



SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES OF ARKANSAS' CHARTER SCHOOLS

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	i
I. Introduction	1
II. Successful Practices of Charter Schools around the Nation	1
III. Arkansas' Charter School Landscape	4
1. Where are charter schools located, and who do they serve?.....	4
2. Where do students have charter school choice in Arkansas?	8
IV. Successful Practices of Charter Schools in Arkansas.....	8
3. How are Arkansas' charter schools unique?	8
a. What waivers do charters claim?	8
b. Do charters pursue different curricular methods?.....	10
c. What types of targeted programs do charters offer their students?.....	12
d. Do charter school teachers have expanded leadership opportunities?.....	13
e. How do charters involve parents?	13
V. Arkansas' Charter School Performance.....	13
1. Are parents satisfied with Arkansas' charter schools?	13
2. How are students' performing at Arkansas' charter schools?	16
VI. Conclusion.....	18

Executive Summary

In 2013, the University of Arkansas Office for Education Policy (OEP) was commissioned by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to perform an evaluation of charter schools in Arkansas, as defined by Arkansas Code § 6-23-404. The OEP is currently contracted to evaluate open-enrollment and district-conversion charter schools from the 2011-12 through the 2014-15 school year.

In March 2013, the Arkansas House of Representatives Education Committee requested an interim study of the best practices from public charter schools in Arkansas and across the nation (ISP-2013-002 submitted by Representative Charles Armstrong). Therefore, the purpose of this report is to present successful practices of charter schools in Arkansas and across the nation. To do so, we outlined a set of questions to answer:

1. What are the best practices of charter schools around the nation?
2. Where are Arkansas' charter schools located, and who do they serve?
3. Where do students have charter school choice in Arkansas?
4. How are Arkansas' charter schools unique?
5. What do we know about the performance of Arkansas' charter schools?

1. What are the best practices of charter schools around the nation?

We found that a small number of studies have examined what specific school characteristics may be the key indicators, or correlates, of charter school effectiveness, and what characteristics of students may moderate charter effects by enhancing or diminishing them. For example, studies have found that extended instructional time is correlated with charter school effectiveness. In a future study, we will provide a more in-depth review of these successful practices.

2. Where are Arkansas' charter schools located, and who do they serve?

In the 2014-15 school year, there are 18 open-enrollment charter school districts, and 22 district-conversion charter schools, which operate in 18 traditional school districts. The majority of open-enrollment charter schools are located in Central Arkansas (10 in Pulaski County and 2 in Jefferson County). District-conversion charter schools are located in all regions across the state. The demographics of the charter schools vary, just as student populations across the state vary.

3. Where do students have charter school choice in Arkansas?

To determine an approximate number of students who have the choice to attend an open-enrollment charter school, we examined the feeder districts of charter schools in the 2012-13 school year. Excluding the Arkansas Virtual Academy, because it serves the entire state, we find that 1.7% of the state's students practice choice through open-enrollment charter schools and 27.6% of the state's K-12 public school students have access to open-enrollment charter schools. Of those students with choice, 40% are in Pulaski County.

4. How are Arkansas' charter schools unique?

To answer a set of questions that examine the successful practices that charter schools have, we analyzed charter school applications, administered surveys to charter school teachers and leaders, and held focus groups with charter school teachers and leaders. We find that charter schools ask for waivers from teacher licensure requirements and school day and calendar requirements. From the surveys and focus groups, we find that charter schools pursue different curricular methods and offer targeted programs to students, including college and career preparations and whole-child initiatives. Additionally, we find that charter schools offer expanded leadership opportunities for teachers, which is partially a function of smaller schools and a function of expanded leadership offerings in academic-related and extra-curricular opportunities. Lastly, we find that charter schools actively engage and involve parents through special programming and increased communication.

5. What do we know about the performance of Arkansas' charter schools?

To learn about why students attend charter schools and the impact that charter schools are having on students, we administered a survey to charter school parent/guardians. In the survey, we learned that open-enrollment parent/guardians are satisfied with the academics in their school and the majority agreed that the academics were better than the previous school that their student attended. Of course, to truly understand performance, we must examine more than parental attitudes. Thus, in this report, we present plans to examine the impact of attending a charter school on students' academic performance. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of data collection on student "lottery" results, we will not be able to draw firm causal conclusions about all open-enrollment charter schools, because they have not all submitted data on student applications to charter schools. Nevertheless, we are in the midst of conducting a reasonably strong "virtual-twin" study to assess the impact of all open enrollment charter schools in Arkansas from 2011-12 to 2013-14. In the future, we aim to gather better data from charter schools, so that we can make more conclusions about the impact of attending charter schools in Arkansas.

I. Introduction

In 2013, the University of Arkansas Office for Education Policy (OEP) was commissioned by the Arkansas Department of Education (ADE) to perform an evaluation of charter schools in Arkansas, as defined by Arkansas Code § 6-23-404. Arkansas Code § 6-23-404 requires that an evaluation of open-enrollment charter schools should include: student test scores, student attendance, student grades, incidents involving student discipline, socioeconomic data, parental satisfaction, and student satisfaction. The OEP is currently contracted to evaluate open-enrollment and district-conversion charter schools from the 2011-12 through the 2014-15 school year.

In March 2013, the Arkansas House of Representatives Education Committee requested an interim study of the best practices from public charter schools in Arkansas and across the nation (ISP-2013-002 submitted by Representative Charles Armstrong). In September 2014, the House Education Committee approved the Office for Education Policy to complete the interim study proposal. The interim study proposal calls for a review of the successful strategies of charter schools, including strategies that improve student learning for all students and increase learning opportunities for low-achieving students; different and innovative teaching methods; choices in the types of educational opportunities; professional opportunities for teachers; and parental engagement strategies. Additionally, the interim study requested to examine how to expand choices in types of educational opportunities.

Therefore, the purpose of this report is to present successful practices of charter schools in Arkansas and across the nation. To do so, we outlined a set of questions to answer:

1. What are the best practices of charter schools around the nation?
2. Where are Arkansas' charter schools located, and who do they serve?
3. Where do students have charter school choice in Arkansas?
4. How are Arkansas' charter schools unique?
5. What do we know about the performance of Arkansas' charter schools?

