ARIZONA

Examining the State's Lowest-Performing Schools

OVERVIEW

In principle, charter schools face greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have fewer persistently low-performing schools because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

This profile examines the trajectories of Arizona's lowest-performing charter and district schools over a recent five-year period. It is part of a 10-state study that compares the rates of turnaround and closure among charter and district schools and investigates how responses to school failure differ within and between the two sectors of public education.

The major takeaway for Arizona is that a much greater proportion of low-performing charter schools have been closed in the Grand Canyon State than in its district sector or in charter sectors of other states. Six of the nineteen low-performing Arizona charter schools in 2003-04 had shut down by 2008-09, representing 32 percent of the sample. Only 5 percent (five of ninety-five) of low-performing district schools closed during that period. Arizona's charter sector had the third-highest closure rate of the ten state charter sectors. This indicates that, in Arizona, the charter sector's more stringent accountability policies are working. Still, in both sectors, a majority of low-performing schools failed to make substantial improvements from 2003-04 to 2008-09—and continued to operate.

Characteristics of Arizona's Low-Performing Schools

The study identified a school as low-performing if its average combined reading and math proficiency rate in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranked among the lowest 10 percent of the state's public elementary or middle schools and the school also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years. This definition is

BACKGROUND ON ARIZONA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Arizona passed charter legislation in 1994. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 566 charter schools operated in Arizona during 2009-10.[1] They served over 113,000 students, or 10.5 percent of all Arizona public-school pupils—the highest percentage of any state.[2] One hundred and one Arizona charter schools have closed since 1994, representing 15 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 64 percent of Arizona's charter schools are independently operated, while 18 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 19 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Arizona's charter law was ranked tenth (among forty states) by NAPCS.[3] State law permits both local school boards and an independent State Board for Charter Schools to authorize charters. The State Board of Education can also approve charters, but has not done so since 2003. There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.[4]

consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that this definition does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Therefore, some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.**

Low-performing schools were identified from a statewide dataset of all elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in the baseline years (2002-03 and 2003-04). Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities. In the end, 119 Arizona charter schools and 1,007 district schools were included in the dataset.[5]

Table 1 shows that nineteen charter schools (16 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did ninety-five district schools (9 percent). The fact that Arizona's charter sector has proportionately more low-performing schools may reflect, in part, the large fraction of charter schools located in disadvantaged, urban areas.

Table 1. Arizona Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	16% (n=19)	9% (n=95)	10% (n=114)
Others	84% (n=100)	91% (n=912)	90% (n=1,012)
Total Schools	119	1,007	1,126

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. "Low-performing" indicates all schools with average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2002-03 and 2003-04 ranking in the lowest 10 percent among all public schools of the same type (elementary or middle) that also failed to meet the state's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency target in both years.

Source: Author's calculations. Arizona Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 42) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low performers in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of poor and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 514, compared with 622 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 269, versus 283 in the other charters.

Table 2. Characteristics of Arizona's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	48.4	43.8	44.2	57.9	48.0	49.6
Rural	31.6	19.4	20.6	15.8	11.0	11.8
Other	20.0	36.8	35.3	26.3	41.0	38.7
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	85.7	50.2	53.5	84.9	39.4	48.8
Special Education	11.3	12.2	12.1	8.3	7.9	8.0
Limited English Proficiency	31.1	15.2	16.7	17.0	3.0	5.3
Hispanic	55.6	36.0	37.9	54.5	18.6	24.3
Black	5.1	4.4	4.5	8.8	5.4	5.9
# Schools	95	912	1,007	19	100	119
Avg. Enrollment	514	622	612	269	283	281

Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. School locations based on National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Locale Codes: "Urban" designates schools located in urbanized areas within principal cities with populations larger than 100,000; "Rural" designates schools in non-urbanized areas with fewer than 2,500 residents and population densities less than 1,000 people per square mile; "Other" designates schools in non-rural areas outside of principal cities, which NCES refers to as suburbs or towns.

