particularly those who have had the least choice in the public system; infuse healthy competition into a bureaucratic and unresponsive public education system; and finally, become laboratories of innovation for other schools and educators.

Now, nearly a decade after these claims were first made, researchers are beginning to examine some of these arguments as they relate to the day-to-day experiences of educators, parents, and students in charter schools as well in nearby public schools. As one of the very first studies to examine the claims of charter school advocates in light of the daily struggles and accomplishments of people in schools and districts, this study of 17 charter schools in 10 school districts across California presents the evidence for these claims and the effects of this reform on students, parents, school districts, and surrounding schools. Unlike most research on charter schools, which either provides broad statistical information or portraits of different charter schools in different states, our study looks carefully at the interaction between one state law and the local context of 10 very different school districts.

We used intensive case study methodology, which meant we studied each of the 10 school districts as an individual "case" and then sought out the people, proceedings, and documents that could tell us the most about the positive and negative effects of charter school reform. We sought to understand these effects from varied perspectives through in-depth interviews, careful observations, and hundreds of documents. We purposefully sought out both the supporters and adversaries of this reform in order to understand their diverse experiences and points of view. In the end, however, we interviewed many more believers in charter schools than opponents, simply because we spent many days in these schools talking to people who have committed themselves to this reform.

We have learned a great deal from our visits to charter schools and their local school districts as well as from our more than 450 interviews with charter school founders, educators, parents, school district officials, and public school principals. In weighing our vast amount of evidence, we learned that this reform can be extremely challenging and rewarding for those engaged in it. Yet, despite the hard work and dedication of charter school founders and operators, and the impressive gains that many have made under trying conditions, charter school reform, for the most part, falls short of the broad and comprehensive claims made by many of its proponents.

We learned, for instance, that charter school reform is a laissez faire policy that allows people greater freedom but guarantees them very little consistent support. As a result, what charter school operators can accomplish is often related to the resources, connections, and political savvy that they bring to this reform. As charter schools interact with the large and uneven public education system, their operators have little power to overcome existing inequalities. In some instances – such as when they employ admissions criteria – charter schools can exacerbate these inequalities.

Our findings do not mean that all the news about charter school reform is bad. We met hundreds of satisfied educators and parents who were proud of what they had accomplished thus far, even as many wondered how long they could sustain this energy and drive. But, based on the evidence, we were forced to question the extent to which this reform will be systemic or that it will touch a large

percentage of those students traditionally least well-served by the public educational system.

We recommend that policy makers who hope for a broad impact reconsider some of the underlying assumptions that led them to favor charter school reform in the first place. We also recommend that they amend current legislation to provide more support for charter school founders committed to serving the most disadvantaged students.

Charter School Reform Overview

Over the last 40 years, advocates as dissimilar as conservative free-market economists, religious fundamentalists, moderate Democrats, civil rights leaders, and so-called "progressive" or child-centered educators have argued for various types of school choice policies, including alternative schools, magnet schools, voluntary transfer and open enrollment plans, and tuition voucher programs (see Cookson, 1994; Fuller, Elmore and Orfield, 1996; Henig, 1994; Wells, 1993). In the last decade, members of each of these groups have converged in their support for charter school reform.

The diversity of political support for charter school reform has been apparent since its birth, which was simultaneously part of a larger, global phenomenon of deregulating, privatizing, and marketizing public education and a distinctly American phenomenon of reoccurring demand for local and community control of schools (see Nathan, 1996; and Tyack and Cuban, 1995). Given its dissimilar political roots, charter school reform has come to symbolize different things to different people, including among the different state policy makers who propose, pass, and implement the legislation (see Wells, et. al., forthcoming).

We designed our research, in part, to discover how charter schools could be attractive to people with such contradictory agendas and views on education. Thus, we began by examining some of the various stated claims or assumptions about what charter school reform was supposed to accomplish (Dale, 1994; Troyna, 1994).

Although charter school laws vary greatly from one state to the next, at the heart of the charter school concept is a common set of arguments about why these more autonomous schools will lead to substantial and overlapping educational improvements – not just in charter schools but across the public system. These interconnected and diverse claims about charter schools reflect the breadth of this reform movement, with different people drawn to it for different reasons:

Accountability

One of the most consistently cited benefits of this reform is that charter schools supposedly are held accountable for student outcomes in ways that regular public schools are not because a chartering agency can, in theory, close a charter school that fails to attract students or does not meet specified performance objectives. Thus, a very compelling argument for charter schools is that they replace the current rule-based accountability, in which schools are held accountable for meeting regulations on inputs, with a system of outcome- or performance-based accountability. The threat of being shut down for not achieving results forces charter schools to be more accountable, particularly for student outcomes and success (Kolderie, 1992; Finn, Manno, Beirlein, and Vanourek, 1997; Hassel, 1996; Millot, 1996).

Autonomy and Empowerment

In exchange for greater accountability, proponents claim charter schools receive a great deal of autonomy from the existing rule-based educational system. This autonomy-for-accountability bargain has enjoyed widespread political support. Indeed, this concept fueled the "systemic reform" movement of the early 90s, leading to the 1994 Federal Goals 2000 legislation – the legislative impetus for states to implement academic standards and matching assessments (O'Day and Smith, 1993; Clune, 1993). Charter school reform fits the systemic reform model, the central idea of which is to create measures of student results – namely standards and assessments – and then allow schools more freedom in how they achieve these results. States with standards and a test to measure students' mastery of the content could pass charter school legislation, allowing schools more freedom to serve students as they see fit, and then hold them accountable for specified student outcomes on state tests.

Advocates believe that this autonomy will pay off by empowering charter school educators to meet the desires of educators and

parents, as opposed to the demands of bureaucrats. In this way, charter schools, cut free from the constraints of the public system, will enable educators to better meet the needs of their students (Shanker, 1988; Kolderie, 1992; Contreras, 1995; and SRI International, 1997).

Efficiency

Charter schools in most states receive less public funding per pupil than do regular public schools, especially considering that many of them pay for their facilities out of their per-pupil operating costs. Thus, their ability to operate with less public support is assumed, by some charter school proponents, as proof that charter schools can educate students for less money than is spent in the regular public system. They argue that these less bureaucratic schools are more efficient – that is, able to do more with fewer resources (see Finn, 1996; and Kolderie, 1992).

Choice

Related to the accountability claim is the argument that, since charter schools are funded according to the number of students they attract, charter schools are more accountable to the parents and students who choose them. In this same vein, charter schools are said to force the public schools to compete for students and resources.

Furthermore, charters, as publicly funded schools of choice, are said to provide greater educational oppurtunities to disadvantaged groups who have traditionally had the fewest choices in education. In this way, charter school reform is said to empower parents as well as educators (Hill, 1996; Finn et. al., 1997; and Nathan and Power, 1996).

Competition

Another critical component of charter school reform, according to many of its supporters, is that it will infuse more competition into the public educational system. By competing with the public schools for students and resources, charter schools will force all schools to be more responsive to the demands of parents. This claim resonates with broader arguments for market-based reforms including vouchers, deregulation, and privatization. The fundamental argument is that competitive markets are more effective than bureaucracies (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Hill, 1996).

Models of Innovation

Advocates of charter schools assume that by empowering more autonomous educators to better meet the needs of their students, they are freeing these schools to be more innovative. Proponents argue that such innovation, particularly as it relates to teaching and classroom-level change, can be shared with the regular public schools and thereby foster positive change and reform in all schools (Contreras, 1995; Little Hoover Commission, 1996; Manno, Finn, Bierlein, and Vanourek, 1998; SRI International, 1997).

Although these claims are prevalent and powerful, they are unproven. Thus far, little research has examined these claims and their underlying assumptions from the standpoints and experiences of people engaged in charter school reform. California, a state that has been at the forefront of this reform movement, offers a chance to see how these theoretical arguments work in the real world. Our study explores these claims by examining 10 schools districts and their charter schools, traditional schools, educators, parents, and students.

The Salience of California

In 1992, California followed Minnesota and became the second state to pass charter school legislation. As of the 1997-98 school year, California was second only to Arizona in the number of charter schools – 130 as opposed to Arizona's 241 – and first in the country in the number of students – nearly 50,000 – enrolled in charter schools. During the 1997-98 school year, California housed about 16 percent of the nearly 800 charter schools operating across the country. Furthermore, California was home to nearly one-third of the 166,000 students enrolled in charter schools nationwide. As of fall 1998, an estimated 1,100 charter schools are up and running in the United States; 156 of them are in California (Center for Education Reform, 1998).

California is also an important laboratory to test the effects of charter schools on other schools. California is the most populated state with 12 percent of the total U.S. population. Projections show it will have 14 percent of the U.S. student population by 2005.

Therefore, educators, policy makers, parents, and taxpayers across the country are interested in what Californians have learned from their vast charter school reform experience. This report sheds light on these discoveries. Before we present our findings, we describe the California charter school legislation, which was based on many of the claims cited above, especially accountability, autonomy, choice, competition, and innovation.

California Charter School Law

The original California charter school law, which went into effect in early 1993, was popular with charter school advocates because it included several characteristics they considered important in the creation of large numbers of charter schools. In May 1998, the state considerably amended the law to make the chartering process easier and reduced the power of school boards to deny or revoke charter proposals. Still, it is important to note that when we conducted our research from spring 1996 through spring 1998 the schools and districts were operating under the original legislation.

Intent of the Law

In the "General Provisions" of the California statute, the intent of the charter school legislation is spelled out, matching many of the claims or policy assumptions discussed above. For example, the law states that its primary intent is to improve pupil learning and to increase learning opportunities for all students, with a special emphasis on those students identified as low achievers. Regarding accountability, the California charter school legislation stipulates that this reform is designed to "Hold the [charter] schools… accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes, and provide the schools a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems."

Related to autonomy and innovation in charter schools, the stated intent of the law is also to encourage innovative teaching methods and to create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school. California also designed its charter law to "provide parents and students with expanded choices" and "provide vigorous competition within the public system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools."

Granting, Denying, and Revoking Charters

A defining characteristic of California charter schools is that they remain local entities, generally granted through and governed by their local school districts. This distinguishes California from many states, where other entities, such as the state board of education or public universities, can grant charters.

The original law included a statewide cap of 100 on the number of charter schools statewide, and a limit of 10 per district. The State Board of Education began waiving the statewide cap in 1995, allowing 30 additional charter schools to open by the 1997-98 school year. The 1998 amendments to the legislation, however, raised the cap to 250 charter schools for the 1998-99 school year and 100 more per year after that. The limit of 10 charter schools per district was removed.

There are two routes to creating charter schools in California: the first is to convert an existing public school into a charter school – a "conversion" charter school – and the second is to create a new, "start-up" charter school. In the original legislation, charter proposals had to be signed by either 10 percent of the teachers in the school district or 50 percent of the teachers employed at an existing school. Under the new law, for an existing public school to "convert" into charter status, the petition must be signed by 50 percent of the permanent-status teachers at that school. For new, start-up charter schools, the petition can be signed by the parents of one-half of the pupils who are likely to attend the school in its first year or by one-half of the teachers likely to work in the school.

The original law specified that only local boards of education could grant charters, although rejected petitioners could appeal to their county board of education. The amendments will allow charter petitioners to apply directly to their county board of education and, if denied a charter, to apply directly to the state board

of education. The amended legislation also defines the conditions under which a school board may deny a proposed charter: when it presents an "unsound educational program;" when the petitioners are unlikely to implement the program specified; or when the petition does not include required information (such as instruction, outcomes, governance, racial balance, expulsion policy, and admissions policy).

California charters are valid for five years, after which time schools must renew their charters with the granting agencies. The law specifies conditions under which a charter may be revoked or not renewed, including a "material violation" of the standards of a school's charter, failure to "meet or pursue any of the pupil outcomes" specified in its charter, failure to meet generally accepted accounting principles, or fiscal mismanagement.

Charter School Operations

The charter school law waives most California Education Code regulations for schools, except those related to non-discriminatory admissions based on race, gender, and national origin; basic health and safety standards; and participation in the state assessment program. In these specific areas, the state requires charter schools to abide by the same rules and regulations as regular public schools.

Other aspects of the California law include a requirement that these more autonomous schools be non-sectarian and that private schools cannot be converted into charter schools. Furthermore, the law states that charter schools should reflect the racial make-up of the school districts in which they are located. However, California charter schools are able to set admissions requirements "if applicable." Such criteria could include anything from evidence of prior achievement to parent volunteer contracts to specific codes of conduct.

The 1992 charter law allowed charter schools to hire uncertified and non-union teachers. The 1998 amendments, however, require charter school educators who teach core and college prep courses to hold a valid teaching credential. Union membership remains optional.

Public funds for charter schools are, in most cases, routed through the local districts that grant the charters. These funds are supposed to equal the "base revenue limit" per pupil for the district. In California "base revenue limit" is the maximum amount of general purpose state and local revenue that a district can receive. Thus, charter schools are funded based on their average daily attendance (ADA) multiplied by the per -pupil amount of base revenue limit of their districts.[1]

In addition to general funds, charter schools are entitled to receive state and federal categorical funds – e.g. Title I or special education – for their students who qualify for them. Charter schools are not, however, automatically eligible for any of the capital funds from the state or those generated by local tax revenues to pay for facilities. The extent to which charter schools benefit from capital funding depends on their relationships with their districts and whether or not they are able to use district-owned buildings free of charge.

While the terms of the California charter school legislation seem fairly straightforward, we have learned that these guidelines and parameters are interpreted differently across the state, as charter school reform interacts with divergent social, economic, and political contexts.

[1]By comparison, funding for regular public schools is much more complicated. Each school district receives its "revenue entitlement," which is the base revenue limit multiplied by the district's total ADA and adjusted for a lengthy list of add-ons and take-backs in order to calculate the district's total revenue limit. After calculating the district's total revenue entitlement, the state subtracts the amount generated by the district in local property tax revenue and adds funding for summer school and other miscellaneous programs. (Premack, 1997) The district then distributes funds to individual schools based on a variety of formulas, district type, and school grade level.

Key Aspects of the California Charter Law:

- Charters are granted through local school districts for a period of five years; denied applicants can appeal to their County Board of Education and the State Board of Education.
- Both existing schools and new start-up schools are able to become charter schools.
- Private schools are not allowed to convert into publicly funded charter schools.
- The cap on the number of charters has been raised to 250 schools for the 1998-99 school year and 100 new schools per year after that.
- Charter schools are allowed to have admissions criteria. Charter schools are supposed to reflect the racial make-up of their school district.
- Under the original law, charter school teachers were not required to be certified; after the 1998 amendments, charter school teachers who teach core classes must be credentialed.

California Charter Schools at a Glance

By fall 1998, there were 156 charter schools in the state, as compared to nearly 7,500 public schools in California. Although there is not a great deal of statewide data about charter schools, we do know some basic facts from two important reports – a state-mandated study conducted by SRI International (1997) and the Federal study of charter schools conducted by RPP International (1997). SRI (1997) reported that half of the charter schools in California were conversion schools and half were newly created, start-up schools. Charter schools tended to be smaller than regular public schools. Charter schools averaged 434 students, while the average public school in California enrolled 767 students. Start-up charter schools were smaller, averaging 244 students, compared to converted charter schools, with an average of 620 students. Start-up charters also tended to be more independent from their school districts in terms of personnel and finances (SRI, 1997).

The SRI study (1997) also found that California charter schools were fairly evenly distributed across the state. And while they were located in all types of communities, they were more likely to be in small towns (33 percent) or urban fringe/suburban areas (28 percent) than in central cities (19 percent) or rural areas (13 percent).[2] Although they served students in all grade levels, charter schools were more likely to serve middle and high school students than are regular public schools. For instance, while only 26 percent of all public schools were middle schools, half of all charter schools served middle grade students. Meanwhile, 21 percent of all public schools in the state versus 30 percent of charter schools served high school students. Charter schools were also more likely to offer a combination of grades that do not fit the traditional grade-level groupings of K-6, 6/7-8, and 9-12 (SRI, 1997). Fifteen percent of the California charter schools surveyed by SRI (1997) used home-based study with the parent as the primary, although not necessarily only, instructor.

We know from our study and the SRI (1997) report that a range of different people come together to start charter schools. Often in conversion charter schools, the charter petitions were written by some combination of administrators, teachers, and parents at the existing public school. In the case of start-up charter schools, the founders were more likely to be people who are not currently working within the existing public system – i.e. parents, entrepreneurs, and educators from the private sector or those who were leaving the public system. In several cases in California, school district officials and/or school board members were instrumental in getting charter schools started.

In terms of student demographics, both the SRI (1997) and the RPP (1997) reports show that White students were over-represented in California charter schools compared to their percentage of all California students, while Latino students were under-represented. For instance, while 40 percent of the students

[2]Seven percent of the surveyed charter schools said they were located in more than one of these areas or that the categories were not appropriate.

enrolled in California public schools were White and 40 percent were Latino, in charter schools 48 percent of the students were White and only 34 percent were Latino. The percentages of African-American and Asian students in the public schools and charter schools were comparable.

Furthermore, racial and ethnic distinctions were more pronounced at the school level as opposed to the aggregated state-level data. For instance, RPP (1997) found that 37 percent of the charter schools, as opposed to only 17 percent of the public schools in California, had student enrollments that were 80 to 100 percent White. Meanwhile, 17 percent of charter schools had zero to 20 percent White student enrollment as opposed to 23 percent of public schools.

Similarly, SRI (1997) found that, although statewide averages regarding low-income students were similar for charter and regular public schools (43 versus 47 percent respectively), within-district comparisons showed more variation. In 74 percent of the charter schools, the proportion of students eligible for the free-lunch program was less than that of the schools in their local school district.

State-level data on Limited English Proficient (LEP) students reveal that charter schools had an average of 20 percent LEP students compared to an average of 24 percent in public schools. But within-district comparisons show charter schools tended to have almost eight percent fewer LEP students than their district average.

The statewide data show that charter schools enrolled almost equal percentages of special education students as the public school (eight percent in charter schools versus nine percent in public schools), however, there appear to be major differences between the start-up and the conversion charter schools.

The UCLA Charter School Study

Our goal in conducting qualitative case studies of school districts and their charter schools was to understand how a seemingly straightforward policy such as charter school reform interacts with different local communities. Our purpose, therefore, was not to study a random sample of charter schools and then generalize our findings: to describe the "typical" charter school. Rather, given that we know that charter schools are located in diverse communities, we purposefully selected districts and schools based on their differences. In other words, rather than use quantitative random sampling techniques, we sampled based on the phenomenon we wanted to study – namely the diversity of experiences within the charter school movement (see Merriam, 1988).

From this diverse sample we are able to generalize to findings of how this reform interacts with different communities – be they urban poor, wealthy suburban, or middle-class rural – and how these findings do or do not match the claims of charter school advocates. Since no one school is typical, our study is not about the "average" experience of charter schools in this state, but rather it covers the range of experiences that have come to define a diverse movement in a diverse state. This study, therefore, helps move the debate on charter school reform beyond global generalizations of whether charter school reform is "working" into a more thoughtful discussion of when it is working and for whom.

Thus, we selected 10 districts that differed on several key factors, including size; racial and socio-economic diversity; position in an urban, rural or suburban community; geographic location in southern, central, or northern California; and number, percentage, and types of charter schools in the district. Our sample consisted of five large urban districts; three districts that were mostly rural but also had some suburban housing; and two districts that were mostly suburban, although one included a rural section. All totaled, the 10 districts housed 39, or almost one-third, of all the charter schools in the state at the time we chose our samples.

We selected the 17 charter schools within these districts by sampling for diversity along various dimensions – e.g. dependent versus independent relationships with districts; grade levels served; school size; demographics of the students; type or format of the school, including home-schooling and independent-study charters; philosophy of the school; and duration of the charter. The final sample included two suburban, five rural/suburban, and 10 urban charter schools.[3] Eight of the 17 were "conversion" char-

[3]One of the urban schools was located in a surburban fringe area of a large city.

ter schools, and nine were new, start-up schools. Three were home schooling/independent study schools that spanned grades K-12. Three were high schools serving students in grades 9-12, and four were middle/junior high schools with some combination of grades 5-8. One was a K-8 charter school and six were elementary schools serving some subset of grades K-6.