To answer these questions, we will start by providing a literature review of successful practices of charter schools around the nation. Then, we will provide an overview of charter schools in Arkansas; and we will present successful practices in charter schools in Arkansas. Lastly, we will report on a parent satisfaction survey of charter school parents, and we will describe future analyses that will report on the effectiveness of Arkansas' charter schools.

II. Successful Practices of Charter Schools around the Nation

A substantial research literature related to the effectiveness of public charter schools, as compared to traditional public schools, in increasing student achievement is emerging. A small number of studies also have examined what specific school characteristics may be the key indicators, or correlates, of charter school effectiveness and what characteristics of students may moderate charter effects by enhancing or diminishing them.

The results of empirical analyses to date are inconclusive about the extent to which charter schools across the country systematically affect student outcomes. The analytic methods and findings of these studies vary, although some general patterns exist. A higher proportion of experimental than

non-experimental studies have found positive charter schooling effects on achievement. Older studies are less likely to report positive effects of charters than are newer studies. This pattern itself could be explained by the maturation effect: older and better-established charter schools and networks tend to exhibit more positive student achievement effects than do newer charter schools. The pattern also could be due to survival of the fittest, with more effective charter schools surviving longer and becoming older than less effective charter schools. Results appear to vary somewhat by location and charter network, so that national and meta-analytic studies produce results that tend to be more modest and closer to zero-effect than do studies of charter schools in specific states, cities, or networks.

One possible reason why different studies of public charter schools report varied effects is that certain factors may consistently be correlated with the effects of charter schooling. Their presence or absence may influence the effect that charter schools have on students. A charter school *indicator* (that is, correlate) is a characteristic or approach of certain charter schools that consistently predicts higher or lower levels of a certain outcome such as student achievement gains. A charter school effectiveness indicator need not be a feature available only in the charter school sector, such as a certain charter school authorizer. An indicator of charter school effectiveness could be a feature common to charter schools but possibly present in traditional public schools as well, such as small class sizes or experienced teachers. Although associated with student outcomes, indicators are not necessarily causes of those outcomes, as more rigorous research methods than are available in indicator studies are needed in order to determine conclusively if an indicator is an intermediate cause or mediator of charter schooling effects.

A charter school moderator is a characteristic of a charter school's student body that consistently influences or moderates charter school effects on student achievement. In the face of moderators, the same general type of charter schooling may have different effects in different circumstances or on different students. Positive indicators suggest how students benefit most from public charter schools, whereas positive moderators suggest who benefits most from public charter schools.

Indicators and moderators of charter school effectiveness

The results of the existing charter school literature point to various charter school characteristics or approaches as possible indicators of charter school effects (table 1). Charter school characteristics that multiple studies have identified as possible indicators of effectiveness and for which reliable measures tend to be available in existing data sources¹ include the following:

- Authorizer type (Witte, Weimer, Shober, & Schlomer, 2007; Zimmer, Gill, Attridge, & Obenauf, 2014)
- Extended learning time (Angrist et al., 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Gleason et al., 2014; Hoxby et al., 2009; Macey et al., 2009; Musher et al., 2005)
- Governance structure, such as education management organization, charter management organization, independent startup, or conversion (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005; Zimmer & Buddin, 2005)

¹ Possible charter indicators identified by prior research that were excluded from this study because reliable measures of them were unavailable include universally high expectations for student achievement (Berends et al., 2010; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Gleason et al. 2014), use of ability grouping (Gleason et al. 2010), extent of innovation (Berends et al., 2010), instructional coherence (Macey, Decker, & Eckes, 2009), principal leadership (Macey, Decker, & Eckes, 2009), teacher-parent-student relationships (Macey, Decker, & Eckes, 2009), and parent involvement (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007).

- Grade range (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Angrist, Cohodes, Dynarski, Pathak, & Walters, 2013; Jacob & Rockoff, 2011; Zimmer et al., 2009)
- School age (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007; Kelly & Loveless, 2012; Zimmer, Blanc, Gill, & Christman, 2008)
- School size (Berends et al., 2010; Gleason et al., 2010)
- Tutoring (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Fryer, 2013)

While certain school characteristics and approaches may correlate with and, thus, possibly explain charter school effects, other, less actionable features of the circumstances in which charter schools find themselves and the populations they serve may moderate achievement effects. Student characteristics that are associated with larger and more positive charter school achievement effects in prior studies include the following:

- In grades lower than high school (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Tuttle et al., 2013)
- Is economically or educationally disadvantaged (Angrist et al., 2011; Angrist, Dynarski, Kane, Pathak, & Walters, 2010b; Berends et al., 2010; CREDO, 2009; Cremata et al., 2013; Gleason et al., 2010; Hastings, Neilson, & Zimmerman, 2012; Hoxby et al., 2009).
- Lives in a city (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2011; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Gleason et al., 2010; Hoxby et al., 2009; Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005)

Table 1. Summary of Indicators of Charter School Student Achievement

Indicator	Research Studies
Grouping students by ability in mathematics and science	Gleason et al., 2010
Attendance rate	Gleason et al., 2010
Degree of instructional innovation	Berends et al., 2010
Teachers' focus on student achievement; high expectations for students	Berends et al., 2010; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Gleason, 2014
Extended learning time (includes extended day, extended time on task, extended school year)	Angrist et al., 2011; Gleason, 2014; Hoxby et al., 2009; Macey et al., 2009; Musher et al., 2005
Level of instructional coherence	Macey et al., 2009
Quality of principal leadership	Macey et al., 2009
Teacher-parent-student relationships	Macey et al., 2009
Grades served	Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Angrist et al., 2013; Zimmer et al., 2009
Governance structure (includes education management organizations, charter management organizations, start-up, or conversion charter)	Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005; Zimmer & Buddin, 2005
Parent involvement	Zimmer & Buddin, 2007
Authorizer type	Witte et al., 2007; Zimmer et al., 2014

Indicator	Research Studies
Charter school age	Hanushek, 2007; Zimmer et al. , 2008; Kelly & Loveless, 2012; Buddin & Zimmer, 2005; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Hanushek et al., 2007; Cremata et al., 2013
School Size	Berends et al., 2010, Gleason et al., 2010
Percentage of teachers alternatively licensed	Zimmer & Buddin, 2007

While the body of research on charter school effectiveness indicators and moderators is growing rapidly, very little is known about what makes public schools distinctive and more or less effective in the specific context of Arkansas.