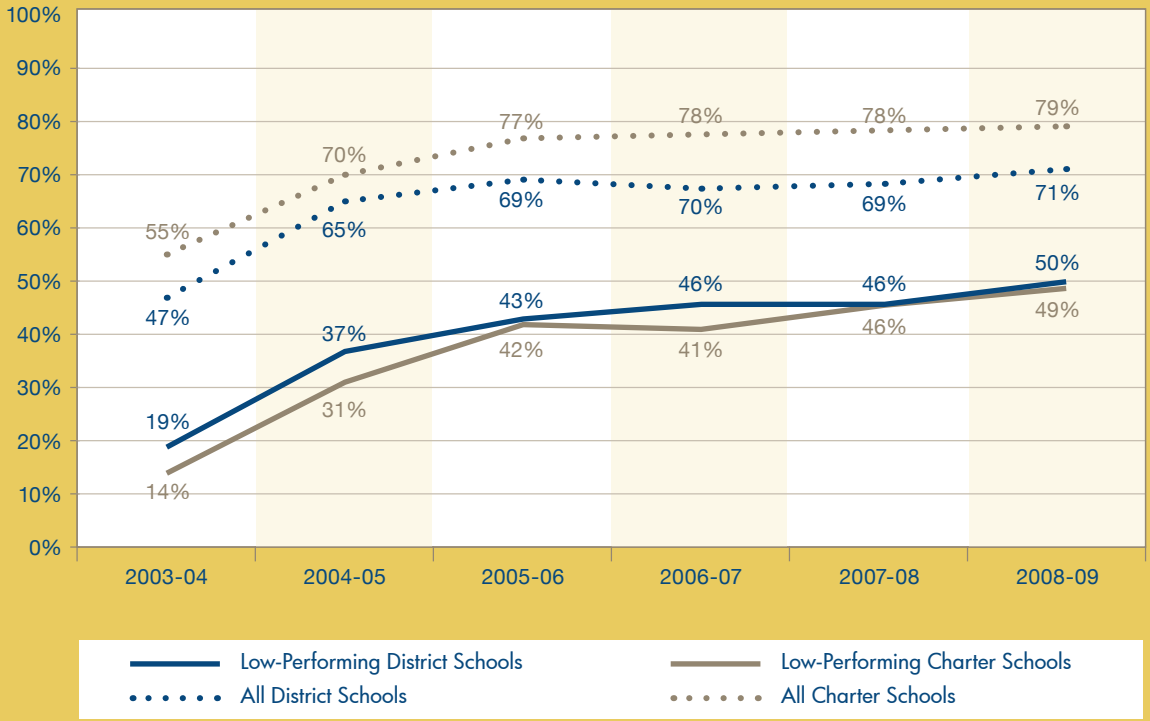
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY TRENDS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

The study tracks the performance of those schools classified as low-performing in 2003-04 across five years to determine whether they made any progress by 2008-09. Figure 1 (see page 43) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. Average proficiency rates for all Arizona schools improved dramatically during that five-year period. However, it is unclear whether that was due to real improvement in achievement or changes in the difficulty of the state test, particularly since the state's performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) remained relatively flat during this time.[6]

Average school proficiency rates from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were slightly higher in the charter sector than in the district sector. Still, comparing the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other.[7] As for low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in proficiency trends.[8]

Figure 1. Arizona's Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2003-04 to 2008-09)



Notes: Calculations limited to dataset, which includes all non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math scores for over twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Proficiency-rate trends based on ninety-five low-performing district schools, 1,007 total district schools, nineteen low-performing charter schools, and 119 total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Arizona Department of Education.

PROGRESS OF LOW-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FROM 2003-04 TO 2008-09

Over time, low-performing schools can take different paths. Some might vastly improve (i.e., "turn around"); others might improve modestly, remain stagnant, or close. To examine the progress—or lack thereof—of low-performing charter and district schools in Arizona from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 44) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation in 2008-09.[9]

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools	
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or below the 25th state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the 2009-10 school year.

Figure 3 (see page 45) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Arizona's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Four notable findings emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained in the bottom quartile five years later. Still, the charter sector was more successful at eliminating low performers. Of the ninety-five low-performing Arizona district schools in 2003-04, 83 percent (n=79) remained in the lowest quartile in 2008-09, compared with 58 percent (n=11) of the nineteen low-performing charter schools.

- Arizona's charter sector did significantly better at eliminating low-performing schools than did the 10-state charter sector, while the persistence of low performance in the district sector was on par with the 10-state district average.