All the names of the districts and schools in this study have been changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of the people we interviewed.

From spring 1996 through spring 1998, we conducted three site visits to each of the eight larger school districts in our study and two site visits to the two smallest districts. These visits lasted three or four days and were conducted by two to four researchers, depending on the size of the districts and the number of charter schools studied. We also interviewed administrators at 22 regular public schools. We chose the "non-charter school" administrators based on the proximity of their schools to a charter school, their relationship to a charter school – e.g. their school sponsored the charter by providing the teacher votes, or their interest in going charter at some point. All totaled, we conducted 462 semi-structured interviews with district officials, charter school founders, leaders, teachers, parents, governance council members, community supporters, and educators at nearby public schools. We also conducted observations of district and charter school meetings and classrooms in charter schools. And finally, we collected hundreds of district and charter school documents.[4]

After two and a half years of traveling, listening, and observing, we emerged from this study with a deeper understanding of the multiple meanings of charter school reform in California and the accuracy of many of the claims that have driven this reform across California and the nation as a whole.

[4]In addition to the data collected in these 10 school districts, we also interviewed 50 state-level policy makers in six states, including California, in order to better understand bipartisan support for this reform.

Data Table.....School Information

School	Grade Levels	Conversion	Startup	No. of Students (rounded)	No. of Teachers	Urban / Suburban / Rural
Academic Charter School	K-6		X	140	6	Urban
Community Charter School	6-8		X	180	8	Urban
Directions High School	9-12		X	100	5	Urban
Foundation Elementary Charter School	K-3		X	160	7	Urban
Franklin Charter Academy	7-9	X		1280	65	Urban
Heritage Charter School	6-9		X	70	3	Urban
Imperial Way Charter School	K-5	X		1040	63	Urban
Liberty Elementary School	K-5	X		420	20	Rural/Suburban
Liberty Middle School	6-8	X		530	22	Rural/Suburban
Montera Charter High School	9-12	X		2480	84	Urban/Suburban
Monument Charter School	K-5	X		700	31	Suburban
Mountain Peak Charter School	7-12		X	110	6	Rural/Suburban
Pangea Charter Academy	9-12	X		480	21	Urban
Shoreline Charter School	K-8		X	180	10	Suburban
Ursa Independent Charter School	K-12		X	2610	37	Rural/Suburban
Valley Home School	K-12		X	1490	70 *	Rural/Suburban
Wilson Elementary	K-6	X		710	31	Urban

All data are 1997-98 numbers except for 96-97 data indicated by a *

Descriptions of Five Charter Schools from Our Study

In this section of the report we describe five of the 17 charter schools we studied to provide readers with an understanding of the range of charter schools within the state. They also help to explain the importance of the local context of these schools and highlight several of the themes we present in our major findings.

Foundation Elementary Charter School opened its doors just a few months after receiving approval of its charter petition from its district's school board. The school developed from a relationship between a locally-based educational foundation and a neighborhood religious center. The financial support and leadership of these two organizations enabled the school to open its doors quickly. In its first year, the year we visited, Foundation had recruited more than 150 students in grades K-3.

Located in a lower middle-class community of color in one of the largest cities in California, the school primarily enrolled students from one racial/ethnic background. Some of the school's supporters stated that this enrollment was not the school's original intent, but due to the convenience of the school's location for this particular racial group. Others reported that the school was in fact designed to serve low-income "minority" communities. Some of the students came from the surrounding neighborhood, but others came from outside the local area. Transportation was not provided by the charter school or the district. In terms of its curriculum, some teachers at the school talked about the importance of recognizing students' heritage, but the primary founders of the school denied that the school had a racially-based focus and selected an instructional program that, in large part, has a back-to-basics focus. In addition, the school's instructional program included an extended school-day.

The school employed seven teachers, and was exploring relationships with supplemental staff for such activities as physical education. The majority of the teachers had taught in surrounding districts before coming to Foundation. Most of the teachers reported that they were not sure whether they were covered by the district's collective bargaining agreement, but the school's founders reported that the teachers were not members of the local teachers' union. At the time we visited, the teachers, administrators, and parents with whom we spoke had high hopes for the school's future, a future that they intended to include expansion to higher grades as well as its relocation to a larger facility.

Montera Charter High School is a conversion charter school located in a wealthy and mostly White area of a large urban school district. Despite its location, it managed to enroll a racially and socio-economically diverse student body by bringing in large numbers of students from other areas of the city. The school district agreed to pay for the transportation of those students to avoid overcrowding in other district high schools and to racially balance its schools.

Montera's application to become a conversion charter school was a combined effort of local parents, the principal, and a group of teachers. These participants wanted the charter school to gain more autonomy from the district's central office for a wide variety of reasons, including: the need to save the school from being shut down as enrollments dwindled in the early 1990s; a desire for more control over which students were sent to the school from outside the neighborhood; more flexibility in implementing reform efforts; and a growing sense of frustration with the slow pace of change in the large district.

The school has thrived in many ways under charter reform. For example, it was very successful in recruiting students whom the faculty and administration said were more motivated. This occurred in part because of the willingness of more neighborhood parents to give the charter school a try and the administration's targeted recruitment of students from particular middle schools. As a result, enrollment increased enough to keep the school open. Furthermore, Montera was able to implement new, tougher disciplinary codes that allowed the school to suspend and eventually expel students who did not follow the rules.

In addition, Montera, under the leadership of a strong and well-respected principal leader, had engaged in several simultaneous reform efforts – some of which caused tension between the educators and the parents. So much reform had taken place over the last five years at this large, comprehensive high school, that even the

educators said they were not sure which of these changes – except the enrollment change – were attributable to charter reform.

Monument Charter School is a suburban elementary school in a district serving mostly White and Latino students. The school, located in one of the most affluent and Whitest areas of the school district, had a 70 percent White student population. Monument converted from an existing elementary school into a charter school at the prompting of the principal, who rallied her staff and parents to plan and write the charter proposal. Monument's principal also had close working relationships with several district administrators, which helped ease the chartering process and enabled the school to gain support from the local school board, despite members' initial skepticism about charter reform. Charter school educators and administators were able to pick and choose which district services they wanted to continue district and which they would contract from outside the district.

According to Monument's staff, going charter not only allowed them to have greater control over their budget, but it also enabled them to implement several curricular and organizational changes at the site. For example, they felt that being a charter school let them choose different instructional programs, textbooks, and other materials not available in the rest of the district. They also structured the school organization and schedule such that class sizes were smaller than district averages, and they had school-wide planning time on a weekly basis. In addition, one of the major changes that Monument made when it went charter was to implement the use of student and parent contracts, outlining behavioral and academic requirements for students and expectations for parent involvement. Parent involvement brought a wealth of in-kind services and support to the charter school from families who had resources that were not plentiful among families in other parts of this district.

Ursa Independent Charter School is one of many home-schooling and independent study charter schools located in various rural areas of the state. Founded as a start-up charter school in 1994 by an enthusiastic and high-spirited businessman-turned-educator, Ursa's original mission was to provide educational services to home-schooled students in its local district and other nearby rural communities. The school also served a smaller number of adult students who had dropped out of school. The services Ursa offered included providing curriculum supplies such as worksheets and tests, academic record-keeping, and approximately an hour per week of home-based instructional support. Ursa also offered selected enrichment activities such as field trips, music classes, and access to the schools' computer facilities for enrolled families. Its focus on parents who were frustrated or frightened by public schools was evident by one of its informational brochures, which read: "Ursa helps minimize parental concerns of drugs, gangs, violence, school police, and inappropriate classmates or friends."

After building a base of several hundred home-schooled students, Ursa expanded its operations to include urban satellite learning centers dispersed among three of California's largest counties. These centers – including youth service agencies and job training programs – helped swell Ursa's enrollment to more than 2,500 students in 1997. At the same time, Ursa has been accused of illegal practices, including enrolling and receiving public funding for students who were concurrently attending private schools. As a result, the school may be forced to scale back its controversial use of satellites.

Ursa was one charter school that did hire non-certified teachers; in fact, some of its teachers did not yet hold bachelor's degrees. The charter school paid teachers a per-pupil rate for working with each student, and this rate varied based on the teachers' education level, prior experience, and credentialed status. But teachers were not compensated for their travel time to and from students' distant homes. By providing services to rural, home-schooled students as well as satellite learning centers serving urban populations, Ursa represents a powerful departure from traditional notions of a public school.

Wilson Elementary School is a conversion charter school located in a large urban school district in an area described by the principal as a rough, old neighborhood with many apartments and many transient and poor families. The mid-sized elementary school served a racially diverse student body of approximately 700.

The school went charter because of the principal's initiative, but the move had a high level of support and input from the faculty. As a charter school, Wilson reduced class size across all grades, which led to the busing of approximately 120 students each year to other elementary schools in the district. In addition to K-6 class size reduction, Wilson used its charter status to extend its school day and experiment with different curricula. At first it adopted several books and curricular materials that were not being used by the district. More recently, Wilson teachers voted to return to some of the district textbooks and curriculum. The school has also improved its main library and created libraries in every single classroom. An independent conversion charter school, Wilson had complete control over its entire budget. The principal used the budget to improve classroom facilities, reduce class size across all grades, and increase the amount of materials available at the school site.

These very brief descriptions of five of the charter schools in our study provide readers with a glimpse of the range of experiences that we documented in our study. What follows are the broader, cross-site findings that emerged from our data.

Major Findings from the UCLA Study

In our effort to test many of the prominent claims of charter school advocates, we have organized our findings from this study according to the following claims: Accountability, Autonomy, Efficiency, Choice, Empowerment, Competition, and Innovation. Our analysis of our vast body of data through the lenses of these claims led us to 15 key findings. Some of these findings address a specific claim and others address more than one. Similarly, some of the claims, such as efficiency, relate to several of our findings.

Looking across the 15 findings from this study, we found few instances in which the experiences of charter schools and the people whose lives they touch in these 10 school districts support the broad claims of the reform proponents. Instead, there are profound differences in the communities' social, economic, and political contexts. The following 15 findings help to illuminate these issues in more detail.

FINDING #1

Charter schools in California are, in most instances, not yet being held accountable for the enhanced academic achievement of their students.

Perhaps the most oft-repeated argument of charter school advocates is that in return for autonomy and freedom from bureaucratic regulations, charter schools will be held accountable for student results and thus demonstrate greater academic achievement. Most advocates compare the "rule and regulation-based" accountability of the public system to a more dynamic and responsive "outcome-based" accountability of the charter schools (Finn, et. al, 1997). This move from the rule-based (or input-based) accountability system of the public schools into performance-based accountability systems is a stated intent of the California law. Specifically, the law requires charter schools to administer the state assessment system and to clearly state in their charter proposals their proposed student outcomes and methods for measuring them.

In this section of the report we look carefully at what charter school operators, educators and parents saw as the vision or purpose of their schools and thus how they measured their own success or failure – i.e. for what are they accountable?

We have learned that, for several reasons, the autonomy-for-accountability tradeoff is not happening the way policy makers hoped. First of all, there has been no consistent state assessment system in place since the state charter school law was passed. Second, the concept of autonomy-for-accountability reflects an extremely simplified understanding of the multiple reasons why people engage in charter school reform and the extent to which they want to be held accountable to one, state-defined set of student performance measures. A third and related reason why the accountability claim is not panning out in California is that many of the defining purposes of charter schools are non-academic in nature, such as discipline and safety. Thus, many desired outcomes do not lend themselves to traditional forms of accountability, including standardized testing. This raises additional questions as to whether traditional forms of academic accountability are relevant in an age of more decentralized educational governance. And finally, school district officials note that, given all the ambiguity around student outcomes and what measures are valid, they are holding charter schools accountable more on fiscal, rather than academic, measures.

1. California has not had a systematic mechanism for measuring student achievement in charter schools – or, for that matter, any other school. Nor has any mechanism been developed to measure schools against their charters.

The issue of school accountability in California has been complex since the beginning of charter school reform. First, the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) was repealed in 1994, leaving the state with no test. A new assessment, the SAT-9 (Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition), was implemented during the 1997-98 school year, but educators complained that this hastily chosen test was not aligned with state standards. Meanwhile, different districts and charter schools have used an array of assessment systems that are not comparable across sites

or over time. Thus, while certainly not the fault of the charter schools themselves, there is no consistent student outcome data for the first several years of charter school reform in California.

According to the SRI (1997) report, during much of this time, 14 percent of charter schools did not use standardized tests, and 17 percent did not have teacher assigned grades. Start-up charter schools were even less likely to use standardized tests than conversion charter schools. Those charter schools that did administer standardized tests used a variety of different ones.

In theory, the charter, as the formal agreement between the charter school and the charter granting agency, spells out the goals and purposes of the charter and desired student outcomes. In reality, however, these goals and outcomes are often vaguely written and ill-defined; they frequently cover a wide range of desired outcomes, such as the goal of "enabling pupils to become self-motivated, competent, and life-long learners."

In one chartering document, the founders' list of intended school and student outcomes included higher staff attendance rates, a higher rate of parent participation, new professional opportunities for teachers, and a school performance index that compares it to schools with similar student populations. Yet the section of the charter on the methods for measuring progress in meeting these outcomes was extremely vague, stating that the assessment of student outcome goals will be based on the "relationship between the desired student outcome and the means used to assess it." These means included the test commonly used in the district as well as other indicators such as GPA, report cards, and attendance information. Still no specific goals or benchmarks were discussed. This is typical of charter proposals.

Even when charter proposals state more specific goals – e.g. a percentage increase in scores on a specific test – they are not specific about the period of time in which this goal will be attained (also see WestEd, 1998). For instance, in one charter document, the only specified outcomes with clear benchmarks and anticipated dates of completion were those that specified when the school would obtain more technology and equipment.

Thus, charter granting agencies, usually local school boards, are put in a difficult position of holding charter schools accountable to illusive goals at a time when state and district assessment systems have been in flux.

Furthermore, very little "baseline" data exist for students in charter schools. As we explain in Finding #9, many charter schools, even those serving low-income populations, require parents and/or students to sign contracts before enrolling in the school. Thus, many charter schools have a self-selected pool of students with more involved parents relative to other students in their communities. Therefore, without being able to compare scores from the same site on the same test over time, it is problematic to look at one-shot test score data from charter schools, and even more problematic to compare these one-shot scores to a nearby public school – even one with similar demographics.

2. Charter schools frequently differ from traditional schools (and from each other) in the academic outcomes they seek for their students – and thus for what they should be held accountable.

When we asked charter school founders and organizers what they hoped to accomplish with their new autonomy, their responses reflected three themes – wanting a school with a specific curricular focus, wanting a safer school environment, and wanting more flexibility in how they use public funds. None of these reasons directly relate to accountability in terms of a state-imposed test. In some cases, these hopes and dreams contradict the concept of accountability as it has been described in the policy world.

Specific Curricular Focus Accountable for Their Own Vision

Despite efforts by policy makers in Sacramento to establish California state standards and a politically acceptable test to measure students' mastery of these standards, many charter school founders and operators have been busy defining their own curricular focus and their conceptions of high standards. As we mentioned, while charter proposals often describe these concepts, albeit vaguely, they generally do not include specific benchmarks or measures to gauge progress. Furthermore, the extent to which these various foci will mesh with any new state assessment system remains to be seen. There is, however, an inherent conflict between the focus of some specialized charter schools and the notion of accountability to the state for one standardized set of outcomes.

While many charter operators develop their own curricular focus because of their dissatisfaction with the existing public system, they each take their foci in different directions. Charter founders include both those concerned that the public schools are not structured enough and those who think the public schools are too structured; those who argue that the public schools have ignored the history and culture of certain oppressed minority groups and those who believe that the public schools overemphasize multiculturalism.

Thus, this variation in charter schools' curricular vision parallels the diversity of views about student outcomes. This diversity explains why California has not been able to develop a state assessment system to which it can hold charter schools – or any other public schools – accountable. For instance, in four of the 17 schools we studied, the educators and parents had chosen a more tightly structured and traditional curriculum that featured basic skills, drills and memorization – a back-to-basics approach to education that emphasized students' mastery of discrete pieces of information.

Yet in seven of the schools in our study, educators were creating more thematic and project-based curricula that moved away from memorization of discrete facts and focused more on learning through experience and interdisciplinary units. For instance, at Shoreline Charter School, students worked on thematic, research-based projects that span the curriculum, rather than learning math, science, reading, or history as discrete subjects.

Furthermore, three of the charter schools – all of which were start-up charters located in urban areas – were created in part to serve students of a particular racial/ethnic group whom the founders or operators thought were not being well served in the public system. One of these schools – Foundation – was also a back-to-basics school. Some of its educators said that part of their mission was to provide students with greater knowledge and appreciation of their own history. In the other two schools – Community and Heritage – the central focus went beyond infusing more history of the ethnic group served and included an emphasis on the ethnic culture, heritage, and identity of the students. Teachers at these schools presented history and culture from the point of view of the people in their communities, not from the perspective of mainstream public school textbooks and curriculum.

A teacher at Heritage noted that she had seen improvements in her students over the school year, "We know our own history, nobody has to tell us, we know it. And they're developing a sense of pride. And I can see, it's taken a long time, but it's happening slowly." She added that while the school does try to fulfill the minimum standard graduation requirements set by the district, "we have to meet the culture part, the spiritual part, and here what's nice is that we can touch the spiritual part and it's OK."

Three charter schools in our study (including one of the three mentioned above) focused on providing what the educators thought were better bilingual education services to non-English speaking students. These schools tried to transition Spanish-speaking students into English classes faster than in regular public schools. One of these three schools, Community Charter School, also emphasized helping all students become two-way bilingual, fluent in both English and Spanish.

In this particular school, where 41 percent of the students were Limited English proficient, a parent noted that the charter school was a very comfortable place for her children to learn English without thinking that Spanish was bad. One of the teachers described his job as making sure that all students are proficient in Spanish. "So my job is basically for the Spanish speakers to practice reading and writing, and then getting them to write using the appropriate grammar and spelling, just to improve it overall, and I think that definitely is a big part of this school; everybody has a Spanish class."

While a special curricular focus such as those described here may or may not result in higher student scores on the SAT-9 exam, they are central to the purposes of these charter schools. It is this focus that is often stated in the charter proposals and that attracts educators, parents, and students to these schools, and thus, is an important part of how people at these schools think about accountability. For these reasons narrowly defining student outcomes to only the result of a single standardized test is particularly incompatible with a reform like charter schools. In fact, many people who started these schools did so precisely to escape an educational system that they perceived to be overly prescriptive (see Rothstein, 1998).

3. Many of the defining purposes of charter schools are non-academic in nature, such as discipline and safety. These desired outcomes do not lend themselves to traditional forms of accountability, including standardized testing.

According to respondents, all of the schools in our study had at least one reason for "going" charter that had little or nothing to do with wanting higher standardized test scores. This does not mean that the charter operators did not care about student learning or achievement, rather it means that, at several schools, charter reform itself was not necessarily intended as the vehicle for changing the instructional program.

In fact, in four of the conversion charter schools, respondents said they were not changing their instructional programs at all as a result of going charter – that simply was not their purpose. At these schools, educators said they already had restructured their instructional programs before going charter and hoped to use their new-found autonomy for other purposes. According to an administrator at one of these schools, "We didn't become a charter to be incredibly different, we just wanted to do it well, and if we have a little more freedom we'll be able to make more of our own choices and do some of the things that we can correct."

Other non-academic issues such as safety and fiscal flexibility emerged when we asked charter school founders why they engaged in this reform.

School Safety Accountable for Safe Places

If charter schools should be accountable for what their parents and educators think is important, then school safety should be added to the list, at least for six of the schools we studied. In these schools, parents and educators talked about students who came to the schools because they did not feel safe in the large public schools. All of these schools were either located in large urban school districts or drew students from adjacent urban districts.