III. Arkansas’ Charter School Landscape

In this section, we provide an overview of open-enrollment and district-conversion charter schools in Arkansas. Since the first charter law passed in Minnesota in 1991, states across the country have responded with their own type of charter legislation that allows for the creation of public charter schools. To this point in time, forty-two states and the District of Columbia have implemented laws allowing these charter schools.² Arkansas was one of those states, passing their first charter school statute in 1995 (Act 1126) allowing conversion charter schools, and then a more general open-enrollment charter law in 1999 (Act 890)³. The first open-enrollment charter school opened in Arkansas in 2001, and two open-enrollment charter schools have been continuously in operation since that time: Academics Plus and Benton County School of the Arts (now Arkansas Arts Academy).⁴ Conversion charter schools were slower to form; the earliest continually running school of this type was founded in 2003: Mountain Home High School Career Academy.⁵

1. Where are charter schools located, and who do they serve?

In the 2014-15 school year, there are 18 open-enrollment charter school districts, which operate independently from any existing traditional school district. In the 2014-15 school year, there are 22 district-conversion charter schools, which operate in 18 traditional school districts. Figures 1 and 2 below highlight the locations of open-enrollment and district-conversion charter schools in Arkansas. The majority of open-enrollment charter schools are located in Central Arkansas (10 in Pulaski County and 2 in Jefferson County). Furthermore, tables 2 and 3 below highlight the demographics of Arkansas’ individual charter schools. The demographics of the schools vary greatly; therefore, we present averages for the open enrollment and conversion charter schools as a whole as well as demographic data disaggregated for each individual public charter school.

² “Law & Legislation.” *The Center for Education Reform*, n.d. Web. 08 August 2014. <<http://www.edreform.com/issues/choice-charter-schools/laws-legislation/>>.

³ *Arkansas Quality Charter Schools Act of 2013*, Acts 1999, No. 890. <http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/Learning_Services/Charter%20and%20Home%20School/Charter%20School-Division%20of%20Learning%20Services/Arkansas_Quality_Charter_Schools_Act_of_2013.pdf>.

⁴ *Open-Enrollment*. Arkansas Department of Education, n.d. Web. 13 August 2014. <http://www.arkansased.org/contact-us/charter-schools/charter_school_categories/open-enrollment>.

⁵ *District-Conversion*. Arkansas Department of Education, n.d. Web. 13 August 2014. <http://www.arkansased.org/contact-us/charter-schools/charter_school_categories/district-conversion>.

