

New Hampshire School Reform: Where Charter Schools Fit

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ith all the national media attention on charter schools over the last two decades, one could easily conclude that charters are (choose one or several of the following) a panacea for what ails public education, run by for-profit educational management organizations siphoning off public funds, taking the brightest students from neighborhood public schools, or failing students at a higher-than-average rate. These impressions are formed when we read about government programs like Race to the Top (US Department of Education, 2011b), read reports from think tanks like The Heritage Foundation (Heritage Foundation, 2011), see popular movies like *Waiting for "Superman"* (Chilcott & Guggenheim, 2010), and read education reform-minded books by Ravitch (2010) or Brill (2011). It would be easy for an individual to draw general conclusions about charter schools from one political point of view or another without being very well informed at all about the charter schools in New Hampshire.

All of the 11 operating New Hampshire charter schools are publicly, not privately, managed. Some are affiliated with local school districts, while others are independently operated. Stu-

dents from low-income households are few at some charters and greater at others, and the achievement rate at NH charters is a complicated picture, just like other NH community public schools. So, what is the role being played by NH charter schools and what is their potential for leading NH school reform? This article describes NH charter schools, reports on recent research about NH charter school parents, and looks to the future of charter schools' role in NH school reform.

New Hampshire Charter Schools: A Status Report

The US Department of Education defines a charter school as “a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or [an] organization under a legislative contract or charter with the state” (US Department of Education, 2011a). Forty of the 50 states have legislation allowing for charter schools. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2011) reports that in the 2010–11 school year there were 5,275 charters nationally representing 5.4 percent of all US public schools. The state-by-state public school percentages represented by charter schools range from Virginia with 4 charters (.2 percent) to Arizona with 508 (23.3 percent) and Washington, DC, with 45 percent (52) of its public schools currently being charters. Those are the extremes. More typical are Georgia, where 4 percent (94) of public schools are charters, and Minnesota, where 6.8 percent (149) of public schools are charters. Internationally, as of 2009, 14 countries had some type of school choice, such as charters (Viadero, 2009).

New Hampshire law allows for charters to be authorized locally by districts and voters, or by the state board of education. All current NH charters are state-board authorized. Once authorized, charter schools are eligible for federal charter start-up grant funding. Of the 466 public schools in New Hampshire, 11 (2 percent) are charters. Twenty NH charters have been authorized since 2003; of those, 11 are in operation, 4 have closed, and 5 are slated to open in the upcoming year. In 2010, New Hampshire had 199,022 public school students with 983 (.5 percent) students enrolled full-time in NH charters (NH Department of Education, 2011).

Charter schools are open-enrollment, tuition-free public schools. Any student who is a state resident is eligible to attend a charter school for free. The state average per pupil cost for public schools in 2009–10 was \$12,213.99 (NH Department of Education, 2011). New Hampshire's state-authorized charter schools are

Operating New Hampshire Charter Schools by Region & Grade Level

Region	Grade Level
MERRIMACK VALLEY	
• Academy for Science and Design Charter School	Middle/Secondary
• CSI Charter School	Secondary
• PACE Career Academy Charter School	Secondary
• Strong Foundations Charter School	Elementary/Middle
SEACOAST	
• Cochecho Arts and Technology Academy	Secondary
• Great Bay eLearning Charter School	Middle/Secondary
• Seacoast Charter School	Elementary/Secondary
• Virtual Learning Academy (management offices)	Middle/Secondary
UPPER CONNECTICUT RIVER VALLEY	
• Ledyard Charter School	Secondary
MONADNOCK	
• Surry Village Charter School	Elementary/Secondary
NORTH COUNTRY	
• North Country Charter Academy	Secondary

funded directly by the state at \$5,450 per full-time student. However, NH charter schools also operate at a lower per-student rate that varies widely from school to school, typically about \$7,500 per student for elementary charters. The lower per-student rate for charter schools is due in part to special education costs that remain the responsibility of students' home districts in situations where services are provided at the charter school. Similarly, student transportation, uniformly provided by school districts, is not provided by NH charters.