In five out of six of these schools, the smaller size of the charter coupled with a greater sense of community (often related to a more homogeneous student population), appeared to make the parents and students feel more safe. For example, a parent at Shoreline Charter School talked about parents being "absolutely delighted that their kids aren't going to be thrown into a situation like [the local] middle school, especially parents of girls." She went on to explain, "And I think the kids feel pretty darn safe at the charter, in all ways, emotionally, physically." We also heard numerous comments about safety at Liberty Elementary and Liberty Middle School because these charters are seen as providing a safer environment for students, in fact, being the "safest and best spots" in the area.

In four schools, people said that stricter discipline codes helped create a safe environment for students. Related to these stricter discipline codes are the parent and student contracts that some charter schools required (see Finding #9 below). These contracts often spelled out the required behavior of parents and students – including mandated parent involvement, student conduct, and dress codes. Charter founders and directors saw making sure that all members of the charter school community abide by these codes as an important part of what they hope to accomplish via this reform.

While perceptions of safety in these charter schools cannot be easily measured on standardized tests, they were very significant outcomes of this reform, according to the educators and parents we interviewed. How this relates to school accountability is not clear, especially when it is difficult to know how many of the fears of the regular public schools are grounded in actual experiences at those schools.

Fiscal Flexibility Accountable to Save Money, Make Money, and Reallocate Money

Another major impetus for going charter, according to the founders and operators we interviewed, was that they hoped to use their new-found autonomy in the financial realm. They wanted more control over how to spend money and how to manage their funds. This meant different things in different charter schools, but one of the more common goals was to use the charter law to implement "flexible staffing" arrangements.

Thus, charter founders and operators of six of the 17 schools in our study stated that one of the motivating factors behind going charter was to employ more part-time and/or less expensive, non-union teachers and staff.

As one charter school administrator explained, he and other founders hoped that by converting the school into a charter they

would be able to save some money during bad financial times. "Money was lean. And, we looked to some of our staffing models as the only way to accomplish some of the goals that we had."

Conversely, at Valley Home, one of the home schooling/independent study charter schools, a central impetus behind its founding was to bring in enough new revenue to allow two district teachers to keep their jobs. Severe budget cuts in the early 1990s almost forced the district to dismiss these two teachers until they used the charter school to attract students from outside the district who brought per-pupil funding with them. Similarly, founders created three other charter schools in part to bring new students and thus new revenue into their districts.

Directors of two schools, Imperial Way and Franklin, converted their schools into charters in order to reallocate funds. One of these schools reallocated money to build a new building and the other one converted an empty lot into an athletic field for the students. A teacher at Franklin explained that the school had already restructured its instructional program before going charter. When asked what he had hoped the school could accomplish via charter status, he stressed greater flexibility, especially in terms of spending money – "Being able to spend money without having to go through all of the loops and twists and all that kind of thing."

If saving, making, or reallocating money was a major impetus for so many schools to go charter, should they then be held accountable for fiscal creativity? If so, how could that be measured by some sort of accountability system? This raises additional questions of whether traditional forms of academic accountability are relevant in this age of decentralization.

Fiscal, Not Academic, Accountability is Stressed

Our data demonstrate that this idea of academic accountability is even more illusive when examined from the other side – i.e. the perspective of district officials who legally must hold charter schools accountable and decide whether charters are revoked or renewed. These district officials were far more likely to hold charter schools accountable for fiscal rather then academic outcomes. In fact, all but one of the four schools that had their charters revoked or simply not renewed in the 10 districts we studied, lost them primarily for financial or legal/contractual reasons. This held true despite the fact that not all of the renewed charter schools had lived up to the goals stated specified in their charter contracts.

In the High Country Unified School District, the board of education revoked the charter of a home schooling/independent study school due to charges of mismanagement and misappropriation of public moneys. Specifically, the board accused the charter school of collecting public funds for students who were not really enrolled in the school. Board members and district officials also had concerns about the quality of the school's program, but in the end, it was the legal, contractual issues related to misuse of public funds and student enrollment numbers that led to the divorce between the district and the charter school.

Interviews with school board members showed us that they felt they can be more strict with charter schools in regard to fiscal issues, because that is their normal accountability role in their districts. A school board member in Pastoral Unified even went so far as to say he was impressed with the fiscal order of the charter schools and that was the only thing the charter school really has to comply with – "so, if they are clean there, there's nothing else we can violate besides [the] civil code or contract law."

In most of the districts we studied, board members articulated a tension between being ultimately responsible for the well-being of the students in the charter school and the fiscal stability of a charter and its potential impact on the rest of the school district. Yet the fiscal accountability aspect seemed to be the easier issue for board members to get their arms around due to the confusion about student outcomes, and, in some instances, finance was the issue with the most immediate political ramifications in the district.

The Madrona school board, for example, revoked a charter due to fiscal mismanagement, and the district was forced to pay off most of the the nearly $700,000 debt the charter school left behind. The board member reflected, "I mean, they had all these public dollars and after a while there were a lot of questions raised about how they were being spent. And there's... I don't care what an ardent decentralist someone is, they don't want public dollars spent without accountability." This same

board member noted that the tensions around accountability and autonomy for charter schools is not about academic standards, but rather about accountability for public dollars.

Thus, while the theory of charter schools states that these autonomous schools are being held accountable for student outcomes in a new and different way, the data from our study suggest that they are more likely to be held accountable for fiscal order. We do not argue that fiscal accountability is bad or undesirable, but once again we see little evidence that the student outcome side of the accountability equation is playing out the way proponents have claimed. As a result, it is not clear that charter schools are being held responsible for anything more than the public schools are held to, although in areas where they have more control over resources, they sometime have to report their use of these resources in more detail.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #1

What this finding reveals is that the vision of what charter schools are trying to accomplish and thus for what they should be accountable is not clear or straightforward. While all charter school operators talk of trying to serve their students "better" than the regular public schools, they may vary tremendously in what they mean by "better".

Charter school reform in its purest sense is about community-based groups trying to respond to dissatisfactions with the public schools by creating alternatives to what they perceive to be an unresponsive public system. In many cases, the value of these alternatives will not be accurately measured by a state-imposed assessment. While a centralized, common state test causes many problems in the regular public educational system, it is particularly problematic for charter school educators, many of whom assume that their schools are anything but standardized and that they know more than politicians in Sacramento about how to serve their particular students.

We do not present this finding to discount the importance of charter school accountability for student outcomes or to suggest in any way that charter operators or parents do not care about student learning. We raise these issues in order to ask policy makers hard questions about how they translate the theoretical ideas behind charter school accountability into real policies. If, in many cases, the goals and purposes of charter founders and operators have little to do with the ever-evolving state assessment program, how will the success or failure of this reform be measured and how will school districts and the state hold charter schools accountable? Given the financial failures or improprieties of some charter schools, school districts are likely to be cracking down on the fiscal accountability aspect of the charter-district relationship. But as long as finance, not learning, is the central focus of the accountability arrangements, the promise of student outcome accountability may be deceptive. What then, does accountability mean?

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FINDING #2

School boards are ambivalent about their responsibilities to monitor charter schools; many are reluctant to become involved.

Just as it is unclear "for what" charter schools should be accountable, so it is unclear "to whom" they should be most accountable – their charter granting agency, their parents, their students, or their own vision of their school?

Interviews with district-level officials as well as charter school directors and teachers revealed a great deal of variation across school districts in terms of charter schools' level of accountability to their granting agencies. Furthermore, much of this relationship depended on how the people involved in the process understand their roles. For instance, school board members in a few of the school districts in our study saw their role as keeping a tight rein on charter schools; others felt that they that they have incurred much of the responsibility of the charter schools without any control over what they do.

This latter view was expressed by a school board member in an urban school district who noted that the board has official responsibility over the charter and confessed to worrying about whether students have access to the school, whether they are performing, and whether they are fiscally sound. Yet at the same time, he said the board has no authority over the charter school so it could not eliminate these concerns.

One school board president in an urban district expressed a different opinion, saying that while the board is the final authority on whether charters stay in place or whether they are revoked, there is a need to give the schools more freedom. "The hardest thing for our district has been once we get through with [chartering] them, to keep [our] hands off. To give help when it's needed but do it in a supportive way, instead of a restricted way."

Other board members we spoke to talked about charter schools taking on the responsibility themselves and being accountable to themselves, as if the board could wash their hands of the charter schools and let them sink or swim on their own. According to a board member in the Mission Unified School District, in the regular public system, no one is accountable, but the charter school is "trying to make a statement that they are going to succeed with these kids… accepting responsibility for the success of those kids, and they have to have some authority to do whatever it is they need to do."

Still, the vast majority of school board members we interviewed felt a great sense of responsibility – often for legal reasons – to assure that charter schools were not doing anything that violated the charter school law and that they were living up to the academic goals established in their charter proposals. But in only one district in our study, Mira Vista, did a local school board take action against a charter school that was perceived to be not living up to the academic goals of its charter document. And even in this instance the decision was not solely about the specified goals of the school's charter proposal, but also politics since many of the most vocal parents no longer wanted the school to be a charter. Thus, the school board reacted to the demands of these parents and made an argument that the school had not done anything that it could not have done without its charter.

More typically, school board members said they lacked adequate information about the charter schools to know whether or not these goals were being met. Several school board members stated their frustration over lacking any evaluation tools for the charter schools. According to one, "We still have not done a good evaluation of these schools to know whether they're more effective than they were before they were charters. I don't think, frankly, that they are. I mean that's my personal and gut feeling. But five years from now we'll probably know, and we'll probably say, 'well, they're not doing any worse.'"

A board member in the Pastoral Unified School District, which housed a home schooling/independent study charter school, explained:

> I had some questions here about the program itself because it was so loose in the beginning that, we were asking about, 'how do we know that students are achieving.' And they gave some standardized tests but it was strictly volunteer. So how valid is it? You know, the students who took it did really well but… why would you bring your kid in if you hadn't been teaching them?

In this particular school district, the board voted to revoke the charter when issues about the misuse of funds arose. But parents with students in the school, charter school advocates, and state policy makers launched an onslaught of political pressure that led the board to reinstate the charter, this time with a re-written agreement requiring charter school students to take the same test as all the other students in the district. Two years later, the curriculum director of the charter school informed us that the parents of two-thirds of the students in the school had requested and been granted a waiver from administering the exam, resulting in limited data on student achievement.

In this rural district and in Madrona, one of the large urban districts in our study, political pressures – either from the local school community or from the broader network of charter school supporters – sometimes overrode board members' concerns about the lack of evidence of higher student achievement at a charter school.

For instance, in Madrona Unified, a district that has been attacked from many political fronts over the last decade, several charters were renewed for a second five-year period although the schools had not shown consistent test score improvements. Politically, it is sometimes more detrimental for a board to revoke the charter of a popular charter school than to allow it to continue even if it lacks evidence of achieving student outcome goals.

Yet, as we mentioned, in Mira Vista, an urban district whose board has much more political support, board members voted not to renew the charter of a school that had failed to show substantial achievements gains. Since this charter school did not

appear to be doing any worse than those in Madrona, these examples point to the importance of the political context of accountability – some school boards have more authority to hold these charter schools strictly accountable than do others. Some local communities and charter advocates intensely pressure school boards to renew charters for schools that have garnered a lot of political support.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #2

These data reveal problems behind the straightforward policy discussion of how charter schools will be held accountable to their charter granting agencies for student achievement. Most of these discussions lack any acknowledgment of the political context of accountability for charter schools and the wide variation in terms of how charter granting agencies, in this case the school districts, view their roles.

Furthermore, school boards, the official charter granting agencies, are uncertain about their roles and often lack the necessary information or political clout to hold charter schools accountable for student outcomes.

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FINDING #3

Charter schools have multiple constituencies to whom they see themselves as accountable.

The other interesting accountability dilemma on the question of to whom charter schools are accountable is raised by charter founders when they speak of their multiple constituencies. Some proponents of charter reform talk about different forms of accountability, including a "market" accountability, which means that charter schools must be more responsive to the needs and demands of parents who can simply "vote with their feet" and leave the schools (Manno, 1998). At the same time, the educators at a single charter school can be divided on the issue of to whom they are accountable. All of these issues, however, vary from district to district and from one charter school to the next.

School-level Tensions in Terms of Accountability

Even the educators at charter schools often had different understandings of to whom they were accountable. Because many of these schools were founded out of frustration with the regular public system, charter school educators often resented their local districts and school boards. Furthermore, staff at some schools felt they should be accountable to the educators' vision of what their school should be. When these demands were at odds with the demands of their districts, different charter schools made different choices. Additionaly, different people within a given charter school sometimes will disagree about the direction to take.

This type of intra-school struggle was articulated by the principal of the independent Community Charter School. She explained that she and her staff sometimes had different understandings of accountability:

> …there's kind of an attitude of, we don't have to be accountable to the district. They [at the district] think we do, but we don't. And I'd like to feel that way too… I don't know yet. I'm a little nervous about trying to find out this way, you know, it's not like playing chicken here. I would just as soon, play their game now and get it over with, and then go on with our lives, rather than drawing the line here and saying, this portfolio is going to be done our way. But I probably won't necessarily win on that issue, and it is a school where I don't make the decisions single-handedly.

Other charter school educators spoke of trying to get their colleagues to be more accountable for student learning by implementing performance standards, but they had not succeeded because of distrust and conflict among the educators at the site. A teacher at Franklin Charter Academy noted that "there were some things that I had wanted to do [with performance standards]… if we wouldn't have had this distrust going on, I think people would have seen the validity in it and how good it could work."

In this particular instance and others, the obstacles charter schools face in moving toward a more accountability-based

system do not seem that much different than those faced by regular public schools.

Accountability to Parents

And finally, we found that in many instances, charter school operators did feel more accountable to at least some of the parents choosing their schools. But this sense of accountability to parents depended on what it is that parents – at least the most outspoken parents – value about the charter schools.

We learned, for instance, that the reasons why parents chose to enroll their children in these schools and thus, what they value most, did overlap with some of the founders' reasons for starting charter schools. For instance, the parents talked about what the charter school offered that they did not see available in other public schools, including safety, a curricular focus on the culture or history of a certain ethnic group, or instructional methods that were better suited to their children's learning needs.

In a few cases, parents said they believed the charter offered a more rigorous academic program. For example, at Montera Charter High School, where many of the parents demand a college prep program (and have since before the school went charter), an administrator explained, "We try to maintain a certain level of [educational] attainment...sports teams are good, but [that's] not what attracts them to this school. We have kids going to Berkeley and Harvard, we are known for that."

It appears that in some instances schools appeased parents simply by placing a charter school "banner" on the school. Many parents said they believe that being a charter means the school is better, more cutting edge, that there is something different, even if only symbolically. We heard people say that their schools were 'better' because they were charter schools and thus could do things that other public schools could not. However, when we asked for examples, parents and others were often stumped and could not state any concrete differences.

In some schools, parents said they believe the charter has more motivated students and a higher level of parental involvement. For example, at Liberty Elementary School, there was a lot of talk about "high quality" and "concerned" parents, the "well-educated" and the "middle-class." People affiliated with this charter school also said they value children who are "doing their best" and who show "effort," and they perceived these expectations to be different from those in the nearby public schools. Shoreline Charter School educators and parents also talked about students at the school being more "self-driven."

A theme that runs through the data and raises issues about charter schools' accountability to parents is that many who choose charters do so to be with others who share similar values and beliefs about schooling. This means that charter school communities – parents and educators alike – often try to send clear signals to prospective families about who is welcome and who is valued in the school. Sometimes, families who are not a good fit are encouraged to leave. Seven of the charter schools in our study and 75 percent in the state required some sort of parent contract (SRI, 1997) that, combined with strict behavior codes, allowed them to get rid of families that do not fit. In this twist on accountability, the schools are holding their "clients" accountable.

We also found that even among those parents who were not asked to leave, some parents felt themselves more included and listened to than did others. In fact, at many of these charters, we also found that less powerful, minority or non-English speaking parents often struggled for their voices to be heard in the decision-making process. While such struggles are typical of many non-charter schools, these episodes cast doubt on the degree to which charters are "more" accountable to all of their parent constituents.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #3

In conclusion, the claim of greater school-level accountability for student outcomes via charter school reform has not yet truly come to pass in California. This is due in large part to the fact that charter schools answer to many different audiences, and thus are sometimes torn between being accountable to different people.

FINDING #4

Charter schools vary widely in the amount of operating autonomy they need or want and in the demands they make on districts.

Autonomy from the constraints of the bureaucratic public education system is often touted as one of the most beneficial and liberating aspects of charter school reform. This autonomy from the rules and regulations is seen as the key to enabling schools to reflect the wisdom of the educators who work in them and the particular needs of the parents and students who patronize them (see Contreras, 1995; Kolderie, 1992; and SRI, 1997).

Certainly, operators of charter schools in our study stated that they found several aspects of the public system constraining. But the degree to which charter educators and parents seek autonomy from their school districts varied tremendously even within a single district. The range extended from some very "dependent" charter schools (usually conversion schools) that had no more autonomy from their school districts than did the nearby site-based management schools to extremely autonomous "independent" charter schools (most, but not all start-ups) that were funded completely separately and operated almost as their own school districts. In between these two extremes were large numbers of schools that varied in degrees of autonomy depending on what aspect of their operations is considered.

This variation in charter school autonomy was due to the particular needs and demands of the charter schools and requirements and responsibilities that each school district has defined for itself. The reality is that while some charter schools want to be autonomous and independent, when trouble, questions, or controversy erupt, they often turn to the district's bureaucracy for help.

In this section of the report, we define dimensions of charter school autonomy from their districts along four measures: support and advice from district personnel, district-level services, alternative (non-district) sources of services and support, and hiring and firing of educators. Interestingly enough, many of the more "independent" charter schools in our study tended to function with a great deal of autonomy on the last three of these four measures, but not necessarily on the first. That is, some of the most savvy charter school operators have managed to garner a great deal of support from their districts, while at the same time maintaining the ability to pick and choose among the support, services, and contractual agreements that the district provides, taking what is needed and opting out of what is not.

Support and Advice from District Personnel

The variation in degrees of charter school autonomy relates in part to the local political and social context of their school districts. For instance, some school districts, superintendents, and boards of education have been much more supportive of charter school reform than others. In fact, in four districts in our study (all suburban or rural), entrepreneurial superintendents and/or school board members played critical supportive roles in founding the charter schools in their districts. And in each of these cases, had it not been for strong district-level leadership, the charter schools might not have ever gotten off the ground. In the fifth suburban-rural district, the school board supported the charter school even though the energy and enthusiasm for the charter clearly came from the educators and parents at the school.

Unlike the suburban and rural districts, urban districts' officials and board members generally played a much less pro-active role in the chartering process. While there were numerous supportive district officials and school board members in these urban districts, they generally were not as actively engaged in founding charter schools as were their counterparts in suburban and rural communities.

In three urban districts in particular, charter school reform became contested as members of different groups disagreed over which charter school would be formed and what that meant for the other schools and communities. In fact, in all five of the large urban school districts, some board members and/or district administrators were skeptical of charter school reform while others embraced the potential of charter schools, particularly if they represented or identified with the charter school founders.

How these divergent relationships relate to the degrees of autonomy that charter schools ultimately enjoyed varies to some extent depending on the history of the school – conversion versus start

Data Table.....Relationship with District Information

School	Pay Rent to district or to other source Y/N	Pay Insurance	Handle Payroll	% District Overhead
Academic Charter School	Y(nominal)	Y	Y	3% but has not yet paid
Community Chater School	Y	Y	Y	9%
Directions High School	Y	Y	Y	*
Foundation Elementary Charter School	Y	N	N	*
Franklin Charter Academy	N	N	N	NA
Heritage Charter School	Y	Y	Y	9%
Imperial Way Charter School	N	Y	Y	5%
Liberty Elementary School	NA	NA	NA	NA
Liberty Middle School	NA	NA	NA	NA
Montera Charter High School	N	N	N	NA
Monument Charter School	N	Y	N	5.5%
Mountain Peak Charter School	N	N	N	*
Pangea Charter Academy	N	N	N	0%
Shoreline Charter School	Y	N	N	6%
Ursa Independent Charter School	Y	Y	Y	10% out of district 20% in district
Valley Home School	Y	*	covered by overhead	15%
Wilson Elementary	Y	covered by overhead	covered by overhead	7.58%

All data are from 1997-98
* Data not available
NA means not applicable to this school

– up – and the personalities and personal relationships between the district officials and charter school leaders (see Finding # 5).