Figure 1. Map of open-enrollment charter schools in Arkansas, 2014-15

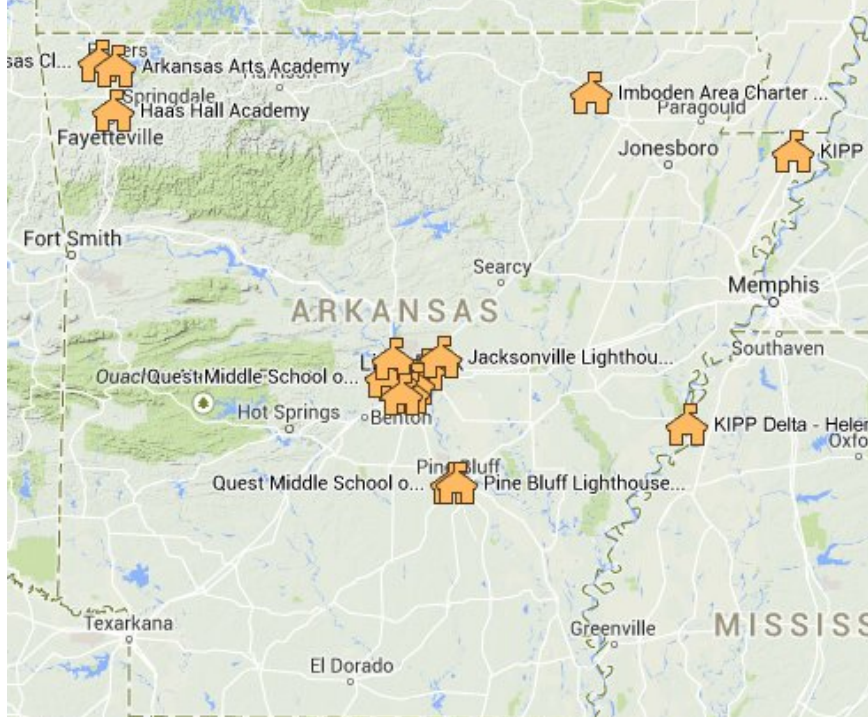


Figure 2. Map of district-conversion charter schools in Arkansas, 2014-15

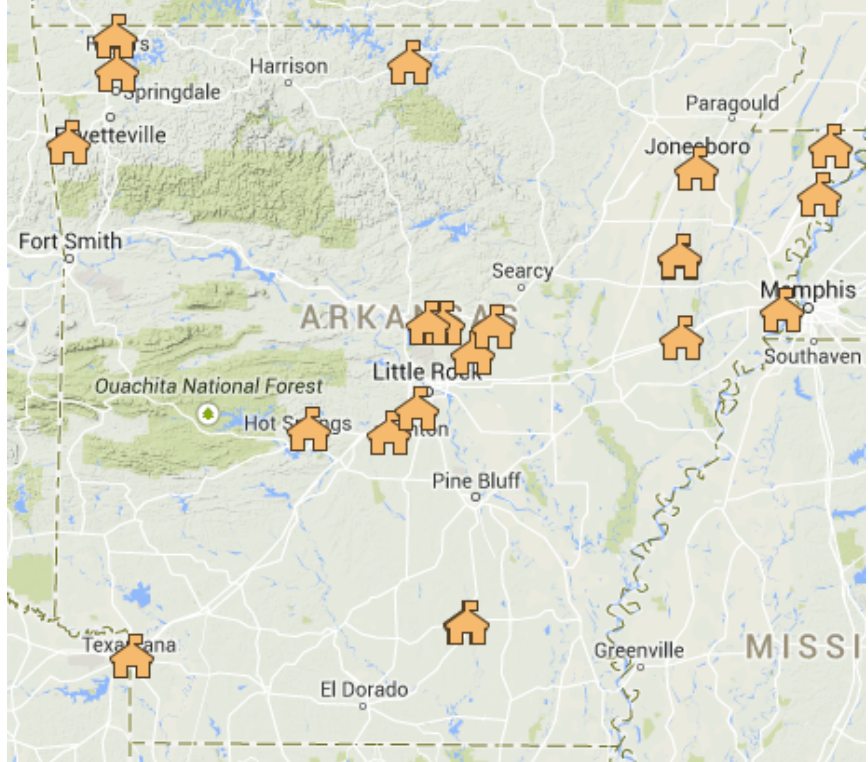


Table 2. Demographics of open-enrollment charter schools, 2014-15

	Year Opened	Grades Served	Enrollment	% White	% Minority	% FRL
State Average	-	-	-	63%	37%	62%
Open-Enrollment Charter Average	-	-	595	38%	62%	60%
Academics Plus	2001	K-12	749	77%	23%	20%
Arkansas Arts Academy	2001	K-12	758	76%	24%	36%
Arkansas Virtual Academy	2007	K-10	1647	81%	19%	29%
Covenant Keepers Charter School	2008	6-8	157	0%	100%	91%
Estem Public Charter School	2007	K-12	1462	41%	59%	32%
Exalt Academy of Southwest Little Rock	2014	K-2	112	3%	97%	96%
Haas Hall Academy	2004	8-12	320	82%	18%	N/A
Imboden Charter School District	2002	K-8	64	97%	3%	78%
Jacksonville Lighthouse Charter	2009	K-11	913	33%	67%	65%
KIPP Delta Public Schools	2002	K-12 (Helena) 4-8 (Blytheville)	1324	6%	94%	90%
Lisa Academy	2004	K-12	1488	33%	67%	41%
Little Rock Preparatory Academy	2009	K-8	398	0%	100%	100%
Pine Bluff Lighthouse Academy	2010	K-7	293	0%	100%	91%
NWA Classical Academy (Responsive ED Solutions)	2013	K-9	522	64%	36%	17%
Premier High School of Little Rock (Responsive ED Solutions)	2013	9-12	130	14%	86%	72%
Quest Middle School of West Little Rock (Responsive ED Solutions)	2014	6-8	166	63%	37%	14%
Quest Middle School of Pine Bluff (Responsive ED Solutions)	2013	5-8	57	0%	100%	96%
SIA Tech Little Rock Charter	2011	9-12	152	12%	88%	57%

Table 3. Demographics of district-conversion charter schools, 2014-15

	District	Year Opened	Grades Served	Enroll- ment	% White	% Minority	% FRL
State Average	-	-	-	-	63%	37%	62%
District-Conversion Averages	-	-	-	425	60%	40%	68%
Academies of West Memphis	West Memphis SD	2014	10-12	1128	17%	83%	100%
Badger Academy	Beebe SD	2007	7-12	25	92%	8%	60%
Bauxite Miner Academy	Bauxite SD	2013	6-12	52	94%	6%	42%
Blytheville High School - New Tech School	Blytheville SD	2013	9-12	699	16%	84%	100%
Brunson New Vision Charter School	Warren SD	2013	4-5	265	50%	50%	74%
Cabot Academic Center for Excellence	Cabot SD	2004	7-12	218	91%	9%	42%
Cloverdale Aerospace Technology Conversion Charter Middle School	Little Rock SD	2010	6-8	583	3%	97%	92%
Cross County Elementary Technology Academy	Cross County SD	2012	K-6	331	90%	10%	75%
Cross County New Tech High School	Cross County SD	2011	7-12	285	86%	14%	72%
Eastside New Vision Charter School	Warren SD	2012	K-3	550	40%	60%	74%
Fountain Lake Middle School Cobra Digital Prep Academy	Fountain Lake SD	2014	5-8	422	88%	12%	56%
Lincoln High School New Tech	Lincoln Consolidated SD	2012	8-12	517	79%	21%	70%
Lincoln Middle Academy of Excellence	Forrest City SD	2010	5-6	374	13%	87%	100%
Mountain Home High School Career Academy	Mountain Home SD	2003	9-12	1226	93%	7%	49%
Osceola STEM Academy	Osceola SD	2012	5-8	390	15%	85%	100%
Pea Ridge Manufacturing and Business Academy	Pea Ridge SD	2014	11-12	87	89%	11%	51%
Rogers New Technology High School	Rogers SD	2013	9-11	385	61%	39%	49%
The Academies at Jonesboro High	Jonesboro SD	2013	10-12	1136	45%	55%	63%
Vilonia Academy of Service and Technology	Vilonia SD	2007	5-6	106	93%	7%	38%
Vilonia Academy of Technology	Vilonia SD	2004	2-4	77	95%	5%	45%
Warren Middle School	Warren SD	2014	6-8	374	49%	51%	72%
Washington Academy	Texarkana SD	2013	9-12	119	18%	82%	67%

2. *Where do students have charter school choice in Arkansas?*

Students can apply to attend open-enrollment charter schools regardless of traditional school district boundaries. To determine an approximate number of students who have the choice to attend an open-enrollment charter school, we examined the feeder districts of charter schools in the 2012-13 school year. Feeder districts are the traditional school districts that charter school students previously attended or were residentially assigned to attend if not attending the open-enrollment charter school. In this analysis, we are excluding the Arkansas Virtual Academy, which is open to students across the state.

In the 2012-13 school year, there were 20 traditional school districts considered to be feeder districts for open-enrollment charter schools. These 20 school districts account for 27.6% of the state's K-12 public school students (130,240 students out of 471,867 students in Arkansas), while open-enrollment charter schools account for 1.7% of the state's students (7,896). Of those students with choice, 40% are in Pulaski County where its three traditional school districts account for 10.5% of the state's student population.