Charter schools make up the difference between the state-funded \$5,450 per student and the actual charter school per-pupil cost through affiliations with local school districts, fundraising, and grant programs. Six of the 11 operating NH charter schools were initiated by, or are affiliated to varying degrees with, local school districts. Five have always operated independently of local school districts. Public boards of trustees govern all the NH charters.

NH charter schools cluster in geographic areas consistent with the state's highest population rates, in particular, Merrimack Valley and the Seacoast region. Of the 11 currently operating charter schools, 3 serve elementary/middle grades and 8 are for middle/secondary grades (Table 1).

NH charter schools are founded with a specialized mission, seeking to serve a particular need in their local communities. The

unique circumstances of each school have led to a range of philosophies, approaches, and practices, such as

- arts integration (Cocheco Arts and Technology, Seacoast Charter School),
- differentiated/project-based (Great Bay eLearning Charter School),
- early literacy (Strong Foundations Charter School),
- mastery-based/dropout prevention and recovery (CSI Charter School, North Country Charter Academy),
- online learning (Virtual Learning Academy Charter School),
- place/community-based (Surry Village Charter School),
- science/mathematics/engineering/design (Academy for Science and Design Charter School),
- student-centered/competency-based (Ledyard Charter School).

The oldest charter schools in NH have been operating only since 2004. In the 2004-05 school year there were 81 full-time students in two charter schools. By 2010-11, NH charter school enrollment had increased to 983 in 10 schools. What is it that attracts parents to consider a charter school for their child? As will become evident in the following section, the specialized approaches developed by charters are a major factor contributing to NH parents' interest in charter schools.

Who Chooses NH Charter Schools for Their Children?

A recent independent study of NH charter school parents was conducted in cooperation with the New Hampshire Public Charter School Association. An online survey was administered from April 28 to June 6, 2011, to parents of current NH charter school students. On-site visits and focus groups were scheduled at each school site during a school day. The purpose of the on-site visits was to familiarize the investigator with the program, curriculum, facilities, and culture of each school. Parent focus-group interviews provided an opportunity to hear directly from parents about their experiences. The number of parents who were able to attend was limited. The highest attended focus group had 12 parents; at two schools, no parents attended. Information taken from the focus groups was used to provide clarification and context for the open-ended responses in the survey. At the time of the study, there were approximately 690 charter school families in the nine participating schools. Three hundred surveys were submitted, 295 completed, for a return rate of 43 percent.

The survey collected data regarding (a) demographics about the household, parents, and children; (b) parental experiences before and after enrolling a child in the school; and (c) parental perceptions about charter schools in general. The aim of the project was to examine NH charter-school parent experiences and per-

ceptions in general. Survey questions did not identify specific schools. Due to the unique nature of the Virtual Learning Academy Charter School (VLACS) course delivery model and focus of the study, VLACS participated through an interview with the chief executive officer to provide context and background information about VLACS; parents were not contacted. PACE Career Academy Charter School had not yet opened. A profile of NH charter school parents, based on the study findings, is summarized in Figure 1.

Overall, charter school parents are more highly educated and compensated than the average NH adult. According to the United States Census Bureau (2011), 32 percent of NH adult residents hold bachelor's degrees or higher, whereas 80 percent of the survey respondents are college graduates. The median NH household income is \$60,734. The majority of the charter school parent population in this survey (61 percent) has a household income over \$75,000; of those households, 40 percent have incomes of +\$100,000.

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On a scale of 1 (low) to 4 (high), parents valued the emphasis and philosophy of the school (mean = 3.82) and academic reputation (mean = 3.71) most highly. Dissatisfaction with a previous school experience was a close third (mean = 3.43). Parents are willing to drive their child to the charter school when it is likely (96 percent) that the nearest district school is within 10 miles and public transportation is provided.

When asked, "Is there anything else about you or your charter school experience that you want to add?" parents expressed a range of perceptions, including their gratitude to the charter school for attention to their child's needs, dissatisfaction with a prior school, stories of their child's success in the charter, frustrations with charter-school funding policies, lack of after-school opportunities at charter schools, and concerns about specific school practices. Anecdotally, in focus group discussions, the

charter school's culture and a sense of their child being known and appreciated were areas of satisfaction. However, parents consistently expressed concern over the sustainability of charter schools given funding uncertainties and meeting the needs of a diverse student population due to open enrollment requirements.