Charter schools in the smaller and generally more wealthy suburban/rural districts in our study tended to be able to draw upon their districts' infrastructure as needed. In the larger school districts there was more variation, but, generally, school district officials told us that they felt responsible for these schools and so established processes to deal with them.

For instance, some districts appointed new administators to oversee charter school reform. Other districts delegated the responsibility to existing personnel, and in many districts, administrators with other responsibilities spent countless hours supporting charter schools. Often, these district officials guided charter school representatives as they developed and presented their charters to the school board.

In the rural High Country Unified School District, one district administrator complained about the amount of time district officials spent working out the financial agreements with the district's home schooling/independent study charter school:

> I think we spend an inordinate amount of time. We are talking about a charter school with three hundred kids and we have six thousand kids in the district. We spend a disproportionate amount of time in dealing with their issues… and that is bothersome to me… there's a tremendous burden put upon district [administrators] because these people didn't know what they were doing…

In Mira Vista Unified School District, an administrator became so heavily involved with a charter's development that she was asked by a school board member to record the hours she was donating to the charter school. Teachers at a charter school in this district credited this administrator with helping them get the charter approved and the curriculum developed, and with mediating rather severe governance conflicts. Other charter schools in this district benefited from district administrators who responded to their requests for support by helping them secure buildings, hire staff, and deal with financial hardships.

In at least two districts, governance disputes within charter schools resulted in mediation by district administrators at the schools' request. In one district, administrators assisted a charter school in terminating or transferring principals and in another, the district superintendent fired a charter school teacher. A high-ranking Mission Unified School District official explained:

> For some charter schools...that sometimes proves to be a challenge because they really want to believe that they're completely autonomous schools, and therefore they have no responsibility to the public school system. And very candidly, that would be great if everything went well within the guidelines we have, but our charter schools have this tendency to have problems, particularly internal people problems, and that's probably been the most taxing and time consuming part of all of our charters, has been around the people issue, governance.

Thus, the reality seems to be that, while some charter schools want to be autonomous and independent, when they need help they often turn to the district's bureaucracy. Furthermore, this appears to be more the case for start-up charter schools and those charters that set out to be the most independent from their districts. Converted public schools, most of which have remained more "dependent" – using many of the district's services – tend to need less district official time and energy to get the charters up and going.

Charter schools, then, do affect the public systems in which they operate. They require a great deal of attention from sponsoring districts, particularly in the beginning stages of their operation. These costs are not reimbursed by the charter schools.

District-level Services for Charter Schools

Regardless of the level of support charter schools receive from district officials, they still vary tremendously in the type and amount of district level services they choose to receive. These services include building maintenance; use of district facilities; insurance; staff development; business office services; and psychological services or resource specialists. In some instances, support from district officials in terms of advice or greater flexibility enables charter schools to contract out for more of their own services at a lower cost.

In each of these areas, we found huge variation across schools and districts, with independent and start-up schools generally contracting out for the largest number of services. And all but the most dependent charter schools could pick and choose among services provided by the districts and those they could find on their own.

Yet in two urban districts – Edgewood Unified School District and Mission Unified School District – the school boards and district officials dictated exactly what services the charter schools would receive from the districts. These terms and agreements were relatively consistent, leaving the charter operators few choices. For example, the Edgewood district leaned toward consistently giving the schools very few services. According to a counselor at one of the charter schools in the Edgewood district:

> …We were really out there on our own. We had no support. The district made that really clear that the district wasn't responsible for anything, wasn't going to give us any buildings, or help us in any way. So it works for us and against us. And our first year was really difficult. Every year is really difficult…

While the Mission district wanted all the charter schools to receive certain services, such as insurance, through the district, another large urban school district, Modrona, worked out individual agreements with its several charter schools depending on the school, what was requested, and what the district agreed to give. As a result, some of its charter schools continued to receive virtually all of their services from the district, including free transportation for students. Meanwhile, other charter schools contracted out for almost every service.

District staff development services is another area of huge variation among charter schools – educators in some of the charter schools participated as if they were at any other school in the district, educators at other charters picked and chose, and educators at a third subset of the schools never participated.

This third subset of charter schools educators included those who were not informed or specifically not invited to district staff development programs and those who were not at all interested in going. According to one charter school teacher, "I would not go to any of their [the district's] staff development, I wouldn't trust that any of their staff development would be any good… I don't want anything to do with it."

In the smaller, suburban/rural districts, the relationships between the districts and the charter schools also varied regarding these district-level services, but the charter schools did seem to be more able to get what they want when they want it. One charter school official talked about still getting the same services he had always gotten from his county school board, while at the same time having more flexibility to seek out other options when it might suit him, "…they were willing to work with us on the same basis they always had, if we were working with them on the same basis we always had. And so we didn't fight any battle there, nor did we attempt to make any changes."

In one of these smaller districts, Sunnyside Unified, educators at the sole charter school negotiated a best-of-both-worlds situation in which they could partake in district-wide in-service activities when they chose and contract out with private firms when they saw that as more advantageous. For instance, the school contracted out for custodial and grounds-keeping services, bypassing the district's unionized maintenance staff. Yet for other classified positions in the school, such as the front office staff, the school kept the district's union employees.

The superintendent of Sunnyside commented on this flexibility for the charter school:

> The big thing that they get away from – and I don't think this [has an impact] on the educational program, I think it [has an impact] on the budget, maybe – is the issue of being able to hire out in terms of classified association. They can hire out their maintenance, custodians, you know, whatever they want to hire out. But that is not… going to make a whit of difference to the child's reading score…

Of course, every aspect of this autonomy relates to funding issues between the charter schools and their districts. These issues are discussed below in Finding #5.

Alternative Sources of Services and Support for Charter Schools

Charter schools' relationships with their school districts were somewhat predicated on whether or not these schools had alternative sources of support. These alternatives included the expertise and consulting that some schools get from outside institutions – educational reform groups, including well-known national coalitions; private consulting agencies, some created specifically for the charter school market; or private foundations. Although support from alternative sources is not unique to charter schools, this reform movement, with its links to entrepreneurs and reformers "outside" the public education system, has increased this practice.

The extent to which charter schools had access to these types of organizations often dictated how much autonomy from their school districts they could afford. This certainly relates to the type of connections the schools had to get these alternatives goods and services (see Findings #6 and #7). In our study, seven of the 17 schools recieved some support and/or services from such private organizations.

As one charter school principal explained, he could pick and choose among the district's staff development offerings or their business office services because he had another option. He was working with the private educational foundation that helped launch his school to write a business plan and project into the future. He noted that a psychologist from the foundation comes in and meets with the staff, and that the foundation also assists him with the curriculum.

Another "alternative" to district services is for the charter schools to provide them on their own. Thus, at the charter school level, many charters add layers of bureaucracy to their schools to handle tasks that districts have traditionally performed. For instance, we found that many charter schools had governance councils; advisory boards; non-teaching administrators; office staffs; fiscal, legal and educational consultants; and partnering organizations. While we realize that some regular public schools

have many of these extra layers of governancs and administration, they tend to be more concentrated in charter schools.

The Superintendent of Edgewood Unified School District talked about how charter schools recreate some of the district's bureaucracy:

> I do think that contrary to what might have been one of the motivations for charter schools and that is elimination of the bureaucracy… that these schools have found that there is a certain degree of infrastructure support that is required just to operate. So I am not sure about the extent to which the fundamental premise on what charter schools emerge has been validated. In fact, it is conceivably more a bureaucracy because you have one or two people now responsible for everything from taking care of payroll to buying paper…

Thus, in some instances it appears as though charter school reform, aimed at dismantling the unresponsive bureaucracy of the public system, has created some new and different bureaucracy of its own.

Hiring and Firing Educators at Charter Schools

Hiring educators seemed to be an area in which nearly all of the charter schools in our study – conversion or start-up, independent or dependent – had a great deal of autonomy. Furthermore, it is a form of autonomy that all charter school operators cited as very important to them.

The extent to which this form of autonomy is a new phenomenon, resulting from charter school status, depended on the district. For example, in one urban district in our study, the local teachers' union had been successful in enforcing a contract in which teacher placements were strictly guided by seniority and teacher preferences. Thus, schools in that district traditionally have had little autonomy in hiring teachers. Yet in other school districts in our study, individual schools have worked around their union contracts and hired at least some of the teachers they wanted.

For schools in these more flexible districts, the additional autonomy in hiring teachers that comes via charter school reform was not as pronounced. Still, the ability to hire non-credentialed, non-union teachers (at least until the new amendments to the law take effect), has allowed the charter schools – conversion and start-up – additional flexibility (although only one conversion school dismissed their union).

Despite the greater flexibility in hiring, some charters would rather receive support from their districts. For example, the charter school in the Sunnyside Unified School District planned to use the district's hiring process to find a new principal.

The start-up charter schools in our study also had more autonomy to fire educators because none of the teachers in those schools had tenure or were members of the union. At least three of the charter schools in our study have been able to dismiss teachers or principals quickly because of this flexibility.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #4

Any description of charter schools as free agents, freed from the restrictive bureaucracy of the public educational system to do creative and innovative teaching, ignores the extent to which all schools, including charters, often depend on bureaucracies for much needed support. While public school educators may claim their bureaucracies are frustrating or not responsive enough, charter school educators have found that they are also sometimes necessary. When the public system is not helpful or too expensive, charter schools will recreate their own mini-bureaucracies or contract with outside firms. The most savvy and politically empowered charter school operators will pick and choose their degrees of autonomy from their school districts rather than buying into the rhetoric that complete autonomy all of the time is necessarily a good thing.

FINDING #5

The amount of public funding that charter schools receive for operating expenses ranges widely from one district to the next and even within the same district.

The California charter law's funding formula appears fairly straightforward: charter schools should receive funding equal to the "base revenue limit" per pupil for the district in which they are located plus some state and federal categorical funds for eligible students. Because noncharter public schools have access to pockets of public funds, including capital funding, that charter schools are not entitled to, charter schools must, in theory, become more efficient and do more with less money than other public schools (see Finn, 1996).

Charter schools definitely receive less public funding than noncharter schools simply because of the way the charter school law and its implementation guidelines are written. Public funding refers to the three specific categories of funds charter schools are entitled to – basic funding from the school district, state categorical funds, and federal categorical funds. According to the charter school law, charter schools are only entitled to a portion of the public funds that noncharter schools receive because they are not eligible for capital funds nor for some of the state categorical programs. Additionally, because the public funding for all charter schools (minus a few exceptions) is funneled through local school districts, the actual amount of money charter schools receive, like virtually every other aspect of this reform, is highly dependent on the local district. In other words, much of what charter schools receive from their local districts in terms of public funds depends on the relationship between each charter school and the district, the political savvy of the charter directors, and district level policies about what the charter schools deserve.

The Unevenness of Public Funding for Charter Schools

Our data speak specifically to funding variation within the unified (K-12) school districts in our study. Within these districts, the amount of money per pupil received by each public noncharter school generally varied according to the grade levels the schools served. Thus, elementary schools usually received less per pupil than did middle schools, which received less than high schools. Charter schools within and across these unified school districts received different amounts of public funding and these differences did not always correlate with the grade levels they served.

With respect to basic funding from the school district, charter schools are entitled to the same base revenue limit per ADA as other schools within the same district. Yet our data reveal that some charter schools located in unified school districts received more than noncharter schools serving the same grade levels, other charter schools received less than noncharter schools serving the same grades, and charter schools within the same district did not always receive the same level of funding.

Meanwhile, charter school administrators almost universally stated a belief that they received less public school funding than they were entitled to and less than noncharter schools received. According to one charter school leader:

> [I]t's my belief that probably we would be entitled to these things [bond money], but it's a combination of us not knowing or having expertise to find out what that stuff is, and then the fact that we are actually fiscally independent of them, that means that we're basically, we have to rely on their good graces in terms of anything they want to give us.

On the other hand, most district administrators asserted that charter schools received the same level of public funding as noncharter schools or at least that charter schools were receiving the funds to which they were entitled. An administrator in the Mission school district described the dilemma faced by the district this way:

> [W]orking with our Superintendent's cabinet and the board, we developed a district policy on implementing charter schools saying that the charter school will receive the same allocation that any other school at that grade level receives. And so by doing that, then you know the senior high schools, just on our basic allocation formulas, receive more than the elementary and the middle level. So we're able within our district to take care of that potential problem. But it always comes up when a new charter comes forward

> and as we talk with the people developing the charters as far as what the funding [is] going to be, particularly at the elementary level, they go back and they quote the legislation that now, 'Why aren't you giving us the full revenue limit?'

Another administrator in the Mira Vista Unified School District explained that "[the district goes] by the law. The State law says they get the revenue limit, and that's all they get. . . The State tells us, I mean the revenue limit is based on so many dollars per ADA, and that's what they get."

The truth lies somewhere in between these different perspectives. Some of the variation in funding levels within school districts can be accounted for by whether or not a charter school is an independent or a dependent charter school. Dependent charter schools typically were funded in the same manner and at the same level they were before becoming charter schools. As one administrator in the Madrona Unified School District explained, dependent charter schools were "just like any school in the district because they are not operating by themselves."

Independent charter schools, both conversion and start-up, generally had entered into entirely new funding agreements with their districts. The charter schools had negotiated these funding arrangements with their sponsoring district. As the principal of the Imperial Way charter school explained:

> In the beginning, they only wanted to give us $2,300, then [we] went to bat. Then, it's $2,600. Then we forced them to do this. . . to figure out exactly what it is. And that's when they do $2,806. . . Okay? Just nagging, nagging, nagging. . . Budget negotiation. So you win some, you lose some.

Through this negotiation process charter schools may, among other things, reach an agreement with their districts to receive a higher base revenue limit, more funds from state categorical programs, or funds from state categorical programs which are not listed within the charter school law. For instance, the Imperial Way charter school principal, cited above, was dissatisfied with the level of categorical funding her school received and planned on arguing with the district until she received the amount to which she believed she was entitled.

Thus, so much of the negotiation process, not only for the basic revenue funds, but also for the categorical funding, is circumscribed by the politics of the local district. For instance, in one district, the school board had not yet determined if the charter schools would be eligible for any federal funding and required that the charter schools submit applications for other available categorical money. In another district, if the charter schools met the eligibility criteria for federal and state categorical funds they automatically received those funds, no questions asked.

In this way, the variation in the levels of funding is linked to factors that are not quantifiable. For example, one independent charter school in our study received a higher base revenue limit than the other independent charter in the district because the charter school director applied pressure to the district administrator in charge of finance. When asked to reflect on why one independent charter school received a higher base revenue limit than the other, the district administrator said:

> Maybe they asked for the high school [base revenue limit]. You know sometimes it depends on how many votes they [have] on the school board, I mean this is all about politics, and there are school board members who like Directions, and there are school board members who don't like [the other charter school], and I'm not the one to fathom why they do or don't like it.

In another instance a charter school principal obtained both an initial start-up grant and a loan from the district because she was able to apply political pressure to the district school board.

Furthermore, the start-up and independent charter schools were often ineligible for facilities or capital expenses from their districts. Rather, they must secure and sustain these and other resources on their own. It was only recently that funds have been made available for start-up costs, and these were limited. In California, in the 1996-1997 school year, federal funds for starting charter schools were converted into the Charter School Revolving Loan Fund, through which school districts are eligible to apply for up to $50,000 for start-up charter schools. Larger federal grants were available in 97-98, but these were one-time payments and not on-going sources of revenues.

The lack of capital funding for start-up charter schools is a major issue, often leaving these schools far more vulnerable and forced to pay their rent out of their general operating budget.

The Uneven Need for Public Funds

We found that charter schools offering home-schooling or independent study services were unique in many respects, especially with regards to their funding realities. In our study, these charter schools, despite the fact that they were new, start-up charters, tended to be much larger than the other start-up charter schools, with student enrollments often at or above 1,000. These schools are entitled to full ADA funding if their students generate evidence that they are studying full time, yet because their students' classrooms are in their homes, they have very low costs. Thus, they can use the public funds they receive to cover their costs flexibly.

This was the case at Valley Home School which exchanged minimal operating costs for the opportunity to buy computers for all of their teachers. These schools often targeted drop-outs, students with learning or behavioral challenges, or families who choose to not participate in government-supported public schools. One director commented, ". . . we have the flexibility to do that [because] we don't have the mammoth overhead and. . . pay our teachers what regular public schools do, and we don't offer all those benefits that regular public schools do."

At Ursa Independent Charter School, the founder argued, "Who paid for all this stuff? It all came from ADA [public funds]. None of it is from grants. None of it is from special money. . ."

These schools took advantage of the range of possibilities charter school reform offers to start schools that benefit from full ADA apportionment without being required to operate a building, compensate teachers in traditional ways, or offer students full-day instruction.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #5

In short, although charter school laws, in theory, allow for a form of funding equalization by giving each school a set per-pupil amount, in reality, the charter school legislation in California, by funneling the money through the local districts, allows for funding discrepancies for charter schools across and within school districts. In this way, these funding mechanisms seem to have replaced one inequitable system with another.

FINDING #6

Private resources are usually necessary for the survival of charter schools.

In this section, we present the second finding from our study that relates to the "efficiency" claim of charter school proponents – i.e. the argument that charter schools, freed from bureaucratic constraints, will be more efficient and require less funding (Finn, 1996; Kolderie 1992). We find this claim to be misleading. Instead, we found charter schools' very fiscal survival often depends on their ability to acquire extra private funds. This is the case primarily because charter schools are not entitled to capital funds, and start-up costs can be very high. For many schools, the cost of providing teachers' salaries and benefits, building and liability insurance, maintenance, and educational materials exceeds what the school is entitled to in public funds. Of course, each school's ability to negotiate its cost constraints is related to the type of school in question, which includes the following: conversion, independent, start-up, dependent, home school, and independent study.

It is important to consider these various types of charter schools when examining resources. For instance, the start-up schools in our study – with the exception of the home schooling and independent study charter schools – tended to be small, with enrollment ranging from a low of 60 to a high of 180 students. While many in these communities cited the smallness of the school as essential, the low student enrollments did not generate enough public funds to make the schools sustainable solely with public ADA monies.

The need for additional resources was particularly great in schools that were independent from their sponsoring districts and located in low-income communities. Because of their independence, educators in these schools were generally responsible for administering virtually every aspect of operational expenses, including securing, renting, and maintaining the school building; paying their own insurance and payroll; and purchasing supplies. In contrast, conversion, independent study, and home schooling charter schools did not typically share the same

concerns over facilities, start-up costs, and day-to-day expenses as did these more independent charter schools.

The need to tap into private sources of funds – whether community based, corporate, or foundation money – is great. In this way, charter school reform reflects the increasing privatization of public education. It allows taxpayers and the government to pay less per child overall. One charter school in our study drew about 60 percent of its needed revenue from the public coffers. The remainder of the school's money came from corporate donors (Scott and Jellison, 1998).

In every district, we found that securing private and in-kind resources was critical to the financial stability of nearly all charter schools. Furthermore, we found that the use of various connections, including political, social, and financial ones, were often the central means by which charter schools were able to receive the information, political support, and materials that they need. Of course, some schools – particularly those in wealthy communities – had more access to the types of connections that yield these resources than others (Scott and Jellison, 1998).

All charter school operators, regardless of the poverty or wealth around them, use a number of strategies, alone or in combination, to garner as much social, financial and material support as they can. Some of these strategies are outlined below.

Composition of Governance Councils

Many schools in our study, including some in low-income communities, intentionally appointed individuals to their governance councils because of the connections, expertise, or resources these people could bring to the school. While many advisory boards for non-profit organizations may be chosen with similar goals in mind, charter schools are often presented as a means to offer local control over schools, yet few actually elected their governance council members.

At Shoreline Elementary Charter School, one governance council member described the selection process by saying, "And there were people who were. . . recruited, who were commandeered, really, people wanted them."