IV. Successful Practices of Charter Schools in Arkansas

3. *How are Arkansas' charter schools unique?*

In this section, we examine a number of questions to understand how charter schools in Arkansas may be unique. The questions include:

- a. What waivers do charters claim?
- b. Do charters pursue different curricular methods?
- c. What types of targeted programs do charters offer their students?
- d. Do charter school teachers have expanded leadership opportunities?
- e. How do charters involve parents?

To answer these questions that examine the successful practices that open enrollment charter schools have, we analyzed charter school applications and administered surveys to and held focus groups with charter school teacher and leaders. We received surveys from 164 teachers in 12 open-enrollment charter schools; and 24 leaders in 12 open-enrollment charter schools.

a. What waivers do charters claim?

By definition, charter schools have more flexibility than traditional public schools. Through the application process, charter schools apply for waivers, requesting exemption from particular state regulations or laws that mandate specific school practices, policies, courses, or other actions. In this section, we examine the most commonly requested waivers by open-enrollment charter schools.

Between the 2011-12 and 2013-14 school years, twelve entities applied for open-enrollment charter schools and sixteen applied for district-conversion charter schools. Table 4 below highlights the waivers that these proposed open-enrollment and district-conversion charter schools requested.

Table 4: Requested waivers by proposed open-enrollment and district-conversion charter schools, 2011-12 – 2013-14

Waiver Category	# of Schools	Percent of Applications
Teacher licensure	23	82%
Gifted and Talented programming	21	75%
Planning time requirements	17	61%
Duty limits	16	57%
School day length	13	46%
Class size	12	43%
At-will hiring and termination	12	43%
Guidance counselor	11	39%
Committees at each school (for decision-making)	11	39%
Library media specialist	10	36%
Health and Safety Education	10	36%
Certified salary	10	36%
Leased facilities requirements	9	32%
Teacher salary and schedule	9	32%
School Boards (required for public schools)	9	32%
Seat Time	8	29%
Science (especially offering a 12-month contract to a vocational agriculture teacher)	7	25%
Planned Instructional Days	7	25%
Oral communications	7	25%
Fine Arts	7	25%
CTE (Career and technology)	7	25%
Certified decision-making	7	25%
Superintendent	6	21%
Start and end dates for the year	6	21%
Grades	6	21%
Benefits	6	21%
Transportation	5	18%
Principal licensure	5	18%
Flagstaff (having a flagpole outside the building)	5	18%
Definition of “teacher” as a school employee (only certified teachers are school employees)	5	18%
History	4	14%
Formation, annexation, and consolidation	4	14%
Student coding (what grade a student is in)	3	11%
School elections (for school board members)	3	11%

Teacher licensure requirements are the most commonly requested waivers by charter schools. Charters applying to ADE in 2011-2014 consistently wanted the ability to hire community professionals without a teaching background to teach courses such as music and art; schools were also interested in bringing in business professionals to help students understand what they need to do in order to succeed at their future careers. As noted by the charters in their applications, and by the ADE in their compiled list of Commonly Granted Waivers, these teachers still need to meet the requirements of a Highly Qualified Teacher, except for the

licensure portion.⁶ Arkansas law establishes different requirements for a highly-qualified teacher based on years of service and grade levels taught, but generally teachers need to have a degree in their content area and passing scores on their licensure exams. In their hearings, the Charter Authorizing Panel noted that while many charters do request waivers for teacher licensure requirements, many do hire teachers with their full licensure credentials, particularly for the core classes.

Charter schools often request other waivers around teacher obligations, such as requirements around planning time requirements and duty time limits. Schools offered two main rationales when requesting exemptions from planning time requirements: first, that they were still going to give teachers the mandated amount of planning time, but not necessarily in the 40 minute minimum increments stipulated by Arkansas statute; and second, that they were going to provide teachers with curriculum, meaning teachers would not need as much planning time as allotted for by the state. Along with decreasing planning time, charter schools were also interested in increasing the amount of time teachers spent on duty and when they could be on duty. Charter schools particularly wanted teachers to have lunch duty, whether voluntarily as a means of reaching their weekly duty requirements, or by standard practice, with teachers eating lunch daily with the students. Schools also wanted to increase teacher duty requirements from 60 minutes per week to 240 minutes in a 4 week period, or 240 minutes each week. Schools rationalized the lunch duty as a way for teachers to build closer relationships with students, but much of the reasoning behind the increased duty is simply logistical—charter schools do not have the staff available to cover lunch and other duty times unless they place even greater demands on teachers.

Another commonly requested waiver from charter schools, with 46% of schools requesting it, is related to the length of the school day. Thirteen schools requested permission to either have regular early release or late-start days in order to give teachers common planning time. Many schools were particularly interested in the opportunities this presented for interdisciplinary planning and co-teaching. At the same time, most schools requesting permission for a weekly-shortened school day also requested permission for a longer school year, so the overall timing should either balance out, or come down on the side of increased school time for students.

b. Do charters pursue different curricular methods?

To answer this question, we draw on our waiver analysis, surveys administered to charter school teachers and leaders, and focus groups. It is important to first recognize that charter schools often have unique curricular methods due to the fact that the schools often center the school on a unique focus. For instance, the Northwest Arkansas Classical Academy emphasizes classical teaching methods and curricula. The Arkansas Arts Academy is an arts school, providing students opportunities for many different forms of art, while Lighthouse Academies are arts infusion schools that enhance teaching through the arts.

⁶ Arkansas Department of Education, Commonly Granted Waivers.
http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/Learning_Services/Charter%20and%20Home%20School/Charter%20School-Division%20of%20Learning%20Services/Applications/Waiver_Document.pdf

In 2014, the Arkansas Department of Education administered a survey to charter school leaders to solicit best practices.⁷ The ADE asked schools to provide the most successful instructional practice. Two schools identified their math curricula to be successful (Academics Plus cited Math Investigations and eStem cited Singapore Math). Other schools identified reading programs, including a district-conversion that noted a technology infused reading program. In the survey that we administered to charter school teachers, the majority of teachers responded that the curriculum at their charter school is more innovative and more rigorous than traditional public schools. Additionally, teachers responded that they were more likely to employ innovative teaching strategies. Many teachers noted that they have autonomy to seek out extra opportunities for their classrooms. At eStem, a number of teachers sought innovation grants to infuse innovative technology practices into their classrooms.

