



PART 1

Are Bad Schools Immortal?

ARE BAD SCHOOLS IMMORTAL?

The study identifies 2,025 low-performing charter and district schools in ten states in the baseline year of 2003-04. These low performers are tracked over five years and the status of each in 2008-09 is classified as: (1) persistent low performance, (2) moderate improvement, (3) turnaround, or (4) closed. Classifications within each sector are then compared to determine whether rates of persistent low performance, moderate improvement, turnaround, and closure differ for charter and district schools. Within-state and across-state comparisons are presented.

Data

Data for this study were collected from two primary sources: grade-level reading and math proficiency rates from state department of education websites and demographic, geographic, and programmatic data from the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD).²³

The analysis investigates charter and district schools in Arizona, California, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. Collectively, these states were home to 71 percent of all charter schools in 2008-09.²⁴ They are included in this study because each has a sufficiently large sample of charter schools with publicly accessible test-score data going back to 2002-03.²⁵

Charter-school environments vary across the states (see Table 1 on page 18). Five permit state-level authorizers, all have local school-board authorizers, and four allow university or nonprofit authorizers. Table 1 includes NAPCS's grading of state charter-school laws.²⁶ It also shows historical charter-school closure rates by state, or the proportion of charter schools in each state that have been closed prior to 2008-09 as a percentage of the total charter schools that have opened in each state. The last column shows the percentage of total public schools in the state that are charters.

Methods

The study is limited to elementary and middle schools that participated in state testing in 2002-03 and 2003-04.²⁷ (High schools were excluded because consistent longitudinal data for high schools were unavailable in all ten states.) Schools that opened in 2003-04 or after were excluded, as were schools serving only students with disabilities.²⁸ In addition, schools that tested fewer than twenty students in any year between 2003-04 and 2008-09 were excluded because their small test samples do not allow for reliable performance classifications.²⁹

Table 1. Characteristics of the Charter-School Sectors in Ten States

	YEAR CHARTER LAW PASSED	CHARTER-SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS			MAX. LENGTH OF INITIAL CHARTER TERM (IN YEARS)	NAPCS LAW RANK	HIS-TORICAL CHARTER CLOSURE RATE (%)	# OF SCHOOLS IN OP-ERATION 2003-04 (BASELINE YEAR)	# OF SCHOOLS IN OP-ERATION 2008-09 (FINAL YEAR)	% OF CHARTER SCHOOLS TO ALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS (2008-09)
		STATE	LOCAL SCHOOL BOARDS	UNIVER-SITY / COLLEGE / NON-PROFITS						
AZ	1994	Yes	Yes	No	15	10	19%	505	474	23.7
CA	1992	Yes	Yes	No	5	3	13%	444	747	7.5
FL	1996	No	Yes	No	5	11	21%	257	396	10.6
MI	1993	No	Yes	Yes	10	14	11%	212	232	6.1
MN	1991	No	Yes	Yes	3	1	18%	101	153	6.9
NC	1996	Yes	Yes	No	5	32	31%	93	97	3.9
OH	1997	No	Yes	Yes	5	26	16%	163	327	8.6
PA	1997	No	Yes	No	5	12	9%	102	127	3.9
TX	1995	Yes	Yes	No	5	21	10%	274	496	5.9
WI	1993	No	Yes	Yes	5	33	17%	137	218	9.7

Notes: Because Texas charter-school operators are allowed to operate multiple campuses under one charter contract, Texas's 496 school campuses operate under 263 charter contracts.

Source: Figures in columns 2-6 are drawn from the Center for Education Reform's (CER) Charter School Laws across the States (Washington, D.C., 2008); column 7 is drawn from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' (NAPCS) state charter-law rankings database (out of 40 states), 2010; column 8 is based on author's calculations from data in CER's Accountability Report (Washington, D.C., 2009); columns 9-11 are from NAPCS's 2009 Public Charter School Dashboard.

The full dataset is presented in Table 2 (see page 19). A total of 24,921 district schools and 944 charter schools are included.