The members of this particular governance council, in turn, proffered the use of their connections to garner resources for the charter school, resulting in substantial grants to be used for technology and curriculum materials.

At Heritage Charter School, the governance council was also selected and included many prominent members of the community. Although some people at the school said they want more parent involvement on the council and in the school in general, the principal explained:

> For the most part, the everyday parent knows what's good for the child, but. . . they don't understand a certain procedure or manner or how to run a school. . . So that could be one of the problems if parents don't have an educational background nor the experience in school to have that much power.

Becoming 'Partners' with a University, Corporation, or Other Entity

Several charter schools in our study received resources through such partnerships. For instance, the Academic Charter School, located in a low-income community, partnered with several organizations, including a local university, a bank, and powerful individuals in the business world. As a result, the school operated in a donated, recently renovated building for which it paid nominal rent. While there were other regular public schools in the area, this school was targeted by these outside groups. One of the founders of the school attributed some of this attention both to the school's low-income student population and its charter status. He said, "I have seen more people that are interested from other organizations and from institutes of higher education. . . in my first year of charter than in the four years that I was at my traditional school. Charters are given a lot more attention."

The principal at Montera Charter High School also credited the school's charter status as a marketing tool in trying to forge new and fruitful partnerships. Similarly, Directions Charter School formed partnerships with many institutions. In fact, this school received its facility as a result of its partnership with a local university. The founder noted, ". . . we get a lot of things for that [rent], for example, we get full access to their media center, so pretty much unlimited use of VCRs, LCD projectors, anything

that's media related. . . as well as unlimited use of the computer labs during the day."

Foundation Charter School, an independent start-up charter school, served a poor and working class student population, but its partnering organization funded all of its start-up and facilities costs. The principal explained, "If you don't have facilities, then, I mean that's really half the battle right there because they're not cheap, and it does take time to do. . . so it [the partnership] was a perfect marriage and match. . ."

Grant Writing & Fund Raising

Every school in our study sought funding from foundations, the State of California, or the business community. The person responsible for this activity varied from school to school. Some well-resourced schools employed fiscal or business managers who often had connections to the non-profit community, others employed grant writers or volunteers to help write grants. Wealthier schools often relied upon parent volunteers to fundraise, while parents of students at lower income charter schools generally have less time for such activities. Thus, the already overburdened administration and teaching staff at the low-income charter schools wrote grants and solicited funds in addition to their instructional responsibilities. At Community Charter School, a teacher told us:

> We've had some people write grants, we've received a certain amount of money, but not a huge sum that would help us in our program. . . You really need people who are very familiar with fund-raising and looking for that money. And sometimes you just, who has time to do that? You have to hire people who are actually proposal grant writers who are familiar with the system, so that means you have to have money for that particular grant writer. . . there have been donations here and there but not to that great extent.

Even at Shoreline Charter School, where grants have helped the school fund many programs, teachers expressed concern about the sustainability of this type of financial support as grants may not be extended once they are used.

Parental and In-Kind Support

Some charter schools benefited from the wealth within them. Parents with medical, legal, or fiscal expertise shared these skills with the school. Parents donated their time by volunteering in classrooms, helping with administrative tasks, or contributing financially to the school. Other parents helped with maintenance of the school facilities by cleaning bathrooms, laying concrete sidewalks, or cutting grass.

Although there was some variation within schools in terms of parental support, wealthy schools tended to use parental resources help the schools in academic ways. A teacher at Shoreline Elementary commented, "I have a couple of parents who have just been God-sent. One is an amateur astronomer, she got her degree in physics and she does computers now. . . She did our Mars web page. . . " Another parent used her training in microbiology to conduct science experiments with the children.

Similarly, Monument Charter School had a large cadre of well-educated parents who volunteered in classrooms and raised several thousands of dollars through the PTA each year.

Other schools did not draw upon parental support for academic or fundraising purposes. At schools such as Wilson Charter School, a conversion charter school serving predominantly Asian and Latino students, parental involvement was almost non-existent. At Community Charter School, while some parents did help in classrooms, many assisted in constructing sidewalks or cleaning the bathroom.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #6

Starting a charter school and ensuring its fiscal viability is intimately tied to the school's connection to resources. These resources can be in the form of facilities, political connections both within and outside the school district, monetary support, in-kind assistance, or assistance from a well-resourced organization. The need for external support while schools are attempting to break away from school districts raises questions about which people and which communities are most likely to be able to embrace the freedom charter school reform promises.

FINDING #7

Charter schools vary widely in their ability to generate private sources of revenue

As we have learned that starting and operating a charter school requires a substantial amount of resources of all kinds – material, in-kind, social, and political, it also became obvious that the type and amount of resources available to a given charter school varied greatly depending on the location of the charter school in a given community and the school's relationship to various institutions, including the school district, business community, policy makers, and others (see Scott and Jellison, 1998).

Thus, while we see that charter school operators across our sites all engaged in one or more of the resource-generating strategies described above, we have witnessed substantial disparities in the resources they are able to attract via these strategies. For example, while a governance board member at a well-resourced school contemplated how to utilize the abundance of computers and a business manager at another school reflected on its $400,000 budget surplus, other charter schools were housed in barren facilities, some of which had no running water, heat, or adequate classrooms for the students.

Generally speaking, schools located in predominantly middle and upper-middle-class communities (those generally serving a higher proportion of White students) tended to have easier access to financial and in-kind resources due to their connections. Meanwhile, educators in charter schools serving predominantly poor students and students of color were often overwhelmed by the day-to-day demands of running a school and struggled to make similar connections. Thus, while some educators seek independence via charter school reform in order to offer poor children and children of color a better education than the regular public schools, they may find themselves in dire financial straits, unable to meet their own expectations. According to the principal of Community Charter School, a start-up, independent school serving low-income children of color:

> The impact has been really extreme. . . I mean you can see the condition of the school. The portables we rent and the land which we rent, and the fact that we have no certainty of where we're going to be from one year to the next. . . I think the school has paid dearly for its independence, in terms of not having sufficient books, not having sufficient materials. . . Other than that, we'll be using discard [books] again, books from the school district or whatever we can scrounge.

Schools serving high-poverty communities may find themselves free from regulation, yet limited in the educational program they can offer by a lack of money, space, or support. We found that operating a charter school solely on public money is simply not a viable option for high poverty schools, where the needs are great and the resources are few. As a teacher at Community Charter School explained, "You can't do it just on ADA, there's no way. . . you're set up not to succeed unless you're middle class or above in terms of your resources. And a school like this that does not have that wealthy a community is at a great disadvantage in the charter situation."

Similarly, Heritage Charter School, a start-up school in a high poverty community, has struggled to meet basic costs and to deal with their inadequate facilities. This independent school served a poor population of students, yet offered no lunch program. Furthermore, it had no playground, and when we visited in the middle of winter, no heat. The principal commented:

> Our biggest challenge right now is finding a better site. This is not a good area. . . We need to find a site that's safer for our students. . . It's kind of hard, but we're hoping that some rich, wealthy person will say, 'Hey, I'll give you a couple of million dollars.' And then some of our challenges will have been met and settled, and somehow, it does not look like it.

Other schools, meanwhile, were more easily able to meet financial and educational challenges due to their connectedness to well-educated parents, community wealth, knowledgeable grant

writers, or partnerships with well-resourced organizations. As we discussed in the previous finding, one of these connections often facilitates another.

Parents at Shoreline Charter School, a start-up school, for example, often assisted in the classroom, instructing in astronomy, genetics, and computers. They also brought access to grants from their companies' foundations. At Liberty Charter School, a conversion, dependent charter school, parent involvement and financial resources benefited the school. One teacher describedthis, saying, "A tremendous amount of the extras that are sitting in this room are from the parent committee. . . They do two major fundraisers a year. They make a tremendous amount of money. It is probably in the tens of thousands."

While parents at Foundation, Academic and Directions Charter Schools, all start-up, independent schools which served predominantly students of color from poor and working class backgrounds, did not have these connections from parents, the schools established partnerships with wealthy organizations which provided not only financial support, but also buildings, curricular materials, and governance. At one school, the partnering organization was instrumental in the school's founding by writing the charter, presenting it to the board, and hiring the staff. Other schools, like Community and Heritage, lacked both resources and time from parents and connections to organizations that could help their financial stability.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #7

As these examples demonstrate, the argument that charter schools can do more with less needs to be considered in light of all the time and energy charter school operators put into garnering these additional resources and why they believe this is necessary. We must also consider which charter schools have greater access to these resources. Our data raised serious concerns about these issues.

Our evidence leads us to reflect upon the following issues: If the cost of operating a charter school exceeds what independent schools receive in ADA monies, can charter schools be successful organizations without some form of subsidy from the private sector? Based on our evidence, we suspect not, which means charter schools in wealthy communities or schools connected to well-resourced benefactors will continue to have an advantage over less well-connected schools serving low-income children of color. And all the while, the documented "success" of the well-connected schools in getting resources for their students will fuel the flames for less public spending on education and thus the privatization of public education.

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FINDING #8
Charter schools depend heavily on strong, well-connected leaders.

While charter school advocates tend to assume that charter schools "work" because they have exchanged autonomy for outcome: based accountability, we have found that charter school success or failure is much more complicated. In addition to the need for private resources and well-connected governance council members, we found that the day-to-day leadership of a charter school is another crucial component to charter reform.

In fact, 14 of the 17 charter schools we studied had one or more well-connected, strong leaders who provided the catalyst for reform at that site. Although the role these leaders played in the reform varied depending on the school communities they were serving, and upon whether the schools were start-up or conversion schools, these leaders proved central to carrying charter reform forward.

While many of these individuals did serve as strong instructional leaders for their schools, as described in the Effective Schools literature, we found that oftentimes their leadership took on a different emphasis, beyond or in lieu of the school-based collaboration and instructional support that typified the instructional leaders portrayed in that literature (Peterson & Lezotte, 1991). What struck us as "strong" about these leaders was their ability to draw together diverse constituencies, such as parents, community members, and teachers, as well as to network outside the immediate school community. These leaders used networks not only to garner crucial political support from district officials or others in the educational community (see Findings #4), but, as discussed in Finding #7, also to tap into private resources that aided in the success of their schools. Many of the leaders we considered to be "strong" also had a high degree of business savvy,

and were able to use their knowledge of budgets and school finance to maximize both the school's existing resources and those they acquired. In this way, the "strong" leaders in these charter schools provided entrepreneurial leadership, in addition to or instead of instructional leadership.

Many charter school parents and teachers valued the support and motivation these leaders provided them. We also found that teachers and parents placed a large value on the symbolic role these leaders filled. As one teacher at Montera Charter High School noted:

> . . . What you really see is that everybody likes sort of a symbolic leader who they can go to and be encouraged that, 'yes, we can do this, yeah, there's a way to do this.' They know the answer. I believe 90 percent of the time they know the answer but they just want to hear it from that person.

Leadership in Conversion Charter Schools

Educators and parents at the conversion schools we visited learned of the charter initiative from different sources, often from a teacher, community member, principal, or even the superintendent. However, in six of the eight cases, it was the school's principal or superintendent who then pushed the charter idea ahead, kept the momentum and morale of the community up through the chartering process, and used social networks to garner the resources and support crucial to the charter's success. For these conversion schools we studied, the teachers and parents often stated that the charters could not have succeeded without such leadership.

Leaders at five of the eight conversion charters were hired at their schools only a few years before the charter bill had been passed, and three of these leaders had come to schools that were in trouble fiscally or had low morale. Each of these leaders then made positive and popular changes at their schools, thereby gaining the trust of their staff and community, which allowed the school to "go charter" with full constituent support.

For example, before Montera Charter High School became a conversion charter school it was losing enrollment and threatened with closure by the district. The principal arrived at the school shortly before the charter legislation passed and quickly gained the trust and respect of his staff needed to convert the school to charter status. As a long-time teacher at Montera noted:

> You know, it is so hard to separate the school going charter [from the principal] being the principal because it was because of [the principal] that we went charter. It was because of [the principal] that we are where we are today. You know, I can't say enough about the man, and I think truly the school is, like I said, it is almost impossible to separate the two because he came to this school when the school was just almost going under in terms of enrollment.

This leader, in addition to providing instructional support for the school's teachers, used the charter to market the school and increase enrollment, and used his connections in the district and community to gain resources in the form of grants and donations.

At Imperial Way Charter School, a teacher also credited the principal for turning morale around before they went charter, and for creating a climate in which teachers were prepared and confident enough to adopt the charter:

> [T]here was a tremendous change, I would say even the first year [the principal came.] Her motivation and her support was the opposite of the past administrator, and when I saw her she drew out talent in everybody, and she had everybody work with their talent and that just gave everybody self-confidence and pride in being in the school. And with the attitude changing, the school started changing, and the teachers were ready for change. And the principal is one that causes change.

At Wilson Elementary, the charter was also the principal's idea, and respect for this leader, who, according to most accounts, had turned the morale of the school around, played a key role in the teachers' willingness to cooperate and move ahead with the charter application and implementation.

Four other conversion charters we studied, however, already were considered "successful" by conventional measures. For these schools, the leaders were able to bring charter reform to school communities that were tired of the "usual" way of doing business and willing to change. Thus, these leaders were not reacting to crisis, but nonetheless were trying to push the school forward.

The differences we found in the leadership roles in these conversion schools can likely be traced to the context in which the schools were operating. Two of the three "crisis" schools were urban and serving mostly poor student populations. Three of the four "non-crisis" schools – those widely considered "good schools" prior to going charter – served more privileged populations.

These "non-crisis" leaders, however, were no less pivotal in instigating charter reform at their schools. And, as with the other conversion schools, most of the staff and community at these charter schools already had a tremendous amount of faith in their leaders prior to converting to charter status.

Monument Charter School's principal, for example, was popular both among her staff and within the district. She rallied her staff to "go charter," and used her widespread social networks to draw community support and resources to the school. One parent noted:

> One thing that is very unique is that we have a very, very qualified principal. It's almost like an example of what you would want in terms of a principal, not only in administrative skills, social skills, educational skills, so you really need that type of the person that can work in the community and who knows about education and that can work with the parents. It's very, very important in order for a charter to succeed because since it's kind of its own entity, broken away from the mainstream, you really need the community. You need someone that has communication skills who can get out there and do that.

This description exemplifies the connections and networking required for these leaders to be considered strong, and we found that many leaders tapped into these networks to enable their charter's success.

Leadership in Start-up Charter Schools

Networking skills were particularly important for the strong charter leaders in the new, start-up charter schools. We found such skills in the leaders of four of the nine start-up charters we visited. These leaders had to build community support and material resources from scratch, rather than rallying a pre-existing school community around charter reform. These "strong" leaders variously wrote the charter themselves, hired the staff, and rounded up the resources required for their charter's opening. Often, these leaders had the help of key educators, community members, parents, or donors in getting these charters off the ground – and thus their social networks were crucial.

Of the four charters where strong leadership was not consistently present, three were start-ups and one was a conversion school. Of the start-up charters, the two that served predominately low-income population had leaders who assisted in the formation of the charter, but subsequently had an unusual degree of turnover of leadership; each school has had two principals come and go since they became a charter. These schools, located in low-status, impoverished neighborhoods, have found that few leaders can fulfill the numerous tasks required to keep start-up charters running. As a board member at Community Charter School noted:

> …[I]t's an incredible amount of work because there's lots to be done; it's like a start-up company. I come from a computer world and I see having to be done here all the business aspects of a start-up business as well as running an educational environment, and it's hard to get one individual with both of those qualities as well as for the temperamental quality of starting up the company as well as maintaining it. So it's almost an impossibility in some ways to have on bare bones administrative structure the kind of one individual, which is really all we can afford, doing all the many tasks that need to be done.

Another school with leadership turnover, Heritage Charter, did have a leader who was present behind the scenes throughout the chartering process and operation. However, we did not consider this leader to be "strong" because she did not serve consistently as the school's official leader. Also, while she garnered some

resources for the school, she was connected only to the social networks in her immediate, fairly impoverished community, and thus was not always able to bring in the required resources.

At Shoreline Charter School, a strong charismatic superintendent instigated the charter idea, but during the first year of the charter, the director proved to be ineffectual. A sub-group of parents took over in the absence of a strong leader. Subsequently, the school filled the leadership void with a director who had a coherent instructional vision for the school and the ability to work closely with efficacious parents. Still, the school suffered greatly from not having a strong leader in its first year.

And finally, Foundation Charter School, which was started by a non-profit foundation, did not appear to need a strong leader because the foundation led or directed the school from afar.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #8

The consistent finding of a strong leader providing catalyst and momentum for charter reform raises questions about the degree to which this reform can be a systemic one, or whether it is successful only when strong leaders can be found. If a strong, well-connected and business-savvy leader proves to be essential to the founding and success of charter schools, we have to wonder what charter school reform means to schools that lack such leadership. While some proponents of charter schools have made the claim that any school could succeed at this reform, it is clear from our data that certain ingredients – from private resources to social networks to a leader who is savvy and able to garner both resources and networks – are critical.

Furthermore, the characteristics of strong charter school leaders vary to some extent from the more traditional model of principals as instructional leaders or even more recent collaborative models. Leaders in charter schools need to be more savvy in terms of hustling resources and running the business side of the charter school. To the extent that many of these savvy leaders were not also instructional leaders leads us to wonder to what extent charter school reform requires a form of leadership in which the very substance of education – what happens in the classrooms – is of less concern than keeping the electricity going. The long-term consequences of such a requirement as it relates to the quality of education provided for students remains to be seen.

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FINDING #9

Charter schools exercise considerable control over the type of students they serve.

One claim that has been made about charter school reform is that it will increase the educational choices available to families, especially for disadvantaged groups that have had few choices in the past (Finn et al. 1997; Hill 1996; Nathan & Power 1996). We have learned from our study that while charter school reform seems to provide some families with increased educational choices, it also gives charter schools greater latitude to choose which parents and students will attend. Through various mechanisms such as enrollment, recruitment, and requirements, charter schools have more power than most public schools to shape their educational communities.

These mechanisms often make it more difficult for parents to choose charter schools than it is for them to enroll their children in the nearby public school. This raises questions and concerns about whether the parents served by charter schools in a given community are necessarily those who have had the fewest choices in the past. Our data indicate that powerful self-selection is taking place in many charter schools, both in terms of families choosing schools and schools choosing families.

Choices for Charter Schools

Charter school operators have more power than educators in most regular public schools to shape who becomes a part of their school. For example, charter schools have more control over their enrollment processes (including recruiting efforts, information dissemination, publicity, and admissions requirements), student academic requirements, discipline/expulsion practices, and parent involvement requirements. In addition, the lack of transportation provisions in the charter school law or through the districts or the schools also shape charter school communities. These aspects of the charter often are written into charter schools' proposals, and charter school operators often described their ability to shape their school communities as a key advantage to having "gone charter."

This section reviews the mechanisms by which charter schools we visited have been able to structure their educational communities. This phenomenon seems to be less of an issue for the home-schooling or independent-study charters we studied because they placed less emphasis on setting boundaries around who was enrolled and were more interested in increasing the number of students enrolled in the charter.

Enrollment Processes

Charter schools have increased control over their enrollment, beginning with their publicity, information dissemination, and recruiting strategies. In terms of publicity and information dissemination, a few of the charters we studied sent out information about their schools in district-wide brochures, as do magnet schools and other public schools of choice. Other charter schools simply posted flyers or sent out mailers to families within their attendance boundaries. A couple of charter school directors placed ads in the newspaper, and many gave tours of their schools to interested students and parents. Still other charter schools had school representatives – usually the principal but sometimes students – attend various meetings or public forums to make presentations about the charter school and to inform, recruit, and raise money for the school. And finally, several charter schools in our study relied on word-of-mouth efforts to attract students and parents. In practice, these efforts were often targeted toward certain audiences – based on geographic location of residence, racial/ethnic composition, language proficiency, or 'at-risk' characteristics.

Some charters saw these efforts as "marketing strategies" and described them as more necessary during the first year or so of the charter's operation. For instance, the principal at Montera Charter High School, explained, "In the beginning, four or five years ago, that was a marketing strategy, we were marketing ourselves. I'm not saying we don't market now. . . but I don't have to go out and find more students, because we have enough. We're kind of in a position that we don't want to over-market ourselves and disappoint a lot of people." Eleven of the schools we studied had wait lists, in fact, because there were many more students who want to attend the charter than the school could serve.