By examining the waivers most commonly requested by charter schools, we found that there are a number of curriculum-related changes that charter schools aim to make. Between 2011-12 and 2013-14, charter schools requested a number of curriculum-related waivers, particularly for some science requirements, oral communications, career and technology (CTE) courses, and health and safety education.

Of particular interest were the requests relating to Oral Communications, CTE (particularly keyboarding and career orientation), and Health and Safety Education. Charter schools were interested in embedding the curricula of these courses into other courses, rather than teaching them as stand-alone classes. To gauge the effectiveness of this approach, high school graduation requirements were compared across the states, using information from each state's Department of Education or Public Instruction. The results were somewhat surprising. Only four states (including Arkansas) require students to take a designated Oral Communications/speech class before graduating—others include oral communications as part of standard English classes, offer it as an elective, or include it in other electives, such as drama or debate. It therefore does not seem that charter schools are necessarily denying students the ability to become proficient speakers by not requiring them to take a stand-alone oral communications course, as that skill can be covered in other parts of the curriculum.

Eighteen states (including Arkansas) require students to take designated CTE course in order to graduate, but requirements of specific courses—such as keyboarding and career orientation—are rare. Instead, CTE will have a credit requirement, and students get to choose which courses are most relevant to them. In at least one state that required a keyboarding course, students can waive that requirement by demonstrating proficiency. Some states even allow CTE courses to count towards a math or science requirement. A few states are changing their graduation requirements, and are adding on CTE requirements for graduation. It seems that CTE courses are popular enough that not requiring CTE credits will not prevent students from taking classes, but the trend seems to be that more states and LEAs are requiring CTE for graduation; however, they are not prescribing which CTE courses students must take. Again, it does not seem that students in charter schools that have waived CTE curriculum requirements are at a significant disadvantage as compared to their in-state or out-of-state peers.

⁷ Arkansas Department of Education. <http://www.arkansased.org/divisions/learning-services/charter-schools/best-or-promising-practices>

The last curriculum requirement charter schools most often asked for a waiver from was the Health and Safety Education course—10 of 28 schools requested a waiver. By examining other states, 30 states do require students to take some sort of health class separated from a physical education course for graduation. While health and physical education are both pretty commonplace high school graduation requirements, there is far from consensus on what those courses should entail, making it difficult to say if this waiver has an effect on students.

c. What types of targeted programs do charters offer their students?

To examine this question, we drew on information from focus groups that we held with charter school teachers and leaders and information from the survey that we administered to them. From these conversations and the data, we learned about a number of different targeted programs that charter schools offer.

College and career preparation programs

Many open-enrollment schools offer specialized college and career support for students. For instance, KIPP-Delta has a KIPP Through College Director who oversees the college and career preparation process. At KIPP-Delta, students receive college advising with a 1:45 ratio; however, all teachers work with students on preparing for college, as the college going culture permeates the school. Other schools, including Haas Hall and LISA Academy, noted their college and career focus. These schools also provide college counseling and mentoring programs for students. In these programs, students receive support on the ACT and other college-prep tests, college applications, the financial aid process, and other college-related issues. Additionally, schools including Haas Hall, LISA Academy, and KIPP-Delta discussed visits that students make to in-state and out-of-state college and universities.

Specialized Academic Support Programs

Many open-enrollment charter schools provide specialized tutoring for students by the teachers at the school. In these situations, students are receiving tutoring from their classroom teachers who are able to use data to pinpoint the areas that students need to receive additional support. At Covenant Keepers, all students are required to attend a tutoring class, which is embedded during the school day. At LISA Academy, low-performing students are required to attend after school tutoring sessions and Saturday camps. Through these programs, students are receiving specialized instruction to push them forward.

Whole Child Initiatives

A number of open-enrollment charter schools offer specialized programming to focus on developing strong, positive character in students. For instance, LISA Academy and other charter schools employ advisory groups where students undergo character development workshops and lessons. At Little Rock Prep, the school has developed a set of attributes that students should display, and the school teaches these attributes to its students throughout the year. Other schools, such as LISA Academy, offer extended extra-curricular activities for students, so that they can develop knowledge and skills in other areas. Additionally, many schools noted that they provide extra field trip opportunities for students. For example, Arkansas Arts Academy has a partnership with the Crystal Bridges Museum, so that students are able to experience art in a real-world setting. Other schools provide many in-state and out-of-state field trips for students.

d. Do charter school teachers have expanded leadership opportunities?

From the focus groups and surveys from charter school teachers, we learned that charter school teachers often take on many duties within their school. On the teacher survey, 64% stated that their charter school is more likely to allow them to hold a leadership position than a traditional public school, while an additional 24% stated that their charter school is equally as likely as their former traditional public school to allow teachers to hold leadership positions. In focus groups, many teachers noted that these leadership roles are partially due to the fact that charter schools are often smaller, and thus, with a smaller staff, teachers hold more responsibilities. Teachers also noted that the additional programming that charter schools offer (e.g. tutoring or extra-curricular activities) allow teachers to have expanded leadership opportunities.

e. How do charters involve parents?

Based on the focus groups and surveys from charter school teachers, we learned that many parents are actively involved in the charter schools. All of the charter schools suggested that parent involvement primarily stems from the fact that these schools are a choice. The teacher and leaders believe that this causes parents to be more active, by communicating with teachers and interacting with the school on a regular basis. Additionally, all charter schools noted special programming to target parent involvement, such as parent curriculum nights.

V. Arkansas' Charter School Performance

In the following section, we aim to understand more about Arkansas' charter schools by examining the performance of the schools. In the first section, we look at the performance from the perspectives of charter school families. To do so, we administered a survey to parent/guardians in Arkansas' charter schools. In the second section, we state our plans to examine the academic performance of students in Arkansas' charter schools.