Categories such as the ones identified in this NH charter-school parent study help to frame our thinking about who the parents are that choose a charter school for their child. But there is also a danger that categories will limit our understanding of the bigger picture. For example, other writers (Brindley, 2010) have commented on the lack of low-income families in NH charter schools, and that view is apparently supported by the findings of this study. However, some schools, and therefore some parents, may be under-represented in this data. For example, both North Country Charter Academy and CSI Charter School, with approximately 120 of the 690 charter school families, have delivery models that serve an at-risk student population and involve limited, if any, parent contact. It is likely that the parents who completed the survey were from the other seven schools that have an involved parent community rather than from North Country or CSI charter schools. Similarly, on average, parents who responded to the study were well above the median NH household income level, but in 2010–11, at least one school, Surry Village Charter School, had 24 percent of its families qualify as low-income households under federal free and reduced lunch guidelines.

NH Charter School's Role in School Reform

Given charters' current status and the profile of parents who choose them, what prospects do charter schools have for being leaders in New Hampshire school reform? If by school reform we mean opportunity for innovation leading to student success, then the prospects for charters to be school reform leaders are very good. They represent what many parents and many educators are looking for in public education: nimble, responsive, consumer-oriented organizations. They do not have to be, nor are they trying to be, everything for everyone. They embody the "one size does not fit all" philosophy. They take an intentional approach to creating specialized learning environments to meet the needs of specific students in local communities. New Hampshire charter schools have been designed by NH school districts, educators, and citizens to fill niches underserved by existing schools. They motivate parents to be involved, to commit to driving their child to school, to help with fundraising, and to be an engaged "public" in public education.

Why charters? What can they do that existing neighborhood elementary, middle, and secondary schools can't?

New Hampshire Charter School Parent Profile

- White, 40+ years old
- College educated
- \$75K+ household income
- Child previously attended public school, lives w/in 10 miles of neighborhood school, is driven to charter school
- Didn't know much about charter schools before enrolling, heard about the school by word of mouth
- Attracted by philosophy and reputation of the school
- Dissatisfaction with prior school was a factor in choice
- Helped with fundraising or promotion
- Volunteered at least 10 hours
- Has overall positive feelings toward their charter school



AREAS OF SATISFACTION

- Personal attention to child's needs
- Academic & social school culture
- Sense of child being appreciated
- Child's progress at the charter school

AREAS OF DISSATISFACTION

- State funding policy
- Infrastructure concerns
- Lack of after-school activities
- Issues related to open enrollment

By necessity, neighborhood public schools serve a common good by maintaining a cultural and organizational status quo. That status quo is essential to the long-term sustainability of large institutions, like public school systems. The civic responsibility of neighborhood public schools to deliver a consistent educational product causes them, like any large organization, to gravitate towards stability and uniformity and away from entrepreneurship and innovation. This is why reform-minded parents and school districts embrace charters as an opportunity. They recognize that education is not a zero-sum game, where homogeneity provides equity; that meeting the needs of a diverse student population requires a "yes/and" mind-set; and that creating a variety of unique educational opportunities within the public school system adds value for students and communities.

Successful school reform, leading to successful students, will involve public schools creating pockets of innovation and experimentation that can serve to inspire students, teachers, and the general public. Charter schools—carefully designed, fully funded, and well supervised—can fill that niche because char-

ters are characterized by parents and educators seeking creative ways to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The 2011 NH charter-school parent study points to parents in particular as a catalyst that can make this happen. They have the will, the commitment, and the means to help public schools follow through on successful school reform. Independent citizen groups and reform-minded school districts are looking to charter schools to find unique ideas for meeting the needs of underserved students and communities. Whether these innovations be online, arts focused, competency- or community-based, or something that we cannot yet even imagine, charter schools will play a vital leadership role in New Hampshire school reform in the coming years.

For the full report of the NH charter-school parent study, email tjulius@antioch.edu.

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