

Executive Summary

California's Charter Schools: How Are They Performing?

The second annual EdSource report on charter school performance in California compares charter and noncharter schools on whether they met their Academic Performance Index (API) growth targets for 2004–05. That year, charters enrolled 2.9% of California's students. It also looks at performance trends over the past two years.

The 20-page report compares charters at different grade levels (elementary, middle, and high) and by charter types: conversions versus start-ups and classroom-based versus nonclassroom-based. (See box.)

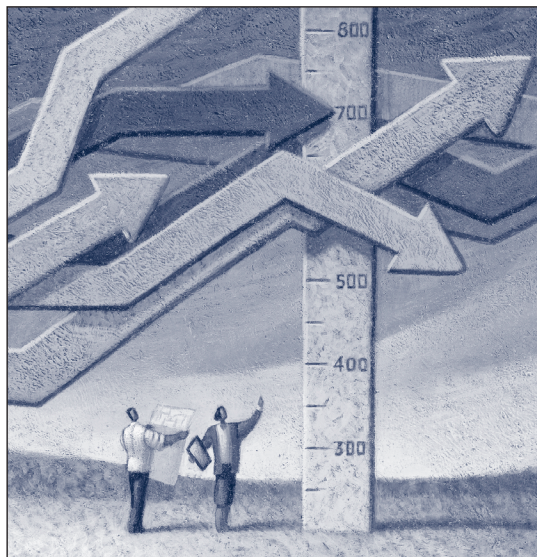
In addition, it uses data gathered from a spring 2005 EdSource survey of California's charter schools to compare the performance of charters providing differing amounts of instructional time and operating under varying degrees of autonomy.

The analysis included 7,418 noncharter public schools and the 355 charter schools that were: open in both 2003–04 and 2004–05; held accountable under the API; and able to report both a 2004 Base API score and a 2005 Growth API score.

Major Findings

Overall, charter schools were more successful in meeting their 2005 growth targets than noncharter schools.

- In 2005, 73% of all California charter schools met their school-



Types of Charter Schools

Conversion. Traditional schools that have become charters.

Start-up. Schools that began from scratch as charters.

Classroom-based. At least 80% of instruction is in a classroom supervised by a teacher.

Nonclassroom-based. Less than 80% of instruction is the classroom-based model. Examples include home schooling, independent study, and distance learning.

wide and subgroup API growth targets compared to 67% of noncharter schools.

Charter elementary and middle schools were more likely than their noncharter counterparts to meet 2005 growth targets, but charter high schools lagged.

- At the elementary level, 78% of charters and 68% of noncharters met targets. For middle schools, those numbers were 76% versus 66%, respectively. (Charter middle schools were few, creating statistical uncertainty about observed differences.)

- Charter high schools lagged behind noncharters in meeting growth targets. Among charters, 64% met targets versus 67% of noncharters, though the results are not statistically significant (meaning they could be the result of random variation).
- Noncharter 10th graders outperformed their charter school counterparts on the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).

Comparing performance by charter type shows that those most like mainstream public schools performed best: higher percentages of conversions met their growth targets compared to start-ups and classroom-based charters were more likely to meet their targets than those not classroom-based.

- 80% of conversion charters compared to 71% of start-ups met targets. But due to the small numbers of schools involved, this seemingly substantial difference is not statistically significant.
- 76% of classroom-based versus 64% of nonclassroom-based charters met targets—a significant difference.
- Interesting, but again not statistically significant, findings included:
 - Classroom-based conversions were the charters most likely to meet their growth targets.
 - If a school was a nonclassroom-based start-up, a high school, or both, it was less likely to meet its growth targets.

Extra instructional time as well as a balance between school autonomy and oversight correlated with growth target results. However, these results were not statistically significant.

- It appears that the more extra instructional minutes a charter school requires, the more likely it was that the school would meet its growth target.
- Charter schools that struck a balance between autonomy and oversight from their chartering agency were more likely to meet growth targets, though other factors (such as curriculum, teacher quality, and the demographics of students in those schools) may have played a key role.

Charter school performance was similar in 2004 and 2005.

- In 2004 and 2005, charter versus noncharter schools—overall and by school type—performed similarly, in terms of which group of schools had a higher percentage that met API growth targets. Charter high schools were the exception, achieving a lower percentage than their noncharter counterparts in 2005, a change from 2004.

Caveats

The following caveats need to be kept in mind when considering the findings of this analysis:

- Comparing charter to noncharter schools is complex given such realities as the ever-changing nature of the charter universe, the often-different grade configurations of charters and noncharters, and differences in school size and funding. Moreover, the number of subgroups a school has and the diversity of its students could affect its performance. And charter schools are more likely to be missing growth data than noncharter schools.

Background: Charter Schools in California

Charter schools were first implemented in California in 1993. The goal was to create public schools less rule-bound than traditional schools but also more accountable for student achievement. Charter developers could either modify existing public schools or create wholly new ones.

For some charter advocates, simply providing alternatives that satisfy parents and students is justification enough. The large majority of supporters, however, see potential benefits for education quality in general from marketplace competition. The existence of charters, they say, will prompt schools to compete for students and the funding that goes with them, thereby motivating schools to improve and tailor programs to meet students' needs. Charters that cannot compete will close, just like unsuccessful business ventures. Those that do not abide by their charter's terms will have it revoked. Conversely, those that succeed can serve as models for charter and noncharter public schools.

Today the state has 575 charter schools, with 20 more slated to open soon. Fewer than one in five were once traditional public schools. The rest were started from scratch. Charters exist at all grade levels and operate throughout the state.


Data from the California Department of Education (CDE) indicate that since 1993, 174 approved charters are not open now. Most that closed did so voluntarily (109), but some had their charter revoked (41), and others never got off the ground (24).

Initially, charters were the only California public schools that could be closed because their students were not achieving. Today, all schools that do not make "adequate yearly progress" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) can eventually be shut down or reorganized. NCLB explicitly lists chartering as one option for reorganizing these schools. This new option—along with the belief in innovation and parent choice—is helping to fuel interest in the growing charter movement.

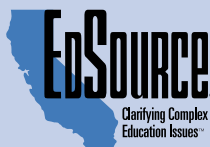
- As a group, charter schools have achieved some encouraging results in recent years. But some educators and policymakers urge caution in embracing this experiment. Charters vary tremendously in how they deliver curriculum and how well their students are meeting state academic standards.
- Reporting on schools' academic performance is complicated. Few believe that test scores should be the only measure. But state and federal policies, and now parents and educators, place great importance on those metrics.
- Because the comparisons in this report are based on only one measure, they are limited. A difference between two types

of schools one year could grow or reverse direction the following year. More importantly, this analysis did not fully control for student demographics, a strong factor in academic performance. However, it does report differences in key student and school characteristics.

Thus, while this study does not isolate the impact of being a charter (or a specific type of charter) on school performance, it does place performance data in context and provides information for further analysis.

The full report—*California's Charter Schools: How Are They Performing?*—as well as last year's findings are available online at: www.edsource.org 

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EdSource thanks **Reed Hastings** for supporting our capacity building and independent reporting on California charter school performance and related policy issues.

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