1. Are parents satisfied with Arkansas' charter schools?

In this section, we examine the levels of satisfaction for parents enrolling their child in Arkansas' district-conversion and open-enrollment charter schools. Measurements of satisfaction were obtained through paper-and-pencil or online surveys administered to parents in the spring of 2014. Respondents submitted the anonymous surveys directly to our office. To create the survey, we examined the literature on school choice parent satisfaction. The survey was approved by the charter school program in the Arkansas Department of Education. We received responses from 431 parents in 11 district-conversion charter schools, accounting for an approximately 10% response rate. We received 1,453 responses from 15 open-enrollment schools, accounting for a response rate of 16%. The overall response rate was 14%. Response rates to each question varied. Table 5 highlights the demographics of the survey respondents and their student(s).

Table 5: Survey respondent demographics; Spring 2014

	% of All Respondents	Open-Enrollment Charter School	District-Conversion Charter School
N	1,884	1,453	431
White	53.7%	53.1%	55.7%
African-American	30.3%	31.5%	26.5%
Hispanic	5.0%	3.4%	10.2%
Other	6.40%	6.44%	4.60%
Unknown	4.6%	5.6%	3.0%
% Student receives free-or-reduced lunch (FRL)	40.3%	32.9%	64.5%
% Student in special education	12.9%	13.2%	11.9%

Tables 6 – 8 display the results from the survey. Survey questions were used to create constructs measuring similar outcomes. These included academics, school quality, discipline and safety, and parent involvement.

In table 6, we report parents stated reasons for choosing their respective school. For open-enrollment parents, the most popular reason was the quality of the school/teachers at their previous school, with over a quarter of parents citing this as their reason to enroll in a new school. Roughly one-quarter of parents selected an open-enrollment school because their previous school did not meet their child’s needs. The third most popular reason was convenience of the school’s location. District-conversion parents selected for slightly different reasons. Parents enrolling in district conversion schools said they enrolled because their child was not comfortable in their previous school, as over 90% of parents cited this as their reason. Additionally, district-conversion parents selected that school location was important, with over 30% of parents selecting this reason.

In table 7, we present results from a question where parents were asked to grade their respective charter school on a scale of A to F. The GPA for open-enrollment schools was 3.31, with slightly over half of parents giving their school an A. The GPA for district conversions was 3.24. Slightly under half of parents gave their school an A, but a higher percentage of district conversion parents gave their school an F. This analysis would be more beneficial if there was a proper comparison group (the average grade that parents would give similar traditional public schools).

For the purposes of this report, we focused on areas where open-enrollment charter schools showed an advantage over district conversion charters, where open-enrollment charters perform roughly the same as district conversion charters, and where open-enrollment charters were at a disadvantage compared to district conversion charters based on comparisons with their previous school made by the respondents. We determined an open-enrollment school to be at an advantage if more than 55% of parents said their current school was better than their previous school. There was a disadvantage for open-enrollment charters if less than 45% of parents said their current school was better than their previous school.

Open-enrollment charters showed a distinct advantage over previous schools in academic areas such as: “What is taught in the school,” “Amount your child has learned,” “School communicates about academics,” and “Teacher’s performance.” Charters were roughly equal on “Opportunities for parental involvement,” “School’s desire for parental involvement,” “Discipline in the school,” “Principal performance,” and “Student engagement with school.” Open-enrollment charters are at a disadvantage in “Extracurricular activities offered,” “Transportation”, and “School facilities.” We are currently preparing a survey for charter school parents/guardians to be conducted in the Spring of 2015. We believe that the satisfaction results would be more valuable by conducting satisfaction surveys of carefully matched traditional public schools to make a more valid comparison.

Table 6. Survey respondents’ stated reason: When you choose your child's current charter school, why did you do so? (Choose all that apply); Spring 2014

Stated Reason to Attend Charter School	% of Open-Enrollment Charter School Respondents
Quality of previous school/ teachers was unacceptable	27.6%
Previous school did not meet child's needs	24.8%
School was in a convenient location	22.5%
Concerned about safety at previous school	19.3%
This is my child’s first school	17.6%
Coursework was too easy at previous school	15.9%
Wanted all children to be in the same school	15.5%
Child was not comfortable at previous school	12.1%
Previous school was too expensive	5.3%
Next grade level not offered at previous school	4.5%
Moved away	3.6%
Previous school closed	1.3%
Coursework was too difficult at previous school	0.6%
Suspension or expulsion	0.6%
Child was asked not to return	0.4%

Table 7. Survey respondents’ grade given to charter school; Spring 2014

	A	B	C	D	F	GPA
Open-Enrollment	51.9%	31.9%	12.2%	3.0%	0.1%	3.31
District Conversion	48.2%	33.6%	13.7%	3.1%	1.4%	3.24

Table 8. Survey on charter school characteristics; Spring 2014

	% Satisfied or very satisfied		% Better than previous school	
	Open-Enrollment	District-Conversion	Open-Enrollment	District-Conversion
Academics				
What is taught in the school	92.1%	88.2%	69.5%	46.8%
Amount your child has learned	91.3%	87.5%	70.8%	48.9%
School communicates about academics	85.7%	85.7%	57.3%	40.5%
Quality of charter school				
Teacher's performance	90.8%	92.0%	63.5%	46.4%
Principal Performance	82.5%	95.3%	51.5%	42.8%
Student engagement with school	87.2%	92.2%	54.0%	40.8%
School communicates about academics	85.7%	85.7%	57.2%	40.5%
Parental involvement				
Opportunities for parental involvement	89.4%	92.4%	50.5%	32.3%
School's desire for parental involvement	88.5%	91.5%	52.6%	34.6%
Other parents support for the school	87.4%	89.6%	46.4%	30.5%
Discipline & Safety				
Discipline in the school	82.1%	87.3%	53.9%	34.9%
School communicates about discipline	83.6%	89.8%	49.3%	37.5%
School safety	92.1%	93.4%	51.5%	37.2%
School Offerings				
Extracurricular activities offered	68.7%	83.9%	37.2%	33.6%
Transportation	74.3%	89.7%	23.9%	30.8%
School facilities (Library, gym, textbooks)	66.5%	92.0%	30.1%	37.6%