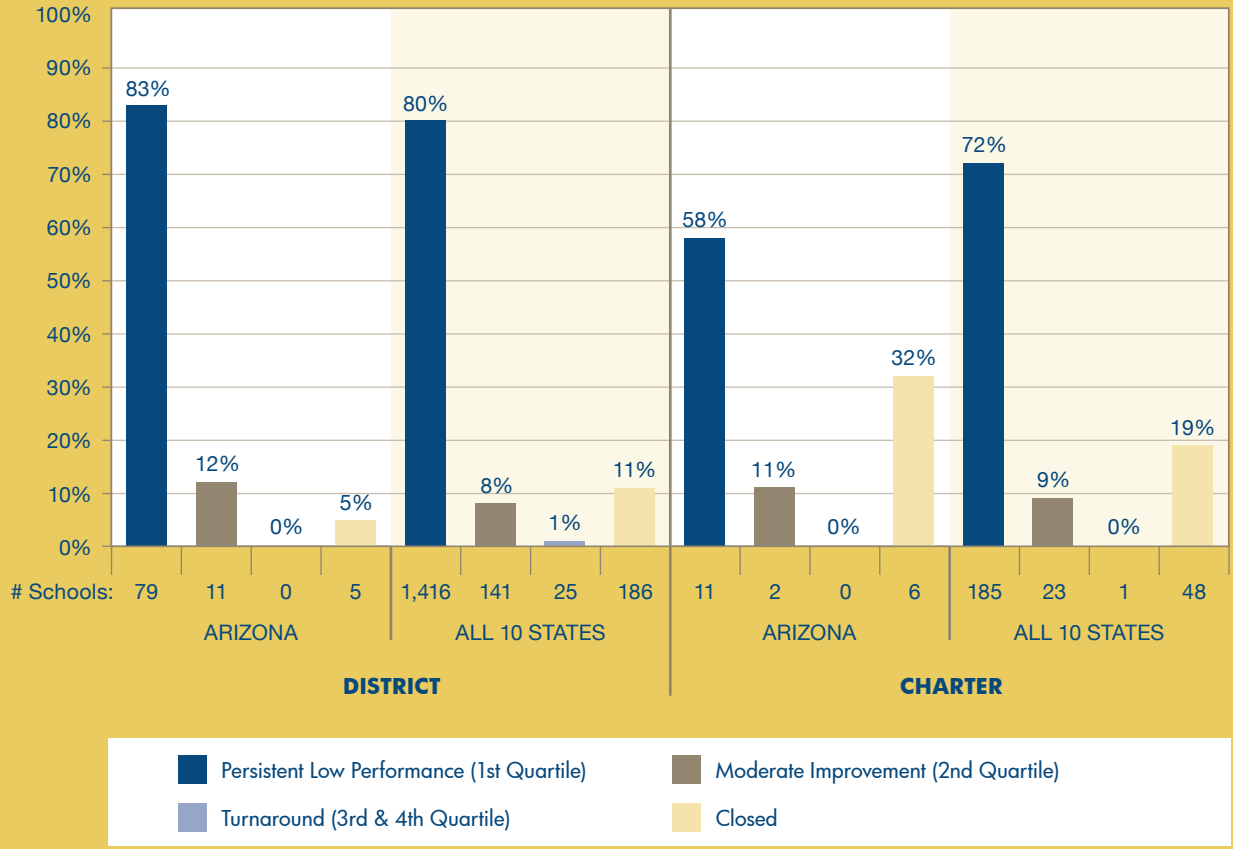
- Arizona's charter sector did better than the district sector at eliminating persistently failing schools via closure. Six of the nineteen low-performing Arizona charter schools in 2003-04 had shut down by 2008-09, representing 32 percent of the sample. Only 5 percent (five of ninety-five) of low-performing district schools closed during that period. Arizona's charter sector had the third-highest closure rate of the ten state charter sectors, while the district sector ranked seventh among ten states' district sectors.[10]

- None of Arizona's low-performing schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turnaround" by 2008-09. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better—only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools met the criteria—indicating the tough odds facing America's many and earnest school turnaround efforts.

In sum, neither sector in Arizona proved itself effective at improving low-performing schools. Negligible fractions of low-performing schools in both sectors turned around over a five-year period; rather, the overwhelming majority of low performers in both sectors stayed that way.

Still, Arizona's charter sector shut down proportionally more low performers than its district sector: A low-performing charter school in Arizona had roughly a one-in-three chance of closure, compared to a one-in-twenty chance in the district sector. Arizona's charter sector was also more successful at shutting down low-performing schools than seven of the nine other state charter sectors in this analysis.

Figure 3. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Schools were classified as demonstrating "persistent low performance" if their average combined reading and math proficiency rates in 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranked in the bottom quartile in the state; schools were classified as making "moderate improvement" if their proficiency rates rose to the second quartile in the state; schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state; schools were classified as "closed" if the school was no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author's calculations. Arizona Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Arizona can improve the quality of its public education system by continuing efforts to shut down low performers in both sectors. Note that even with greater autonomy and flexibility, charter schools rarely make dramatic turnarounds in performance. For those charter authorizers who defer the closure option in hopes that weak schools will make dramatic improvement, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Arizona schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories of Arizona's low-performing charter and district schools—specifically, accountability pressures imposed on the schools, improvement strategies, and background that may explain why the schools' performance trended as it did from 2003-04 to 2008-09. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

Because the analysis revealed that Arizona's charter sector closed 32 percent of its low-performing schools while the district sector closed just 5 percent, the profiles below examine a low-performing charter that was closed and a low-performing district school that remains open despite five years of consistently low test scores.

