

NORTH CAROLINA

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 North Carolina'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 study finds that low performance is remarkably stubborn in both of North Carolina's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the Tarheel State's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. Furthermore, neither sector was particularly skilled in closing weak schools: Seventy-four percent of the charters that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained that way (and remained open) in 2008-09, as did 86 percent of low-performing district schools.

Characteristics of North Carolina'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 consistent with the federal criteria used to identify schools for Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs). **It is important to note, however, that**

BACKGROUND ON NORTH CAROLINA'S CHARTER SECTOR

North Carolina passed charter legislation in 1996. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 102 charter schools operated in North Carolina during 2009-10,¹ enrolling almost 39,000 students, or 3 percent of all public-school pupils in the state.² Thirty-four charters have closed since 1996, representing 25 percent of all charters ever opened here.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 93 percent of North Carolina's charter schools are independently operated, while 2 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 5 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of North Carolina's charter law was ranked thirty-second (among forty states) by NAPCS.³ State law allows the State Board of Education and the University of North Carolina (UNC) to authorize charters, although UNC has yet to avail itself of this opportunity. By law, no more than 100 charter schools may operate in North Carolina.⁴

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, seventy-four North Carolina charter schools and 1,719 district schools were included in the dataset.⁵

Table 1 shows that nineteen of the seventy-four charter schools (26 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did 147 of the 1,719 district schools (9 percent). The fact that North Carolina’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. North Carolina Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	26% (n=19)	9% (n=147)	9% (n=166)
Others	74% (n=55)	91% (n=1,572)	91% (n=1,627)
Total Schools	74	1,719	1,793

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. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2010).

Table 2 (see page 82) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their respective sectors. Low-performing schools in both sectors enrolled higher proportions of economically disadvantaged and minority students and were more likely to be located in urban areas. The average enrollment of low-performing district schools was 332, 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 North Carolina's Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	33.3	15.1	16.6	47.4	23.6	29.7
Rural	25.9	49.1	47.1	31.6	40.0	37.8
Other	40.8	35.8	36.2	21.1	36.4	32.4
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	80.4	47.2	50.0	67.4	19.9	32.1
Special Education	14.2	14.4	14.4	22.4	13.9	16.0
Limited English Proficiency	4.3	4.4	4.4	2.6	0.7	1.2
Hispanic	6.6	6.0	6.0	2.4	2.4	2.4
Black	67.1	28.3	31.5	71.2	24.9	36.8
# Schools	147	1,572	1,719	19	55	74
Avg. Enrollment	332	622	542	269	283	244

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.

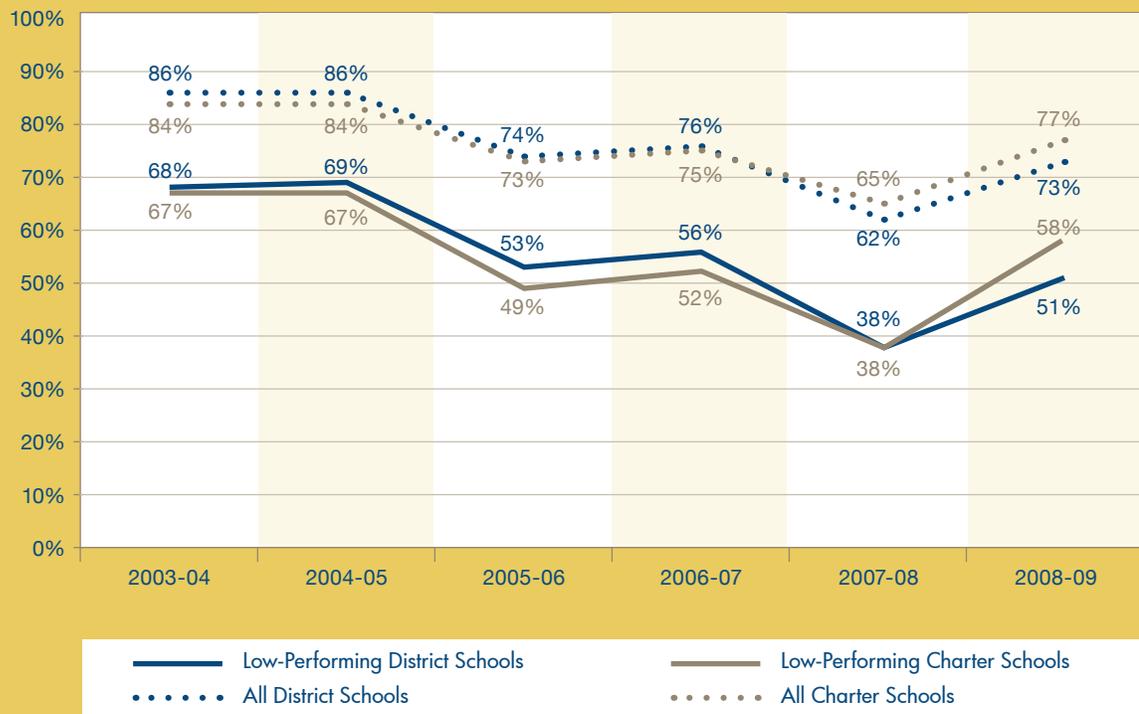
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