2. How are students' performing at Arkansas' charter schools?

In this section, we explain two analyses that we will perform to determine the impact on student academic performance of attending open-enrollment charter schools in Arkansas. The two analyses use different methods to compare the performance of students who attend charter schools to students in traditional public schools on Arkansas' grade 4 – 8 Benchmark exams in mathematics and literacy. While this report will provide school level academic impacts, it also will provide aggregated impacts of all open-enrollment charter schools as one. Additionally, we will be able to determine the impact by individual characteristics that might be moderators of charter school effectiveness such as student race, gender, and grade level, whenever student numbers permit such a disaggregation.

i. Future Analysis: Lottery Study

In this first analysis, to determine the impact of attending a charter school, we will take advantage of the fact that open-enrollment charter schools are required to hold lotteries if more

students apply to attend than there are spots available. In the open-enrollment schools that hold lotteries (“oversubscribed schools”), due to the lotteries, we are able to compare students who were randomly admitted to the school and to students who were randomly not admitted to the school. With this method we have a Randomized Control Trial, which is the most rigorous research design for evaluating a program. The random-assignment method seeks to examine the effect of attending a charter school on student performance on math and literacy assessments. This method is particularly strong because it allows a comparison of students who are all invested in attending a charter school (by applying to the school). Therefore, the differences between student performance can be attributed to the impact of attending a charter school not on differences in parent motivation.

In the 2012-13 school year, we received data from seven oversubscribed schools that held lotteries to admit students into the school. Additionally, a second analysis will include the results from lotteries held in the 2013-14 school year.

Unfortunately, due to the limitations of data collection, we will not be able to make firm conclusions about all oversubscribed open-enrollment charter schools. In both 2012-13 and 2013-14, not all charter schools have reported their lottery data and the data that we did receive was not always clear regarding how the lottery generated the list of admitted and wait-listed students. This problem could be remedied, and a gold standard rigorous experimental analysis could be conducted, if:

1. Charter schools that held lotteries that established exact and complete groups of “admitted by lottery” and “not admitted by lottery” students provided those lists to us in the form in which they existed when the lottery took place;
2. Charter schools that use a lottery to generate a randomly-ordered waiting list, and then admit students in order off of that list, provide us with the original waitlist and indicate the last student who was offered admission off of the list;
3. In either case, the charter schools indicated any students who were awarded automatic admission outside of the lottery and the reasons for that, such as a sibling preference or mid-year transfer.

These approaches would allow us to more clearly and completely determine which students were offered admission through the lottery and which students were not offered admission, which is the foundation of a rigorous experimental analysis.

ii. Future Analysis: “Virtual Twin” Method

This portion of the charter evaluation will examine the academic impact of all charter schools using a “Virtual Twin” matching method. This method, which compares charter students to similar students in “feeder district,” seeks to create the closest alternative to a Randomized Controlled Trial, with the added benefit of including all charter school students, not just those in oversubscribed schools.

Charter students will be matched to the most “similar” looking student from a feeder district by grade, FRL status, race/ethnicity, gender, and prior year test scores. Students will be matched separately for math and English test scores. Charter school impacts on test scores will be estimated for three school years (2011-12 through 2013-14), using data from the previous year

for the matching process. These impacts will be reported for both math and literacy at several levels: all schools combined, only conversion charters, only open-enrollment charters, individual schools, and by subgroups (years of operation, schools with waitlists, grades served).

Through this analysis, we will know more about the performance of students in all of Arkansas' open-enrollment charter schools.

VI. Conclusion

In the 2014-15 school year, there are 18 open-enrollment charter school districts and 22 district-conversion charter schools. The purpose of this report is to present successful practices of charter schools in Arkansas and across the nation. To do so, we outlined a set of questions to answer:

1. What are the best practices of charter schools around the nation?
2. Where are charter schools located, and who do they serve?
3. Where do students have charter school choice in Arkansas?
4. How are Arkansas' charter schools unique?
5. What do we know about the performance of Arkansas' charter schools?

By definition, charter schools are able to apply for waivers from traditional policies for waivers, requesting exemption from particular state regulations or laws that mandate specific school practices, policies, courses, or other actions. Charter schools around the nation employ strategies such as hiring alternatively licensed teachers and holding longer school days.

In this report, we examined Arkansas' open-enrollment charter schools to gain a better understanding of successful practices in the schools. By analyzing charter school waiver requests, holding focus groups, and administering surveys to charter school teachers and leaders, we saw that charter schools employ a number of strategies to promote success. The most requested waivers by charter schools were teacher requirements waiver. Charter schools requested more often to hire non-traditional teachers, for reasons including the ability to hire community professionals without a teaching background to teach courses such as music and art and to hire business professionals to help students learn more about career options. Additionally, charter schools sought to change the school calendar to account for more professional development opportunities for teachers and a longer calendar year.

From talking with school personnel and observing the schools, we learned that many charter schools have unique curricula or curricular strategies. Charter schools reported providing targeted programs to meet the needs of students, including college and career preparation programs, tutoring programs, and whole child initiatives. Charter schools expressed that they have expanded leadership opportunities for teachers, as teachers are more likely to hold many positions within the school. Lastly, we saw that parents are actively involved in charter schools through daily interactions and unique programming provided by the schools.

To learn more about the impact that charter schools are having on students, we administered a survey to charter school parents. In the survey, we learned that parents with children in open-enrollment charter schools are satisfied with the academics in their school and the majority agreed that the academics were better than the previous school that their student attended.

Lastly, we described plans to examine the impact of attending a charter school on students' academic performance. To do so, we outlined two studies that we are undergoing that compare the performance of charter school students to the performance of students in traditional public schools. Unfortunately, due to the limitations of data collection, we will not be able to make firm conclusions about all open-enrollment charter schools, because they have not all submitted data on student applications to charter schools. In the future, we aim to gather better data from charter schools, so that we can learn with greater certainty about the impact of attending charter schools in Arkansas.