Admissions requirements and processes exemplify another way in which charter schools are better able to shape who they enroll than other public schools. Many of the charter schools in our study operated on a so-called "first-come, first-served" basis, although they had admissions priorities for certain students – i.e. those who attended before the school converted to charter, those who had siblings at the school, or those whose parents worked at the school.

In addition to these admissions priorities, several schools required some sort of parent and/or student meeting with school officials. These ranged from informal discussions where the school culture is described interviews designed to assess students' abilities and interests as well as parents' level of commitment. Charter school operators described to us how they use this meeting to ensure there is a fit between the charter school and the family. Students may be steered to apply or not apply, based on whether they meet the behavior, effort, and/or academic standards of the school and sometimes whether their parents can meet the school's parent involvement expectation. As will be discussed further, some charter schools also used contracts to outline such requirements for students and parents.

Admissions requirements and processes, in general, allow charter schools to filter their applicants, to ensure that their shared values and beliefs about education are supported and upheld. Charter school operators talked about how having admissions criteria and an application process in place creates a schooling environment in which people believe that everyone is committed to the school's goals and rules.

For example, a counselor at Montera Charter High School commented, "I guess what makes [the charter] a little bit better is just the fact that you have to go through an application process and do these things. It makes it more of a commitment on both the parent's and the student's part. And that ultimately helps the school and helps everybody."

In their study of charter schools in California, SRI (1997) found that 44 percent of the 98 charter schools surveyed cited student's and/or parent's; lack of commitment to the school's philosophy as a factor for being denied admission. For start-up charter schools the number was 50 percent; for conversion charters it was 39 percent.

Transportation

Unlike other school choice policies, such as magnet schools, charter school legislation was passed in California without transportation provisions. Thus, it should not be too surprising that none of the start-up charter schools and few of the conversion charter schools we visited provided transportation for their students. In the few instances where transportation was provided, it was generally only for students attending a conversion charter school and who lived within the school's former attendance boundaries. In other words, some school districts continued to transport students to conversion schools just as they did before they went charter. Other times, the charter-granting district continued to transport those students participating in voluntary desegregation programs to the charter schools when doing so created better racial balance throughout the district. (It should also be noted that in two of the school districts we studied, transportation was not provided to any regular public school students, although in one of these districts, students were reimbursed for their travel expenses using public transportation.)

This lack of transportation to charter schools limited who could attend these schools of choice. It appears that only those residing within the school's prior attendance boundaries, those few students participating in a voluntary transfer plan in one district, or those with – e.g. a car, flexible working hours, the time, etc. – to get themselves to the school site could enroll or stay enrolled in charter schools.

Student Academic Requirements and Discipline/Expulsion Practices

As we have discussed in earlier sections of this report, charter schools often state explicit expectations and requirements of students, in terms of academic performance, effort, and behavior, in their charter proposals and policies. Unlike other public schools, charters are legally able to enforce these student requirements, mainly through the use of contracts and discipline/expulsion policies.

All but four of the charter schools we visited had such requirements, policies, and/or contracts in place. Educators at these schools could ask students to leave if they or their parents do not "live up to the charter" or the contract. In other words, students who are seen as not "trying hard enough," are frequently tardy or absent, or who misbehave (as defined by the school's conduct code) may be kicked out of these charter schools. As one parent at Monument Charter School commented, "It is nice to have some 'teeth' when you need 'teeth' as far as discipline and having children be accountable for themselves and the work." A teacher at the same school expressed a similar sentiment about the student contract:

> ". . . I just feel that it holds the students and the parents much more responsible, and it's much easier for us as teachers and [for] our principal to enforce our rules and our standards and our expectations. And I think that our school has very minimal discipline problems because of that. It's made a huge difference, huge."

Montera Charter High School had an academic probation policy in place, which an administrator referred to as a way to get rid of students who were not trying hard enough. An attendance policy specified that if a student missed class a certain number of times, he or she automatically failed the course. The school also had a rule that every three tardies to a class equaled a failing grade. Students who did not improve their attendance were sent back to other public high schools. This administrator also talked about enforcing the school's dress code as a way to control who is in and who is out.

In a discussion of the purpose of the student and parent contracts at Liberty Middle School, a teacher noted that if families there did not fulfill the requirements of the contract, the student could be asked to go elsewhere. She remarked, "It cut through the red tape, a lot of the red tape, other schools would have to go through [to expel students]. [The founder's] idea was that he didn't want people taking up space, you know, he wanted kids and families that wanted to learn here."

Thus, many of the charter schools we visited reserved the right to ask students to leave who did not fulfill the schools' expectations and requirements and we know that several charter schools in our study required students to leave. Yet it is unclear how often students were actually asked to leave versus parents removing them from the school on their own, sometimes with prompting from staff at the charter school. This is an important topic – who leaves charter schools, how, and why – which should be the focus of future research on charter schools.

Parent Involvement Requirements

Charter schools also frequently specify expectations and requirements of parents. And unlike other public schools, charter schools are able to enforce these parent requirements, mainly through the use of contracts. As we mentioned, the SRI (1997) study found that 75 percent of the 98 California charter schools surveyed required parents to sign a contract upon enrolling their children. For start-up charter schools, the percentage was 86, and for conversion charters, it was 64 percent.

Furthermore, as we discussed in Findings #1 and #2, claims about charter school reform often include arguments about how these schools will be more accountable to parents and others. But, in our study, we found that many charter schools are also holding parents accountable to the schools through the use of parental requirements and contracts. Seven of the charter schools we visited required parents to sign contracts asking them to conduct a variety of tasks, including reading to their children, going over homework, and encouraging "appropriate" student behavior.

However, charter schools' most common requirement for parents was that they volunteer at the school and participate in school activities, either a certain number of hours or events per school year. Many of the charters reserved the right to ask families to leave if parents did not meet these requirements. They could also deny families admission to the school if parents cannot agree to fulfill the requirements of the charter. SRI (1997) reported that 32 percent of the charter schools in their study had denied families admission to their schools due to parents not being able to fulfill a parental involvement requirement. This was more likely to have occurred in start-up charter schools, 37 percent, versus conversion schools, 27 percent.

A parent at Monument Charter School described the benefit of holding families accountable to the school, ". . . Every single parent is accountable, along with their child. We sign contracts, and because the parent knows the child is accountable, and the child knows the parent is accountable, you have a lot better team work. And you just have a much better cooperative atmosphere in your school."

Regarding parent involvement in charter schools, our data also indicate that some parents had difficulty meeting this requirement. Some groups of parents had less time than others to be involved at the school, often because of their work, family, or childcare situations. And, parents who lived far from the school site, for instance, had more trouble getting to campus. Thus, even when charter schools are serving low-income students, schools with parent contracts are likely to attract the most involved parents within those communities.

Furthermore, there appeared to be a relationship between the status and social class of the parents and the tasks charter schools asked them to conduct. The schools recruited some parents, to assist in classrooms, teach enrichment seminars, and serve on school governance councils. Other parents were asked to clean campus facilities, chop vegetables for a fundraising project, or cut out construction paper materials at home. Not only does this range of activities raise questions about what counts as parent involvement in schools and how it translates into greater success for students, but it also raises concerns about some parents' participation being valued more than others, often depending on their professional background, access to resource networks, educational level, and English language proficiency. In general, less-educated and less-professional parents are more likely to be cleaning the school than they are helping with the academic aspects of the schools. While this differenciation may be true in most schools with high levels of parent involvement, because charter schools can require parents to volunteer these issues are more prominent.

Still, we found a range in terms of charter schools' willingness to enforce the parent contracts. Some charter schools did not allow students to re-enroll when parents do not fulfill the required volunteer time or participate in enough school activities. Yet the principal of one charter school in our sample said, ". . . the parent involvement commitment, in reality, is not something that we enforce, it's just an expectation."

Again, it was not always clear whether families who left the charters were asked to leave or whether they simply removed themselves. It is possible that the charter schools' right not to allow

families to re-enroll if they did not meet the parent involvement requirements served as a way to scare families into either abiding by the school rules or leaving on their own.

The way that many charter schools value parent participation was illustrated by a staff member who coordinates parent volunteers at Academic Charter School:

> [A]lthough we do provide work for our parents to take home, we prefer them to actually come in here so they can meet other parents, you know, our students, our staff, and get a better idea of what their children are learning at our school. . . Once you get to know the parent and you get to know the family, you know what to expect and you know what type of jobs to offer them and how to work with them.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #9

Our data indicate that while charter schools provide additional educational options to at least some of the parents and students in their local communities, the charter schools themselves have a far greater ability to shape who enrolls and who does not compared to most other public schools. Our study raises questions about whether all families have access to increased educational choice through charter reform.

Through mechanisms related to enrollment, transportation, and student and parent contracts, charter schools can serve targeted groups of students - often students with the most involved parents regardless of socioeconomic status. Becker, Nakagawa, and Corwin (1997) focused on the use of parent contracts in California charter schools and raised a similar concern:

> Although charter schools were created to allow parents greater choice in the kinds of schools their children attend, the outcome of the contracts may be to give schools greater choice in the kinds of parents they have involved and the kinds of children they educate. (Becker et. al. p 534)

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FINDING #10

The requirement that charter schools reflect the racial/ethnic makeup of their districts has not been enforced. Other demographic differences between charter schools and nearby public schools exist and vary by local context.

Given what we learned about the mechanisms charters can employ to control who is a part of their communities, we sought to understand the possible impact of these efforts on who is being served by charter schools. This section summarizes the demographics of the student populations in the charter schools, focusing on racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition. Also, we provide brief overviews regarding students served in these charters with bilingual or special education needs.

First of all, we must note that in many of the conversion charter schools, the student populations were the same as they were before the school became a charter school. Therefore, student populations that are not representative of the surrounding school district cannot always be attributable to the schools having gone charter. In addition, when choosing the districts and schools to study, we intentionally included sites that represented a range of student compositions – some homogeneous and some heterogeneous, particularly with regard to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Our data regarding student composition at the charter schools we visited, therefore, are included here only to illustrate the range of students we saw served by charter schools as compared to their surrounding district populations and are not to be generalized to the entire population of California charter schools. Still, when applicable, we relate our data to the statewide data from SRI (1997) study.

Composition of Student Populations

Race/Ethnicity. It is important to remember that the California law states that all charter schools should include in their chartering petitions the means by which the school "will achieve a racial and ethnic balance among its pupils that is reflective of the general population residing within the territorial jurisdiction of the school district to which the charter petition is submitted." We have learned that many schools do not actually address these issues. In

fact, another study has shown that a third of the charter schools in California, in fact, merely reiterate the wording of the law in their proposals, often stating that should racial/ethnic balance become a problem, the school would decide how to deal with it at that point (Lopez, 1997).

In 10 of the 17 schools we studied, at least one racial or ethnic group was over- or under-represented by 15 percent or more in comparison to their districts' racial make up. In eight of these schools, the percentages were off by more than 15 percent for two or more racial or ethnic groups. In three of these schools, the charter seemed to have lessened the level of racial/ethnic diversity in the student population because the schools specifically targeted and attracted students from particular non-White racial/ethnic groups in accordance with specific curricular or pedagogical foci of the school. And, in two of these schools, the charter seemed to limit racial/ethnic diversity by using mechanisms such as admissions requirements or parent and student contracts to make demands of families that most regular public schools cannot legally enforce.

Furthermore, as we mentioned, the SRI (1997) report found that White students were over-represented in charter schools by 8 percent statewide while Latino students were under-represented by 6 percent in terms of statewide averages. The percentages of African-American and Asian students in the public schools and charter schools were virtually the same. But these White-Latino gaps were even wider in certain schools and districts. For instance, in 19 percent of charter schools, the percentage of White students enrolled exceeded the district average White enrollment by at least 25 percent. In 18 percent of the charter schools, Latino students were less than the district percentage by more than 25 points (SRI, 1997). Furthermore, as we noted earlier, the RPP study (1997) found that 37 percent of the charter schools, as opposed to 17 percent of the public schools in California, had student enrollments that were 80 to 100 percent White.

It is fairly clear that the state is not enforcing requirements that charter schools reflect the racial/ethnic make-up of their districts. Still, we note that having student populations that are less diverse racially/ethnically than the surrounding district student population is not unique to charters. In many, but not all, of the districts we studied, this was the norm for public schools. If the purpose of the California law, however, was to encourage charter schools to be more racially and ethnically diverse than most public schools, the legislature should have provided additional assistance to charter schools in terms of incentives, mechanisms for information dissemination and student recruitment, and transportation of students from racially segregated communities. Since the legislation includes none of these mechanisms, we are not hopeful that many charter schools will be able to meet the requirement of racial/ethnic balance even when it is their intent.

We should also note that three of the schools we studied were specifically designed in part to serve the needs of particular racial/ethnic groups. Two of these schools specifically designed their curriculum and instruction to focus on the racial/ethnic groups they enrolled. Although these schools did not overtly exclude students of other racial or ethnic groups, their missions and recruitment strategies led to the creation of one-race schools. Given the purpose of these schools and the history of discrimination and oppression these particular racial groups have experienced in our society, a strong argument can be made to exclude these schools from the racial balance criteria stated in the law. We do not believe, however, that the same excuses can be made on the part of predominantly White schools.

Socioeconomic Status. To assess socioeconomic diversity in charter schools, we used free/reduced lunch percentages as an index of socioeconomic status (SES). Five of the seventeen schools we studied, all of them start-ups, did not receive any free/reduced lunch funding and were not keeping track of such data. Of the twelve charter schools that did receive free/reduced lunch funding, half of them had student populations representative of the rest of the district (meaning there was not more than a 10 percent difference). Of the remaining six schools, three had percentages of students receiving free/reduced lunches that were at least 15 percent more than their district averages; and, three had percentages that are at least 15 percent less than their district averages.

Using free/reduced lunch qualification as an indicator of socioeconomic status, SRI found that 36 percent of the charters they surveyed had proportions of students eligible for free/reduced lunch that were more than 20 percentage points less than non-charters in the same district. Another 38 percent of charter schools had proportions of students eligible for free/reduced lunch that were between 20 and zero percentage points less than in the non-charters in the same district.

Data Table.....Student Information

Data Source Year	School or District	Total # Students	White %	African-American %	Asian/ Pacific Islander %	Latino %	Native American %	Other %	Free/Reduced Price Meals %	LEP (96/97) %	Special Ed (sch report) %
97/98	Academic Charter School	140	0%	42.3%	0%	56.3%	1.4%	0%	79.6%	17.6%	NA
97/98	Community Chater School **	180	**	**	**	**	**	**	84.1%	40.9%	10 %
97/98	Directions High School	100	39.8%	16.3%	16.3%	18.4%	2.0%	7.1% (Filipino)	0%	0%	2%
97/98	Foundation Elementary Charter School **	160	**	**	**	**	**	**	37.8%	0%	1%
97/98	Franklin Charter Academy	1280	4.5%	9.3%	0.4%	85.4%	0.2%	0.2%	52.2%	62.4%	7.2%
97/98	Heritage Charter School **	70	**	**	**	**	**	**	*	0%	N/A
97/98	Imperial Way Charter School	1040	0.6%	3.9%	0.1%	95.3%	0.1%	0%	97.7%	83.9%	6.3%
97/98	Liberty Elementary School	420	70.2%	2.8%	3.1%	22.9%	0.5%	0.5% (Filipino)	21.5%	6.6%	0%
97/98	Liberty Middle School	530	74.6%	3.2%	1.9%	19.1%	0.4%	0.9% (Filipino)	13.6%	7.3%	0%
97/98	Montera Charter High School	2480	32.7%	29.7%	9.6%	27.5%	0.2%	0.4% (Filipino)	15.4%	13.1%	6%
97/98	Monument Charter School	700	70.4%	1.3%	3.7%	22.8%	1.4%	0.3% (Filipino)	34.5%	14.7%	7% (96/97)
97/98	Mountain Peak Charter School	110	82.0%	0%	0%	15.3%	1.8%	.09 (Filipino)	0%	0%	NA
97/98	Pangea Charter Academy	480	17.3 %	14.5%	30.0%	26.4%	0.9 %	10.9% (Filipino)	56.6%	25.1 %	10%
97/98	Shoreline Charter School	180	71.6 %	3.4%	7.4%	17.0%	0%	0.6 % (Filipino)	0%	0.6%	2%
97/98	Ursa Independent Charter School	2610	15.6 %	56.8%	4.6 %	20.2%	1.1 %	1.7 % (Filipino)	0%	0%	NA
97/98	Valley Home School	1490	87%	3.8%	1.2%	6.4%	1.1 %	0.6 % (Filipino)	0%	0%	NA
97/98	Wilson Elementary	710	18.1 %	27.2%	27.4%	26.5%	0.3 %	1.5 % (Filipino)	88.5%	42.4%	8%

Source: Ed Data, with the exception of special education enrollment, which is school-reported data.

* Data not available

All data are from 1997-98 except where indicated

** These schools have approximately 100% of a certain racial/ethnic group and are not listed specifically to ensure confidentiality of study participants

N/A means Not Applicable because these schools did not provide special education services and thus did not identify special education students

Special Education. In terms of special education, five of the charters we studied, all start-ups, did not receive any special education funding and provided no special education services. Three of the charter schools that did receive special education funds served a smaller percentage (five percent or less) of special education students as the rest of the district public schools.

Regarding special education, SRI (1997) found little difference between the proportion of children served in charter versus other public schools. They did find, however, that 26 percent of the start-up charters in their study had no students receiving special education, compared to only six percent of the conversion charters.

Bilingual Education. For bilingual education, we used percentages of (Limited English Proficient) LEP students as an indicator. Of the 17 schools we studied, eight served similar percentages of LEP students compared to their district averages (meaning there is not more than a 12 percent difference). Five charter schools, all start-ups, served percentages of LEP students that were at least 15 percent less than their district averages. And two charter

schools, both conversions, served percentages of LEP students that were at least 15 percent more than their district averages.

To measure bilingual education, SRI (1997) also considered the proportions of students in charters identified as LEP. It found a smaller proportion of students in charters were LEP compared to other public schools, 20 percent and 24 percent, respectively. Charter schools also served smaller proportions of LEP students compared to non-charter public schools in the same district. Furthermore, 53 percent of the start-up charter schools in their study reported having no LEP identified students, compared to only 17 percent of the conversion charters.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #10

According to the statewide data the greatest demographic differences between charter schools and their school district populations were the race and ethnicity of the students – the one aspect of student demographics that is addressed in the law. Obviously, neither the State of California nor most of the local districts granting the charters are paying much attention to this aspect of the law. Why then, should we assume that the State or charter granting agency has much authority to enforce other aspects of the law?

As for the differences between charter schools and nearby public schools regarding SES, special education, and LEP, they appeared to be smaller overall, but there were large ranges on a school-by-school basis. If the future of charter schools in California were to be comprised of mostly start-up charters, these differences could grow.

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FINDING #11

Teachers in charter schools value their freedom, relatively small classes and esprit de corps, but heavy workloads are an issue.

One of the less pronounced claims stated by charter school proponents is that this reform, through the autonomy it offers schools, will empower educators to better serve their students (see Shanker, 1988; Contreras, 1995). On the issue of empowerment, our primary findings are mixed.

First, the teachers in our study found great satisfaction in the intimate, personal settings that small charter schools offered and took professional pride in being among a select group of school reform pioneers. Yet, many of these teachers, inundated by non-classroom responsibilities, struggled with weariness and exhaustion, and openly speculated about their ability to sustain their level of commitment over the long haul.

In fact, across all 17 schools in our study, teachers described tensions between the positive attributes of working at a charter school – often related to their smaller size and closer relationships among students, parents, and other teachers – and the possibility of "burn-out" brought on by increased non-instructional responsibilities, time scarcity, and fatigue.