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 83) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 and compares them with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset. North Carolina's proficiency trends are somewhat ambiguous during this period due to two major changes in the state's math and reading tests. Yet major dips in proficiency rates in 2005-06 and 2007-08 show that these changes made the tests more difficult.⁶

Average school proficiency rates for all schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were almost identical in the charter and district sectors.⁷ As far as the low-performing district and charter schools, there were no meaningful differences in their proficiency trends.⁸

Figure 1. North Carolina'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 147 low-performing district schools, 1,719 total district schools, nineteen low-performing charter schools, and seventy-four total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.

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 North Carolina from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 84) 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.

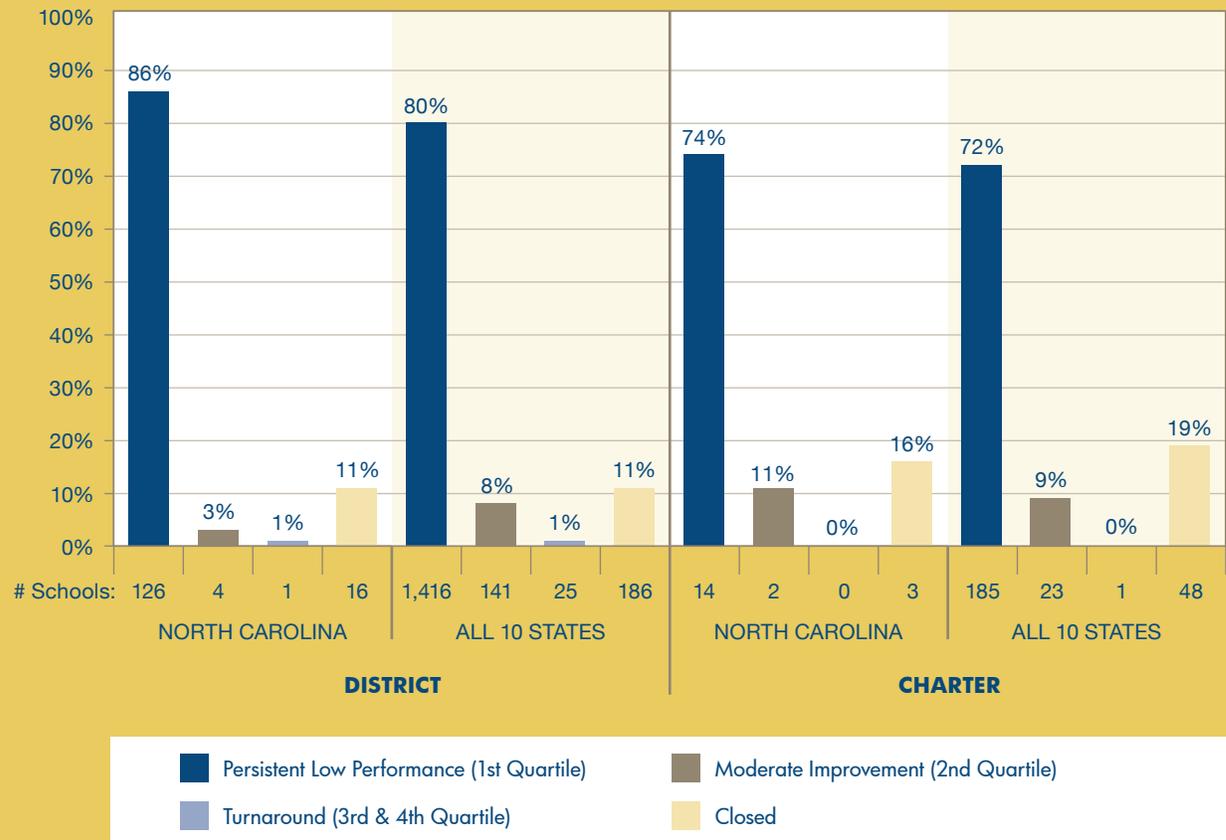
Figure 3 (see page 85) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their statuses by 2008-09. North Carolina's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three notable takeaways emerge:

- Most of the schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained there five years later. Seventy-four percent (n=14) of the low-performing charters stayed in the bottom quartile, as did 86 percent (n=126) of low-performing district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)
- None of North Carolina's low-performing charter schools in 2003-04 qualified as a "turn-around" by 2008-09, and only one of 147 low performers in the district sector met the turnaround criteria. Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, however, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.
- A higher percentage of low-performing schools closed in the charter sector than in the district sector, although the difference was not statistically significant—16 percent (n=3) of the low-performing charters and 11 percent (n=16) of the low-performing district schools.

