

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Fixing chronically failing schools is one of the Obama administration's central education goals, and charter schools have been asked to play a pivotal role in this reform agenda. In principle, charter schools are subject to greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have a better track record of eliminating low-performing schools because they either improve or shut down. But does this really happen?

This study investigates the successes of the charter and district sectors in eliminating bad schools via dramatic turnarounds in performance and/or shutdowns. It identified 2,025 low-performing charter and district schools across ten states, each of which is home to a sizable number of charter schools.⁶ These particular schools were tracked from 2003-04 through 2008-09 to determine how many turned around, shut down, or remained low-performing.

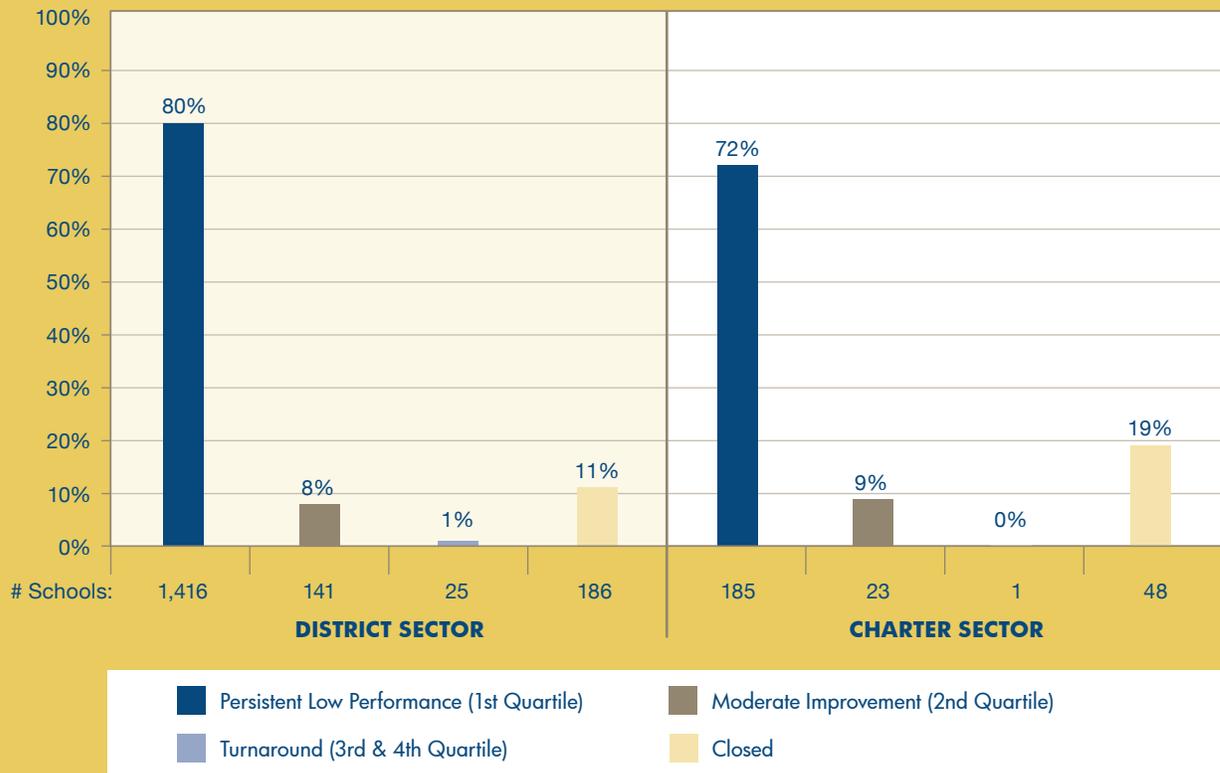
What did results show? A dismal state of affairs. In all ten states, the charter sector has done a slightly better job of eliminating low-performing schools, but neither sector has cause for celebration (see Figure ES-1 on page 11). Seventy-two percent of the original low-performing charter schools remained in operation, and remained low-performing, five years later, compared with 80 percent of district schools.

Few low-performing schools in either sector—barely 1 percent—managed to dramatically improve their academic performance over this five-year period, and fewer than 10 percent made even moderate gains. Charter schools were not statistically more or less likely to turn around than their district peers.

To the extent that this study yields any good news, it is this (and it is modest): In all ten states, low-performing charter schools were likelier to close than were low-performing district schools. Nineteen percent of weak charters were shuttered, versus 11 percent of district low performers. And in both sectors, the majority of schools that closed were lower-performing than their neighboring schools; thus, students leaving closed schools had better academic options nearby.

We conclude that it is easier to close a low-performing school than to turn one around. Rather than pushing dubious turnaround efforts, charter authorizers and education policy makers alike should ramp up their efforts to close bad schools, particularly in cases where higher-performing schools are nearby.

Figure ES-1. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09



Notes: Figure ES-1 reports the percentages of the original 2003-04 low-performing schools within the ten states that met each of the four classifications in 2008-09; 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 they were no longer in operation in the 2009-10 school year. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Author’s calculations. Data drawn from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data.