Second, teachers in the charter schools we studied commonly described themselves and their colleagues as being distinct from other public school educators, members of an elite corps of professionals possessing the "right stuff" to succeed in these autonomous schools. This charter "spirit" permeated our conversations with teachers, suggesting a certain cachet that accompanied working at a charter school. At the same time, this pride of association – particularly for teaching veterans – was tempered by a very real concern about the adequacy of salaries, job stability, and health benefits. In several of our sites, these concerns prompted veteran teachers to return to traditional public schools, leaving the charter school staffs that were young and energetic, but short on experience.

Because this section focuses on teachers' experiences in 17 charter schools, it should be noted that "teachers" are defined differently across the sites. Although teachers, facilitators, and educational specialists sometimes differ in professional training and responsibilities, we have grouped them together to include the voices of all the adults who shared responsibility for teaching and student learning.

Teachers Value the Small Size and Intimacy of Charter Schools

As illustrated in our Table on School Information, 10 of the 17 charter schools in our study could be considered small schools by California standards. In other words, they were elementary schools with fewer than 350 students, and middle schools or high schools with less than 600 students. All but three of these 10 schools that we consider to be small were new start-up charter schools.

Teachers at these schools reiterated the value of a small school community. At Foundation Elementary, a start-up charter school, one teacher commented on the importance of keeping schools intimate, "I just really like the small size. . . it's just a small atmosphere. We don't have ten different lunch periods, we have two . . . so it's more intimate. I know a lot of the kids [by] name, I know what they're up to, and they come in and work with me. . ."

At Heritage Elementary, which served an ethnically distinct student population, one teacher noted that charter schools change the nature of schooling, "It becomes personal, it becomes private, it becomes special, and you can't get that at a public school . . . you cannot meet those needs in any public school system, or private school system."

Yet, even many larger charter schools tried to capture some of the benefits of smallness and intimacy by lowering their class sizes. In fact, the charter schools in our study offering home-based instruction or independent study took class-size reduction to its logical conclusion, "We offer a class size of one!" the Ursa director told us.

Furthermore, many of the conversion charter schools made efforts to cap school enrollments and keep class sizes small. Although these size-reduction strategies significantly overlapped with a statewide push to trim K-3 classes to 20 students each, conversion charter schools wielded greater control over their numbers than traditional public schools and often expanded the class size reduction effort beyond the third grade.

For example, Monument Elementary, whose district enrollment was growing steadily, capped all of its classes in grades K-5 at 28 students each. The decision to cap class size resulted in a large waiting list of students wishing to enroll.

In fact, the ability to shrink class sizes played a central role in Monument's educators' decision to convert to charter status. "I had 37 kids," one teacher told us, referring to her experience at Monument before it when charter. "So I was definitely in the mood for . . . a change in that situation. During that year, some parents and [the principal] had been playing around with the idea [of] becoming a charter . . . and I think most of us felt that we needed to get control of the class size."

Fear of Burn-out/Being Stretched Too Thin

Despite the attractiveness of working at small charter schools, teachers were aware of some of the costs of staying small. Community Charter School exemplified the benefits and drawbacks of working in a small, conversion charter. In sharing her enthusiasm for the school with us, one teacher remarked, "Having a small staff that has a lot to say is really wonderful, and it's overwhelming sometimes because there is so much that we all need to do above and beyond our teaching."

Tensions surrounding Community's operations are magnified by the relative inexperience of its staff. Thus, while the same teacher felt overwhelmed by non-instructional demands on top of "dealing with curricular issues and management issues," she loved working with a small group of colleagues who held a "common vision and respect for the kids," and who "share ideas and frustrations because it feels safe." At the same time, she wondered whether she was being stretched too thin by the extended time commitment she made for the school – a commitment that offered little financial reward and that may be difficult to sustain year after year. "We have a commitment to the kids," she said, "but I feel like, in our society. . . being committed to human beings means being a martyr."

Community Charter School also demonstrated how the drawbacks of having a small school staff can affect the classroom. One teacher at Community Charter School recognized that having fewer staff members potentially jeopardized subject-matter expertise, "One thing about teaching in a small school is that we have to cover everything, so I'm teaching Spanish as a second language, which I don't feel particularly well-prepared to teach. . . in a small school you have to be flexible, and for now, that's how we're doing it."

Even at larger charter schools in our study, many teachers battled physical exhaustion. At Imperial Way Elementary, one of the first charter schools in California, years of intense demands outside of the classroom have left some teachers reeling and many have moved on to other jobs. One teacher described "meetings beyond belief . . . Mostly four nights a week."

Another teacher at the same school warned teachers who were considering joining a charter school to "be in very good physical

shape. Inform your family you won't be seeing them as much as you intended until it gets off on its legs."

The cumulative effect of these stresses may be to foster schools where teachers turn over every few years as people mature and look for less frenetic settings. Many of the schools in our study, particularly the start-up charter schools, had unusually high levels of teacher turnover. One school with eight teachers lost six of them in one year.

Even teachers firmly committed to the dynamic, reform-minded spirit of charter schools expressed reservations about their ability to keep veteran teachers. One Imperial way teacher confided:

> We put in the time, we put in the long hours, and now it's time that I have to look at me – where am I going to go with charter? As far as charter school, I think it's great, I think the teachers that get hired…come here for interviews because they want the challenge, because they want the reconstruction of education to happen, and they're open to the long hours and the new ideas. I think it's a success, but we don't have the support to support the people that stay on. And it's not going to be a success if the support does not happen. You're going to have a turn over every five years if that's the way it stays.

What this data show is that the smaller, more intimate settings that many charter schools offer are often seen as the most central benefit of this reform. At the same time, this benefit as well as the lack of support, can and often does lead to quick burn-out.

Charter Teachers Share Esprit de Corps

In addition to being both challenged and invigorated by charter school reform, the teachers in the charter school we studied often differentiated themselves from teachers in regular public schools. Typically, they considered themselves to be harder working, more committed, and more professional than their public school counterparts. For example, at Directions High School, one teacher praised his colleagues:

> I like the striving for excellence. I mean the people that are here also want to be here. It's not just some school that we're assigned to. And so they all have that spirit. So you're with your fellow idealists – or fools, maybe– and that's nice to have in common with everybody else. And everybody knows everybody, and I like that. I like starting out with something, and feel like I'm helping to build it.

While there was no consensus around what it means to be a charter school teacher, our data reveal emergent attempts by teachers to define their role as different from conventional, and sometimes unsavory, portrayals of public school teachers. For instance, in the majority of schools in our study, teachers saw themselves as "mavericks" or "rebels," willing to push against the district bureaucracy and to structure their teaching more progressively than other schools. Teachers expressed a greater sense of efficacy, in part because they were able to obtain the materials and support they need.

Furthermore, at almost all of the schools we studied, teachers spoke of a boost in pride that resulted from charter school status. These experiences, emerging from in-depth interviews with teachers, suggest that the perception of power and control that comes with charter status makes teachers feel more professionally capable.

However, while we found the esprit de corps effect led to a new professional identity for teachers in almost all charter schools, the majority of the teachers we spoke to did not see a direct link between this increased professional identity and changes in how they taught. Most teachers could not say what it was that they do in a charter school that they could not have done in a regular public school, indicating that their new professional identity may be based on factors other than their teaching practice.

This seemed to be particularly true at most of the conversion schools, where, as we mentioned above, the purpose of going charter often was not so much about restructuring the curriculum or teaching as it was about using funds in different ways. Yet, even in some of the start-up charter schools where the instructional program had not been the focus of the school's founding, teachers simply brought with them their same techniques and methods.

For instance, one veteran teacher working at a new start-up charter school said, "Once we get into our classrooms, my style of teaching [goes] back to the way it has always been."

On the other hand, there is evidence, particularly in a few of the small, start-up charter schools where virtually all the teachers were hired because of their common vision of teaching and learning, that the concentration of these like-minded teachers in small and more flexible schools has created a synergy that changed the daily teaching practices, especially for the younger, less experienced teachers.

A new teacher at Shoreline Charter School spoke to us about this type of synergy at her school:

> I look for the best educational practices. That is part of what the staff does, especially because I don't know any better. In some way, coming here was really easy for me because I wasn't trying to break any traditional thought. I was a blank slate and so what was put in front of me were the best instructional practices, and great – OK – this is how you do it. So, OK, this is how I will do it.

In many of these small, start-up schools, the more "maverick" charter school teachers could push the school in one direction or another, and succeed in making school-wide changes in how teachers interacted with and taught students. Some of these changes could have been made on a more ad hoc basis without a charter, but the type of coordinated holistic changes we witnessed in these small charter schools probably would not have happened had these educators not been working in those particular school settings with that particular mix of teachers.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #11

While small charter schools and those able to curtail class size provided deeply satisfying working conditions for the teachers in our study, they also made substantial demands on teachers' time and energy that may be difficult to sustain over time. For now, charter school teachers were proud of their commitment to these new schools, which, they suggested, often distinguished them from counterparts in more traditional settings. However, in terms of instructional practices – classroom organization, curriculum, and pedagogy, for example – we found that the majority of charter school teachers employed techniques commonly found in non-charter public schools. Thus, while charter school teachers enjoyed changed relationships with staff and students, the instructional core remained similar to other public settings. Still, there were notable exceptions to this rule among a handful of small, start-up charter schools that maintained an overarching instructional focus.

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FINDING #12

Although not obliged to do so, charter schools for the most part continue to employ teachers with regular state credentials.

Although charter schools almost always reserve the right to hire non-credentialed teachers, they rarely exercised this option. This finding suggests that charter school founders value the concept of "at-will" employment, but also recognize the importance of having professionally trained educators on staff. However, teachers' credentials are not valued for the skills that they connote as much as the credibility they add.

Teaching Credentials Valued by Charter Schools

Although charter schools were free – prior to the 1998 amendments to the charter school legislation – to hire non-credentialed teachers, the schools in our study hired mostly credentialed teachers, or at least those with emergency credentials. Some charter schools hired credentialed teachers because their sponsoring districts required it, while others hired certified teachers because it provided them with a measure of credibility. The link to teachers' professional status was clear: despite the persistent critique of the credentialing process, there is a perception among many parents and voters that teachers who have been trained in colleges and universities and certified by the state are more qualified to teach.

Nonetheless, a teaching credential was not crucial in all cases. Charter school operators and often parents enjoyed the flexibility they have to hire outside instructors to teach non-core, vocational, or enrichment classes. At Mountain Peak independent study charter school, a consultant pointed out "we have flexibili-

ty . . . because not all of our teachers need to have regular credentials. It is nice because we have hired people that have certain business experience [e.g. paramedics] . . . We would like to do that in the medical and computer areas."

The hiring of credentialed or non-credentialed teachers often involved other issues, such as membership in the teachers' union. In the Mission Unified School District, for example, teachers at charter schools were not all part of the district's collective bargaining agreement. So-called "charter teachers," or teachers who were hired through the charter schools and not through the district hiring process, were often paid less than other teachers, and did not have the same protections. However, at Franklin Charter Academy, one of the district's conversion charter schools, the charter agreement called for new hires to receive the same benefits and protections that other district employees enjoyed. The insistence that new teachers be treated equally reflected strong union leadership in the school.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #12

With respect to credentialing, charter schools may not represent a radical departure from the existing system. Although charter schools routinely reserve the right to hire teachers without formal training in education, teaching credentials still are valued.

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FINDING #13

Teachers in conversion charter schools tend to continue to belong to teachers' unions, but those in start-up schools do not.

We found that charter school teachers were divided in their support for teachers' unions, yet were often eager to retain the benefits that unions commonly provide – such as increased job security and access to insurance and pension provisions. At the school level, conflicts between unions and the goals of charter school reform – often rife at both the district and state policy making levels – were far less notable. Instead, only one of the eight conversion charter school in our study, all of which had their teachers as part of a union before going charter, opted out of union membership. Meanwhile, all of the start-up schools we studied were established as and remained non-union.

For instance, Wilson Elementary School, a conversion charter school in the Central Unified School District, opted to retain rights negotiated by its union. According to one Central Unified school board member, teachers at the charter school were eager to hold on to seniority and retirement benefits and "did not want to cut the placenta from the baby." Instead, Wilson's director arranged for the school to remain part of the union and part of the district.

Yet union negotiations did not work out as well for educators at another conversion charter school, Imperial Way – the only conversion charter school in our study where teachers were no longer part of the union. After years of working in the charter school while retaining their district-wide collective bargaining rights, teachers at Imperial Way were forced to decide between staying at the school or staying in the union due to a dispute over how much money this independent charter school would pay into the district teachers' retirement fund.

While much of the staff, particularly the less senior teachers, decided to stay with the school, several veteran teachers chose to leave. Because staying with the school meant breaking with the district's retirement plan and job security, teachers with years invested in the system were most likely to return to the district. Despite their attachment to the charter school, they valued the bargaining rights provided by the union – rights which became less predictable once the school opted out of the district's union agreement.

Meanwhile, at Directions High School, a non-union start-up charter, one school founder discussed tensions that arose with local union officials over hiring practices:

> I was yelled at very vociferously by three union people . . . because we were not going to require certified teachers. We encourage certification, I'd say almost all of our applications are [from] certified teachers, [but] we're not going to require it . . . if we have a Ph.D. who's an expert in biology and proves that he or she can teach young people well, we'll hire them, whether they're certified or not.

Another start-up charter school, Shoreline, moved proactively to reduce union appeal. Many of the parents and local school board members who helped to found the charter school wanted to avoid unionization. A board member recounted that "we agreed early on that we would not support the teachers union . . . We would work together with them, but the community [was] almost unanimously opposed to union activities at all."

In order to get the local teachers' union to go along with the deal, the district signed an agreement stating that no public school teacher in the district would lose his or her job as a result of the charter opening. Meanwhile, the charter school offered its teachers equivalent pay and performance bonuses.

Because they distinguished themselves from other public school teachers, some charter school teachers argued that organizations designed to promote teachers' interests – such as unions – are less necessary.

While the push and pull between unions and charter schools mimics national debates over the changing roles of unions in the American workforce, the impact of the this debate, at the local level, was modest. Rather than recoiling from the union as soon as they were granted a charter, all of the conversion schools in our study (except for Imperial Way) maintained their union contracts. Similarly, none of the start-up charter schools, non-unionized at the outset, have become unionized. Thus, charter schools encompass a diversity of attitudes toward union affiliation.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING #13

Charter schools, at least in California, do not necessarily spell the demise of teachers unions. Instead, we found, with one exception, stasis between union relationships before and after the decision to go charter. In the 17 schools we studied, conversion schools that are unionized prior to their charter typically remained in the union. Conversely, start-up schools that had no union presence at their inception have not chosen to join the union ranks.

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FINDING #14

There are no mechanisms in place for charter schools and regular public schools to learn from each other.

Our interviews with educators at public schools and district officials in these 10 school districts found few direct effects of charter schools on the ways in which nearby public schools operated and educated children. This does not mean that the charter schools did not sometimes influence the public schools by attracting students and parents who would otherwise have attended nearby schools, or by creating a kind of resentment among public school educators because they saw charter schools as receiving more attention. But these effects have not led to any systematic change in the day-to-day functioning of nearby public schools.

This finding calls into question a central claim of charter school advocates that the parental choice and school-level autonomy of this reform will lead to systemic educational improvements by infusing competition into an otherwise bureaucratic and monopolistic educational system as well as a related argument that charter schools will serve as laboratories for meaningful change in public schools (Hassel, 1997; Hill, 1996; Robelen, 1998; and Nathan, 1996).

Instead, all but two of the 22 public school educators we interviewed reported that they had very little information about what was going on in the charter schools, and nearly all of the educators we interviewed said they saw little if any direct impact of charter schools on their school. "To be brutally frank, they have not had an impact," said one administrator from a nearby school.

This finding presents the perceptions of a limited pool of public school educators. Clearly more research needs to be conducted in this area, although one national study on the "ripple effects" of charter schools on the public system by Rofes (1998) corroborates our main findings.

Interaction/Communication

The degree of interaction and communication between charter and public schools varied from one district and even one charter school to the next, but generally was low. A lot depended, however, on whether or not the principals or directors of the charter schools attended district level meetings with their public school counterparts and whether charter school teachers participated in district meetings and staff development programs.

A teacher at Community Charter, one of the more independent and isolated charter schools in our study, told us when asked about his interaction with non-charter schools in his district, "No, no contact. No, I don't know why."

Another teacher in a different charter school in the same district, when asked about the relationship between the charter school and the district and its schools simply said, "Relationship? Correspondence?"

On the other end of the spectrum were a small number of charter school educators, usually the principals at the converted charter schools, who attended most district meetings and saw part of their purpose as informing their colleagues in the regular public schools about their schools.

Between these two ends of the spectrum were charter school leaders and educators who attended district meetings and interacted with regular public school educators when it was convenient. This large middle group of charter educators were neither trying to forge or avoid relationships with other schools, they were simply doing what they saw as necessary to run their schools.

Generally Not Serving as a Laboratory for the Public Schools

With little regular communication or interaction between the charter schools and the public schools, it is difficult to imagine how charter schools will serve as laboratories for public systems. And in fact, only one of the districts we studied used charter schools in this way. At this particular charter school, Shoreline Charter School, the active and ongoing involvement of the superintendent in the charter and the interest of the charter school director led to a more cooperative relationship between the charter and some of the non-charter schools in the district. For instance, the charter school served as a laboratory regarding technology as well as the science curriculum. Also, Monument Charter School applied for funds to serve as a technology model school for its district.

At Montera Charter High School an active and involved principal forged relationships with other public schools in neighboring districts. Some of these relationships pre-dated the school going charter, but others were created because of new grants the school received to write and implement innovative curriculum pertaining to technology and media. While it is not clear if the school received the grant because it was a charter, the grant has promoted more interaction between charter and regular public schools and thus more opportunity for cross-site learning and collaboration.

Still, these three charter schools stand out in our sample as far more connected to the public schools than were the other charter schools in our study. Most charter schools lacked the time aid resources foe meaningful collaboration.

Furthermore, while several of public school educators said they were sure the charter schools were having some system-wide impact on the public schools, they did not know what that was and had not experienced that impact themselves. Still, others noted that the only impact was a sense of resentment among public school educators because the charters received more attention. As one principal of a public school located near a charter school told us, the "fallout" from the charter is "that just because of the notion of being a charter school, you know there is this picture painted that they are a charter school and they are better than other schools." She said that this was demoralizing for the staff at her schools because they felt like no matter what they did, they were always "in the shadows of the charter…"

A second educator mentioned this sense of resentment, noting that all the nearby charter school got from going charter was a public relations tool, which meant the main effect of the charter school on his own school was a little bit of resentment.

Why They Don't Go Charter

The market/competition theory argues that charter school reform should spur the nearby public schools into action, per-

haps nudging them toward applying for charter status themselves. In reality, however, we found very little interest among the educators we interviewed in engaging in this reform.

When asked why their schools did not apply to become charter schools, these public school educators tended to give four reasons: lack of parent involvement, lack of private resources, lack of time to deal with it, or a lack of political support for the idea among the school's educators or community members.

One principal told us that it would be more difficult for her school to go charter because she could never enforce a parent contract. She talked about how many of her students go to Mexico for part of the year, so it would be hard to enforce. Also, she said the charter school had a very involved parent group that she did not have, "While we have several active parents, we don't have 30 or 40 and this is because ours work, so ours are at work all the time, and they work late in the fields, so they don't normally have time to participate."

Four regular public school administrators cited their lack of resources, particularly private resources, as major barriers to going charter. As one principal explained, she would be interested in going charter but she lacked the necessary funds and fundraising networks:

> I know there is also a lot of fundraising that is involved and they are always looking for benefactors and adopters and they manage to get them too. So they are able to do things that other schools can't do just because they are funded like that and they have that kind of financial backing [see Findings #6 and #7 above].

For some educators the feeling of being overwhelmed by the day-to-day realities of working in poor urban schools seemed to stifle any hopes or ambitions of going charter. For instance, the vice principal of the large urban high school with a 75 percent transiency rate talked about the difficulty of simply getting through a normal day before taking on any major reform such as charter schools. "Just the daily work… we begin our [daily paperwork] here at 4 o'clock. The paperwork – letters of recommendation for our children to go to colleges, anything of that nature – I would normally [at her previous non-poor school] have done during school time, I do after school or at home with the computer."