In sum, neither sector of public education in the Tarheel State is skilled at dramatically improving low-performing schools. Negligible fractions of such schools turned around over a five-year period while the overwhelming majority remained low performers. Closure rates in North Carolina's charter and district sectors were unimpressive, slightly below average among the ten states in this analysis.

Both of North Carolina's public-school sectors need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. This may prove more fruitful than investing time and resources in turnaround efforts. The findings from all ten states reveal that turnarounds are extremely rare. For those who put the closure option aside in hopes that schools will make dramatic improvements, these results suggest they are likely to be disappointed.

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. North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of North Carolina schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the different experiences of the state’s low-performing charter and district schools by exploring their respective accountability pressures and improvement strategies, as well as other influences on school performance. Information for these cases was gathered from public documents retrieved via the Internet and, when possible, interviews with school and district leaders.

In North Carolina, 86 percent of low-performing district schools remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency five years later, compared with 74 percent of low-performing charter schools. The case studies below highlight one low-performing district school that failed to make notable improvement over five years and a charter school that made “moderate improvement” and thus exited the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency.

Roberts Elementary School

Eighty-six percent of North Carolina’s low-performing district schools remained in the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency from 2003-04 to 2008-09. One such school is Roberts Elementary* in the Durham Public School District. A Title I school, it serves over 700 students in grades K-5, about 95 percent of them poor and minority. Like most other schools in the city, Roberts has high student mobility.

One of the lowest-performing schools in the district, Roberts shows little evidence of improvement since 2003-04. Its reading and math proficiency rates have consistently ranked in the lowest 10 percent of the state. With the same principal at the helm from 2003-04 through 2008-09, the school has retained most of the same academic program, aside from the addition of a few instructional coaches. Due to six consecutive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) failures, however, it has recently been forced to implement an NCLB-mandated restructuring plan. The restructuring plan calls for extending the school day and engaging parents in students’ learning, as well as bringing in a new principal to take authority over all staff hiring and firing decisions. It also involves intensive professional development and leadership coaching. In view of Roberts Elementary’s history of weak performance, it is unclear whether these changes will bring improvement.

Walker Academy

Walker Academy* is one of two low-performing North Carolina charter schools that exited the bottom quartile of reading and math proficiency between 2003-04 and 2008-09. A small K-6 school, it enrolled 132 students in 2008-09, nearly all of them poor and African American.

Although the school did not make a full turnaround, it has improved markedly since 2003-04. The threat of NCLB sanctions in 2003-04 and 2004-05 served as a wake-up call and instilled among the school’s leadership “a stronger mindset” to do the needful. It proceeded to make AYP and demonstrate acceptable growth on the state’s value-added metric for the next four years (2005-06 to 2008-09). Consequently, it has dodged NCLB sanctions for three years and exited its authorizer’s “watch list” four years ago.

What happened? The school’s management team attributes its gains to a culture of high expectations, talented teachers, and skilled leadership at both the board and administrative levels. The school is constantly adapting its academic program to address changes to the state curriculum. Data drives decisions; formative and summative assessments are disaggregated to determine which classrooms and students need help with particular concepts. The school has also established partnerships with local and national organizations to provide services such as family counseling and summer and after-school programs. The school’s small size creates financial challenges, but it has fostered strong working relationships among the staff.

*Pseudonym

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—North Carolina," <http://charterschoolresearch.com/laws/north-carolina.htm>
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 2,268 public schools in North Carolina in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 1,794 schools after excluding nineteen schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 367 schools designated by NCES as high schools, nineteen schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and sixty-nine other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the North Carolina Department of Education.
6. Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that 4th- and 8th-grade results in reading went down only slightly from 2003 to 2009, while math scores showed an upward trend (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 on the effectiveness of North Carolina charter schools. Specifically, a 2009 study by Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) did not find a statistically significant difference in the average growth of North Carolina's charter and district students (*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 of the charter and district sectors could reflect changes in student characteristics. In North Carolina, 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 the measure accurately represented the performance of a school, not idiosyncratic test performance in a single year.