Tucson Urban League Charter

Tucson Urban League Charter school was granted a charter in 1996 to serve middle and high school students in a poor urban neighborhood. Despite support from a well-established community organization, the school struggled from the outset. It persistently failed on all measurable dimensions of quality: Overall proficiency rates hovered around 10 percent; fewer than one in five students graduated; and attendance rates typically fell below 80 percent. Tucson Urban made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in just one year between 2003-04 and 2008-09.

As with many failing charter schools, declining enrollment also posed financial challenges. With ten teachers and roughly 125 students scattered across seven grades, the school found it difficult to offer a robust academic program.

In light of the overwhelming evidence against the school, the State Board for Charter Schools worked with school staff to voluntarily surrender the charter contract in 2009. School representatives could not dispute its poor track record and, given the financial challenges, decided that such voluntary termination was the best course of action. Voluntary terminations such as this are relatively common in Arizona. In fact, all six of the low-performing charters in this study's sample that closed did so through voluntary surrender.

Bethune School

Eighty-three percent of Arizona's low-performing district schools remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency over the five-year period of this study. One is the Bethune School in the Phoenix Elementary School District. A Title I school, it enrolled over 600 K-8 students during 2008-09, of whom roughly half were English-language learners. The school's improvement plan emphasizes leadership mentoring, professional development on reading and math instructional practices, and the use of intervention specialists for struggling readers.

Yet the school's proficiency rates have consistently ranked in the bottom 10 percent of the state since 2003-04 and, in 2008-09, its average reading and math proficiency rate was only 34 percent. After four consecutive years of failing to make AYP, Bethune made it via "safe harbor" in 2006-07 and 2007-08, permitting the school to avoid restructuring.[11] Although the 7-point proficiency gains required to qualify for safe harbor were welcome, they did not portend enduring improvement in the school's performance trajectory. Bethune again failed to make AYP in both 2008-09 and 2009-10, and is again facing NCLB corrective action. As with many other failing schools in this study, Bethune was identified as "persistently lowest-achieving" in the state's 2010 application for federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) funds.

REFERENCES

1. *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools 2010*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Education Reform, 2010), http://www.edreform.com/download/CER_Charter_Survey_2010.pdf.
2. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Public Charter School Dashboard, http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/home.
3. Todd Ziebarth, *How State Charter Laws Rank Against the New Model Public Charter School Law* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2010), http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/DB-ModelLaw_Report_01-12-10.pdf.
4. Center for Education Reform, "'Race to the Top' for Charter Schools; Which States Have What It Takes to Win: Charter School Law Ranking and Scorecard 2010—Arizona," http://www.charterschoolresearch.com/laws/arizona.htm.
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 2,031 public schools in Arizona in 2003-04. This analysis was limited to 1,126 schools after excluding thirteen schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 463 schools designated by NCES as high schools, sixty-five schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 364 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data in 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Arizona Department of Education.
6. Because state-established proficiency "cutoff" standards often change, measures of school achievement over time are often moving targets. (See, for example, John Cronin and others, *The Proficiency Illusion*, Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2007.) Arizona's proficiency cut score changed in 2005 when the state adopted new academic standards at all grade levels. Instead of measuring low performers' progress by absolute change in proficiency rates, then, this study measures progress by comparing a school's proficiency rates relative to the proficiency rates of other schools in the state over time. State NAEP scores retrieved from: National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/.
7. This finding is consistent with more rigorous student-level analyses of the effectiveness of Arizona charter schools. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found the average growth of charter and district students to be within 0.01 standard deviations of each other (*Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*, Stanford, CA: Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009, http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf).
8. Proficiency trends in the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Arizona, however, there were no statistically significant differences between the low-performing charter and district schools in average changes in the percentage of Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) students, special-education students, and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students from 2003-04 to 2008-09.
9. The analysis used average proficiency rates over two years to ensure that the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.
10. Although Arizona's charter closure rate of 32 percent ranked 3rd among the 10-state charter sectors included in the analysis, it should be noted that the 2nd-ranked state was Wisconsin, which only had a charter school sample of three schools; such a small sample clearly is not large enough to draw reliable conclusions on Wisconsin's charter-sector performance.
11. The "safe harbor" provision of the No Child Left Behind Act permits schools to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress by making a 10 percent reduction in the percentage of students—overall or in subgroups—who score below proficient.