And finally, several of the public school educators noted that they did not have the level of support from the teachers or members of their community needed to go charter. Sometimes, they interpreted this as a sign that the schools already were able to adopt the reforms without needing charter status. In other instances, this lack of support was the result of skepticism about what charter school reform was intended to accomplish. For instance, at one high school where the effort to go charter had been debated in the community, some educators and parents feared that this was an effort to change a racially diverse public school into a more racially homogeneous private school and so squelched the call for charter school reform.

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING # 14

We found little evidence in our study to support the claims of charter advocates that charter schools will infuse productive competition into the educational system or that they will serve as vibrant laboratories where regular public schools can learn about meaningful innovations in education. First of all, as we pointed out in several findings above, it is not clear that most charter schools are conducting meaningful innovations in areas other than school finance.

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FINDING #15

Public school educators' belief that charter schools have an unfair advantage inhibits competition that would, in theory, force improvements

The perceptions of public school educators challenged the simple economic theory that infusing competition into the public system via charter schools would force all educators to work harder and all schools to improve.

The central challenge to this theory came from public school educators who noted that the playing field was not level because the charter school law allows these new innovative schools to do many things their schools cannot, such as requiring parent con-

tracts or a certain number of hours of parent involvement, maintaining more control over their enrollment, hiring with greater autonomy, ignoring certain aspects of the educational code, and filling out less paperwork.

Perceived Unfair Advantage

Several public school educators talked about the advantage that they believed charter schools had over their schools simply because they could require parents to be involved in the school. They spoke of the type of changes they could make at their school sites if they could mandate parental involvement. It is important to note, however, that these public school educators' perceptions were based on what little information they had of the charter schools and their operations. But these perceptions can be powerful when they affect how these educators understand the competitive educational system.

For example, one district official noted that simply having a parent involvement contract attracts certain parents to the charter school – namely those who "understand the nature of contracts" and who have had experiences with contractual relationships. He said that it was likely to be the more educated parents in the community. The relationship of different parents to contracts – by virtue of their professional or personal experiences – seemed to play a subtle but significant role in charter schools that require such contracts.

Others spoke of the ability of charter schools to set enrollment limits while public schools are forced to take whomever shows up on their doorsteps any time during the year. As a vice principal at a large urban high school explained, "We have to take everybody in the community." She noted that charter schools do not need to deal with this "revolving door" enrollment because students who come to them in the middle of the year can be sent to their regular public school. "My teachers have people coming in constantly. . . We have to take everybody. And any time they come," she said.

Furthermore, a few of the educators talked about the ability of charter schools to expel troubled or disruptive students faster and more easily than they could. According to one public school educator:

> If I have a bunch of students who are handicapped, ADD, or whatever you want to call it, and in order to suspend or expel them, I've got to go through a hearing and a tremendous process… If I run a charter school, somehow I can skip all of that work and just sort of give the kid the green slip and send him on his way…[If a charter], I can regulate the kind of problematic students I have in my schools [but] the public schools operating under the education code are held to some very, very demanding due process standards…

As one principal explained, "I would like to have the most interested parents and I would like to have only the best students, but you know, that is just not the way it is." She said that, "We are in the business of educating all students and the parents come along with it and you know, you just have to bring them along the best you can." She added that some people feel that the charter school has turned into an elitist kind of school because it can keep out the parents who cannot abide by these contracts.

Another issue related to the "unfair competition" theme is that charter schools generally have more autonomy than do the regular public schools in hiring staff. One public school principal noted that charter schools have the autonomy to do their own recruitment of teachers and pull from a greater pool of applicants. Another principal noted that she, unlike a charter school, was forced to reassign teachers based on seniority and not necessarily by the skills that people had. "As far as assignments of classrooms we have to go by seniority. We have to go by authorizations. We can't say I, as a principal, think that this teacher is better qualified to teach this program."

Several of the public school educators talked about how they were still bound by all the regulations of the state education code and thus the paperwork that comes with it, while the charter schools had much more freedom to spend time on their school programs. For instance, they cited compliance reviews for state and federal categorical programs. Yet we know from our data collection at the charter schools that the degree of freedom charter schools enjoyed from such regulations varied tremendously from one district to the next and even one charter school to the next.

Enrollment Impact

Beyond the "unfair competition" issue was the one area in which several public schools report a direct, if not major, impact of the

charter school: student and parent enrollment. In other words, the most immediate impact of charters on nearby public schools was the transfer of students and parents between the two. This was a major issue for seven of the public schools in our sample.

A principal of a large urban junior high school located near a charter school explained her frustration with the charter:

> The only thing that I can speak to is that my infrequent experience with it [a nearby charter school] is very often we will get kids from them from let's say mid-year who did not make it for whatever reason within the framework of their criteria and so therefore the kids get shipped off to another non-charter school to deal with them. That is of concern to me. It is like a private school. It is like saying well, I mean because the public school, you take everyone and you deal with them accordingly…We don't have the luxury of saying we don't want you anymore.

In a more rural and suburban school district, a principal of an elementary school near a charter noted that the parent contract at the charter school, created fallout:

> …That is part of fall out that happens from having a charter school… We have some of those parents that, you know, perhaps didn't want to meet, those obligations at the charter school and have ended up coming to us… that would be a real benefit if we had some leverage. At this point, we don't have any leverage. We are a public school… so we don't have that leverage… I think that is the most beautiful part of being a charter.

Yet, we did not just hear of this issue from public school educators but also from some of the parents and educators at the charter schools. For example, one parent who also works as a part-time teacher at a suburban charter school explained that:

> I think one of the hardest things for some of the other elementary schools was that they lost some of the parents who were the most active and who really were willing to put a lot of time into the school… I've heard people say, 'Oh, we lost [a particular parent] to the charter.' They see it as losing people to the charter, and they did to a certain extent.

Non-charter educators spoke of charter schools in some districts having a lot of parents who were free during the day. Most of their parents, they noted in contrast, needed to work during the day. According to one principal, "So I think… the biggest effect [from the charter school] that our teachers feel is that we don't have as much, we don't have as many parents in the classrooms helping and that kind of thing."

CONCLUSIONS - FINDING # 15

The two theories of claims discussed in these last two findings– competition and cooperation – are at odds with each other. In other words, charter school reformers need to decide whether they think they are going to "fix" the public educational system simply by infusing competition or by creating laboratories of innovation. Our findings suggest that the first approach does not work in education. Instead, greater competition leads privileged schools to become more selective in their admissions and leaves less privileged schools with the students that choice schools did not want. The second approach could work, but it will depend on the degree to which charter schools actually make changes that other schools see as valuable and to the extent to which there are incentives and support for both charter schools and regular public schools to work together.

Based on the data we gathered in this study, we found little evidence that either choice or competition served as accountability mechanisms or as a way of improving the overall quality of education. Rather, as have many researchers before us, we have found that choice and competition often lead to greater stratification within the educational system as the higher status schools gain the competitive edge, simply by virtue of enrolling high achieving students, and then become more and more selective, limiting the choices of those who lack access. (See Whitty, 1997 for a review). Charter school reform has the potential to be about so much more than free-market choice and competition. But in order for it to fulfill that potential, the debate about its future needs to be refocused.

CONCLUSION

Our goal was to examine some of the stated assumptions or claims about charter school reform as they relate to the experiences of people in the diverse communities we studied. Looking across our 15 findings, it is clear that in most cases, the experiences of the charter school educators and parents we observed did not support the claims made about charter reform. In other cases the data are less clear, and in a few situations, we found that the claims did work for some of the schools but only some of the time.

Claim #1: Accountability: The central argument for charter schools is that they will be more accountable for the academic achievement of their students than regular public schools. We found, however, that this is not yet happening in California for five reasons:

1. As we explained in Finding #1, there has been no consistent measure of student achievement in charter schools or, for that matter, any public school in California since the charter school law went into effect. Furthermore, most of the chartering documents were vague when it comes to their descriptions of student outcomes or benchmarks for achieving them. This meant that local school boards that grant charters generally had no clear evidence of academic accountability.

2. Charter school educators differed in their understandings of what constitutes academic achievement and thus for what they should be held accountable. Charter schools varied tremendously in terms of the types of learning and knowledge they valued. The freedom to shape school communities enabled charter schools with very different definitions of achievement to bloom – from a school that emphasized the history and culture of one particular ethnic group to another that focused on a more mainstream and back-to-basics approach. Thus, even if a consistent standardized state measure of student outcomes existed, it would not measure what many charter school operators are trying to teach.

3. Many people engaged in charter school reform for non-academic reasons, including creating "safer" school environments through tougher discipline policies and using fiscal flexibility to save money, make money or reallocate money. These "accomplishments" are not measured by standardized student assessments, although they were a very important part of what charter school reform meant to many people.

4. In Finding #2, we noted that there is little consensus at the school or district level regarding to whom the charter schools should be most accountable, and charter school operators often resisted efforts to be held accountable to anyone but their own parents and community constituents. Meanwhile, school boards stressed fiscal as opposed to academic accountability for charter schools because they lacked information on student outcomes, they were used to playing this type of accountability role in the public system, and they often lacked the political clout to hold popular charter schools to a higher standard than other public schools.

5. As we noted in Finding #9, many charter schools used selective recruitment strategies, employed screening devices, or required parents or students to sign contracts before enrolling. Therefore, many charter schools had a self-selected pool of students, often better behaved or with more involved parents than other students in their local communities. Due to this self-selection and the lack of baseline data for students in charter schools, accountability systems relying on one-shot test score data may really measure how successful charter schools are at choosing more motivated students rather than how well these schools teach their students.

Public Policy Implications: If charter schools are to be held accountable, a new system of accountability must be devised. Such a system must be broader and more comprehensive than a single standardized test. It must recognize charter schools' range of academic and non-academic goals and balance them against the public's need to know how these more independent schools are spending tax dollars. Furthermore, charter school petitioners should be required to be more specific about the goals and intended outcomes in their charter proposals. This information should be made public so that charter schools are accountable to taxpayers and voters. And finally, the measure of academic achievement of students in charter schools should be longitudinal and not just comparisons of one-shot test scores to those from the public school down the street. The self-selection bias inherent in charter schools or other schools of choice needs to be factored into analyses of charter school accountability.

Claim #2: Autonomy and Empowerment: This argument states that in exchange for greater accountability, charter school operators are granted much-needed autonomy from the rule-based educational system and become empowered to better serve students. Our data provide the following responses to this claim.

First, not all charter school operators desired complete autonomy from local school districts. We learned that the degree of autonomy that charter school operators wanted and the amount of autonomy districts were willing to give them varied tremendously from one charter school to the next, even within a single district. In fact, some of the most savvy charter school operators managed to garner a great deal of support from their districts, while at the same time picking and choosing among the other dimensions of autonomy, including the selection of district services. And while some charter schools sought a great deal of autonomy initially, when trouble, questions, or controversy erupted, they often turned to the district's bureaucracy for help.

One area in which virtually all charter schools had considerable freedom was in hiring teachers. Charter school operators consistently cited this as a very important, if not the most important, aspect of their autonomy.

In terms of educator empowerment through greater autonomy, we learned that there are empowering aspects of working in more independent charter schools, but at the same time, these small schools made substantial demands on educators' time and energy that may be difficult to sustain over time. Furthermore, charter school teachers were proud of their commitment to these new schools, which they say distinguished them from counterparts in more traditional schools. Yet, we found that for the majority of charter school teachers, the excitement about charter school reform had not changed the way they taught. Thus, the instructional core remained similar to other public settings, except in a handful of small, start-up charter schools in our study.

And finally, with respect to credentialing and union membership – two important areas in which they have potential autonomy – most charter schools we studied did not represent a radical departure. Although charter schools had the right to hire teachers without teaching credentials, most have not done so because the credential is still valued. Furthermore, we learned that charter schools, at least in California, did not necessarily spell the demise of teachers' unions. Instead, we found that with one exception, conversion school teachers were adamant about maintaining their union ties. Conversely, start-up schools that have no union presence at their inception have not chosen to join.

Public Policy Implications: It is time to rest the tired rhetoric that all bureaucracy is bad and all autonomy from bureaucracy is good. There are many charter schools in California that could not exist without the ongoing support of their local school districts. In fact, policy makers and educators have a lot to learn from charter school operators about which aspects of autonomy are most important – e.g. the freedom to hire teachers – and which aspects of bureaucracy are most supportive. Our data suggest there will not be a lot of agreement about the level of assistance needed across charter schools, but more information on this issue could help frame future debates about how to provide public schools with more autonomy while maintaining supportive bureaucracies.

Claim #3: Efficiency: The claim that charter schools will help prove that most public schools are inefficient by doing more with less public funding was not supported by our data. We found no schools doing "more" with less. Rather, some charter schools – particularly dependent charter schools or those with savvy leaders – were funded at the same levels as other public schools. We also found some poor schools holding their own with less funding, as they functioned without heat, adequate plumbing, science labs, or any athletic facilities. These schools did not seem efficient, just poor.

Many charter schools are able to raise enough private resources to buffer them from the lack of public money. Thus, charter school reform pushed some schools to rely more on private resources. But what makes this reliance on private fund-raising particularly problematic is that different charter schools had dramatically different access to such resources. Charter schools in wealthier areas garnered more community-based resources and support, while the charter schools in the poor communities often were forced to rely on corporate and more external support – or none at all. The schools in our study provide ample evidence that privatization is gaining more ground than is efficiency.

We also learned that charter schools are highly dependent on another critical resource: a visionary and well-connected leader. In addi-

tion to private resources, we found that the day-to-day leadership of a charter school is another crucial component to this reform.

Public Policy Implications: To the extent that charter school reform is going to provide for the students and communities most in need of better educational programs, federal and state funding for charter schools should be targeted to low-income communities that lack the corporate sponsorship necessary to start charter schools. Furthermore, charter school funding sources should be made public and disseminated broadly so that the long-term implications of privatization of public education through charter school reform can be publicly debated.

Claim #4: Choice: Advocates claim that charter schools provided greater educational choices to those families who have had the fewest choices in education. Our data suggest that charter school reform does provide some families with more choices, although they are often not the families who had the fewest options to begin with. Furthermore, this claim ignores another very important finding: namely, that most charter schools were able to choose which parents and students will attend. Through recruitment and requirement mechanisms, including parent and student contracts, charter schools had more power than most public schools to shape their educational communities. These mechanisms made it more difficult for parents to choose charter schools than to enroll their children in a nearby public school.

We also learned that because most charter schools were not able to provide transportation to students, only those students with access to public transportation or a parent with a flexible schedule and a car could really choose to attend a charter school.

Furthermore, charter schools' discipline and expulsion policies tended to be more stringent than those of the regular public schools, thereby influencing who can stay in them. These mechanisms that charter schools used to shape their school communities strongly affected who enrolled.

Public Policy Implications: If a central goal of charter school reform is to provide more choice to parents who historically have had the least, our data suggest that charter schools have too much choice over who attends. In order to assure more parental choice, information about charter schools must be disseminated broadly and the ability of charter schools to maintain stricter discipline codes and mandatory parent involvement contracts must be curtailed. Furthermore, states and districts would need to provide transportation for students who choose charter schools but lack the means to get to them.

Claim #5: Competition: Another claim made by charter supporters states that charter schools will infuse competition into the public educational system, forcing all schools to be more market-driven and thus more responsive to the demands of parents. This claim is not supported by our data, which include little evidence that public schools were, as of yet, instituting reforms as a result of the increased competition brought on by charter school reform.

First, many of the schools and districts we studied faced severe overcrowding as the result of an influx of new students. Thus, fear of a loss of student enrollment was not the issue. Rather, in some schools, the issue was what type of students and parents were leaving the regular public schools to attend charter schools.

In addition, many public school educators scoffed at the notion of competition saying that charter schools had an "unfair advantage" because of their selection criteria mentioned above. This meant that the nearby public schools were educating the students who were not admitted to, or who had been asked to leave, the charter schools.

Public Policy Implications: Political rhetoric about competition as a force to improve education is empty in places where overcrowding is an issue. Furthermore, educators who feel they are being asked to compete on an uneven playing field are less likely to join the game. Thus, any policy that tries to infuse competition into public education should take these two issues into account.

Claim #6: Models of Innovation: A final claim of advocates states that charter schools will offer more innovative approaches to education, thereby serving as models of positive change and reform throughout the system. This assumption is somewhat contradictory to the competition claim above because together the two claims say that schools engaged in intense competition with each other will act collaboratively to help each other. We found neither effect in the districts we studied. Instead, we learned that there were no mechanisms in place for charter schools and regular public schools to learn from each other.

One reason for this lack of sharing was a general lack of communication across the schools, especially in situations where the charter schools were more independent from the districts and where the charters were established to be in direct competition with the public schools. Also, to the extent that charter schools were more innovative in the areas of curriculum and instruction, organization, or use of funds – and some were more innovative in these areas than others – their discoveries were, in all but one case, not shared with the public schools. Thus, we found little evidence that educators in public schools are learning about new innovative ideas from charter school educators.

Public Policy Implications: If charter schools and regular public schools are going to learn from each other, districts or the state will need to help facilitate this interaction. Bringing educators from the different sectors together to share information would be a first step. Also, framing charter school reform as a collaborative as opposed to competitive reform movement would help.

Beyond the Claims of Charter School Advocates

As helpful as it may be to organize our findings around the major claims of charter school advocates, such an approach does not allow us to highlight many of the central equity issues that emerged from our data, in part because so much of the current political discourse in education ignores central equity considerations. In this last section, we reframe the debate around these important issues.

Over the last two-and-a-half years, we have learned that people who work in and send their children to charter schools tend to be highly committed to these schools. Furthermore, we have seen charter schools that have accomplished a great deal in the face of limited public funding. Yet, for all this sense of accomplishment, when we stepped back to look at the bigger picture of what this reform means to the larger public system, we became concerned, particularly about the issue of equity. The six above-mentioned claims are silent on this issue, yet our findings point to several significant equity problems related to the California charter school policy.

Perhaps the most obvious issue is the lack of attention being paid to whether or not California charter schools reflect the racial makeup of their school districts. Despite the fact that this is a clearly stated requirement in the legislation, we found that most charter schools were not in compliance. Even when the charter school operators sought a racially diverse student body, the racial segregation of the local community coupled with no transportation for students made it almost impossible to achieve this goal. Meanwhile, there was virtually no monitoring of this aspect of the law.

While the argument could be made that this requirement should not be imposed on charter schools designed to serve students of color by validating their history and culture, these issues need to be discussed in the context of the current legislation and this country's history of racial discrimination.

Other major equity issues that have been ignored by many of the major advocates of charter school reform include charter schools' role at the forefront of marketization and privatization of the public education system. We are also concerned that some charter schools, particularly those in wealthy communities, have more access to the types of resources that are necessary to create a viable school. Their success in this area could lead to less political support for public funding of education as a whole.

Furthermore, the ability of charter schools to choose their students and families places some at a disadvantage over others. With required parent contracts and limited access to information about charter schools, some parents, especially those without transportation, face serious constraints on any choices they might make. This suggests that the students left behind in the regular public schools are more likely to be those with the least involved and least out-spoken parents or those with more troublesome behavior.

Public Policy Implications: Further research is needed on charter schools, especially research on equity, access, resources, accountability, impact on the public system, and classroom practices.

Unfortunately the debate over charter schools and choice is often silent on these critical policy questions. Unless charter school reform begins living up to some of the assumptions that have propelled it this far, it is time to reassess this magic bullet of school reform. This time we need to raise harder questions about equity.

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For too long, advocates and opponents of charter schools have made and refuted claims in the absence of data. This report introduces data from real schools into this discussion. It provides an overview of findings from one of the first intensive studies of charter school reform in California, the second state to pass charter school legislation and the state with both the second largest number of charter schools and the most students enrolled in these schools. This two-and-a-half year study examined many of the most prominent claims of charter school advocates against the day-to-day experiences of educators, parents, and students in 17 charter schools as well as in nearby public schools in 10 school districts across the state.