Data for each school from 2002-03 to 2008-09 were examined. This time frame allows for identification of low-performing schools in 2003-04 based on average test performance in 2002-03 and 2003-04, and it permits determination of turnaround status based on average 2007-08 and 2008-09 test scores. Data were therefore tracked over five years, from 2003-04 to 2007-08. During this time period, all charters are assumed to have undergone either a formal charter-renewal process or an interim performance review; thus the analysis should capture the extent to which authorizers close schools when given a formal opportunity.

Table 2. Charter- and District-School Dataset in Baseline Year (2003-04)

	DISTRICT		CHARTER	
	ELEMENTARY	MIDDLE	ELEMENTARY	MIDDLE
AZ	817	190	97	22
CA	4,944	1,196	174	54
FL	1,630	553	93	30
MI	1,534	599	116	14
MN	807	N.A.	33	N.A.
NC	1,242	477	61	13
OH	1,937	476	45	4
PA	1,508	548	44	11
TX	3,734	1,331	82	26
WI	1,011	387	15	10
TOTAL	19,164	5,757	760	184

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.

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

How Were Low-Performing Schools Identified?

Within the dataset, the study identified 257 charter schools and 1,768 district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04. Two performance metrics were used to identify these schools: First, a school's average combined 2002-03 and 2003-04 reading and math proficiency rate had to rank in the lowest 10 percent among all schools of the same type (elementary or middle) in the relevant state;³⁰ second, schools had to fail to meet their states' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency targets in both 2002-03 and 2003-04.³¹ This definition of low performance is consistent with the 2008 IES panel recommendations as well as recent federal guidelines for identifying schools eligible for SIG funds.³²

More technical approaches that use student-level scale scores would allow for more precise and reliable identification of low-performing schools, but measuring school performance by proficiency rates and AYP status identifies schools that individuals on the ground (school staff, authorizers, district leaders) recognize as low-performing. Proficiency rates from state standardized tests are less than ideal for measuring school performance, but they are universally recognized as the metric that matters most in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era.³³

How Were Schools Classified?

Bryan Hassel and his colleagues at Public Impact define a turnaround as “a documented, quick, dramatic, and sustained change in the performance of an organization.”³⁴ A review of the research points to two defining characteristics of turnarounds. First, they begin as *chronically* low-performing schools.³⁵ Second, they demonstrate remarkable increases in performance over a short period of time. The IES panel emphasizes that the short time period is what distinguishes a turnaround from mere school improvement.³⁶

To qualify as a **turnaround** in this study, a school identified as low-performing in 2003-04 needed to rise above the 50th percentile in its state by 2008-09, based on its average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rate. Similar to the method used to identify low-performing schools, this turnaround criterion incorporates two years of data to provide a more reliable performance estimate. This definition allows at least four years for turnarounds to occur (2003-04 to 2007-08), in line with the timeline suggested by over fifty experts at a turnaround conference sponsored by Foundation Strategy Group (FSG) Social Impact Advisors.³⁷ Still, certain caveats apply to our definition of a turnaround (see *Turnaround Disclaimer* on page 21).

Schools were classified as making **moderate improvement** if they exited a state’s bottom quartile in average 2007-08 and 2008-09 proficiency rates. (The bottom quartile is commonly used as a threshold for identifying low-performing schools, teachers, and students.³⁸) These schools are, in a sense, held harmless because they made relatively strong gains in proficiency scores as compared with other schools in the state (a minimum of 15 percentile points), but the gains were not dramatic enough to qualify as a turnaround. Schools that failed to exit the bottom quartile were designated as demonstrating **persistent low performance**.

A school was designated as **closed** if it was no longer operating by the start of the 2009-10 school year. School closings were identified by the school operational status code in CCD and then cross-checked using data from state department of education websites. The specific reasons for closure were not investigated in this analysis and may, therefore, include factors not immediately relevant to this study, such as citywide demographic changes, school demolition-and-construction programs, etc. Note that some schools may have been reconstituted, consolidated, or converted to charter status.

Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools

Turnaround:	School’s average combined reading and math proficiency rate for 2007-08 and 2008-09 rises to the state’s 51st percentile or above.
Moderate Improvement:	School’s average combined reading and math proficiency rate for 2007-08 and 2008-09 ranks in the state’s 26th to 50th percentile.
Persistent Low Performance:	School’s average combined reading and math proficiency rate for 2007-08 and 2008-09 remains in the state’s 25th percentile or below.
Closed:	School ceased operations prior to the start of the 2009-10 school year.

School closures were broken into two groups: “academically beneficial” closures and “others.” A school closure was designated as “academically beneficial” if the average proficiency rate of the five closest public schools (charter or district) within a three-mile radius was higher than the proficiency rate of the closed school. This technique is designed to determine whether or not the closure benefits students by filtering out bad schools from their set of options. Studies have found that parents place a high value on proximity when choosing schools, particularly low-income parents, whose likelihood of selecting a school declines by 25 to 35 percent for each mile.³⁹ To the extent that a school closure disperses concentrations of low-achieving students and sends them to schools where average achievement is higher, past research suggests the outcome is beneficial.⁴⁰

TURNAROUND DISCLAIMER

It is important to note that a quick change in a school’s proficiency rates (a “turnaround”) may not necessarily be due to an increase in the school’s effectiveness. Instead, it may reflect changes in students’ background characteristics or other factors that are unrelated to actual school quality.⁴¹ The influence of student background and prior learning on a school’s overall performance cannot be controlled for without student-level data, and it can be difficult to compare one school’s performance with another. (That said, the proportions of low-income and high-needs students served in most of the schools in this study changed very little, on average, from 2003-04 to 2008-09; see more in *The Scarcity of Turnarounds* on page 29). This is an important limitation to the study, but it stands to reason that a turnaround (by our definition) may still benefit students even if it does not represent a true change in a school’s effectiveness. Prior research dictates that the academic achievement of a school’s student body has an important influence on an individual student’s academic performance.⁴² If a turnaround disperses a concentration of low-achieving students (either by displacing them to higher-performing schools or by raising school achievement), it is likely a good thing in the long run.

The study’s turnaround criteria are based on relative school performance and introduce both advantages and disadvantages. The primary advantage is the simplicity and intuitiveness of comparing schools with others in the state.⁴³ But one disadvantage is that a relative definition guarantees both winners and losers: As one school exits the bottom half of its statewide distribution, another school enters. This would be of particular concern if all schools in a state were improving—making it possible for a school to make steady improvement while maintaining its percentile ranking—but National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) trends show that, in most states, this is not the case.⁴⁴ A second disadvantage is that most school accountability frameworks are not based on relative definitions; rather, states set common standards and absolute performance benchmarks for all students (e.g., NCLB-mandated annual proficiency targets).⁴⁵ Still, these absolute proficiency rates are ambiguous given that states constantly tinker with test items, test scales, academic content standards, and proficiency cut scores.⁴⁶

Finally, observe that the study’s criteria for school improvement are strict: Hypothetically, a school that rose from the 1st percentile to the 25th over the course of the study would have qualified as a persistently low-performing school, while a school that rose from the 1st to the 50th would have been deemed as having made moderate improvement. While such schools should be recognized for their progress, a school that continues to perform below the state’s average after five years should not be dubbed a turnaround; similarly, a school that remains in a state’s bottom quartile is still low-performing, despite the progress it may have made.

RESULTS

Low-Performing Schools in 2003-04

Table 3 shows the number and proportion of charter and district schools in the dataset that qualified as “low-performing” in the base year. Charter sectors in all ten states had higher concentrations of persistently low-performing schools in 2003-04 than did district sectors. Across all ten states, 27 percent of charter schools were in the lowest decile in reading and math proficiency and failed to meet their AYP proficiency targets in both 2002-03 and 2003-04; this was true for 7 percent of district schools.

Table 3. Low-Performing Schools in Baseline Year (2003-04)

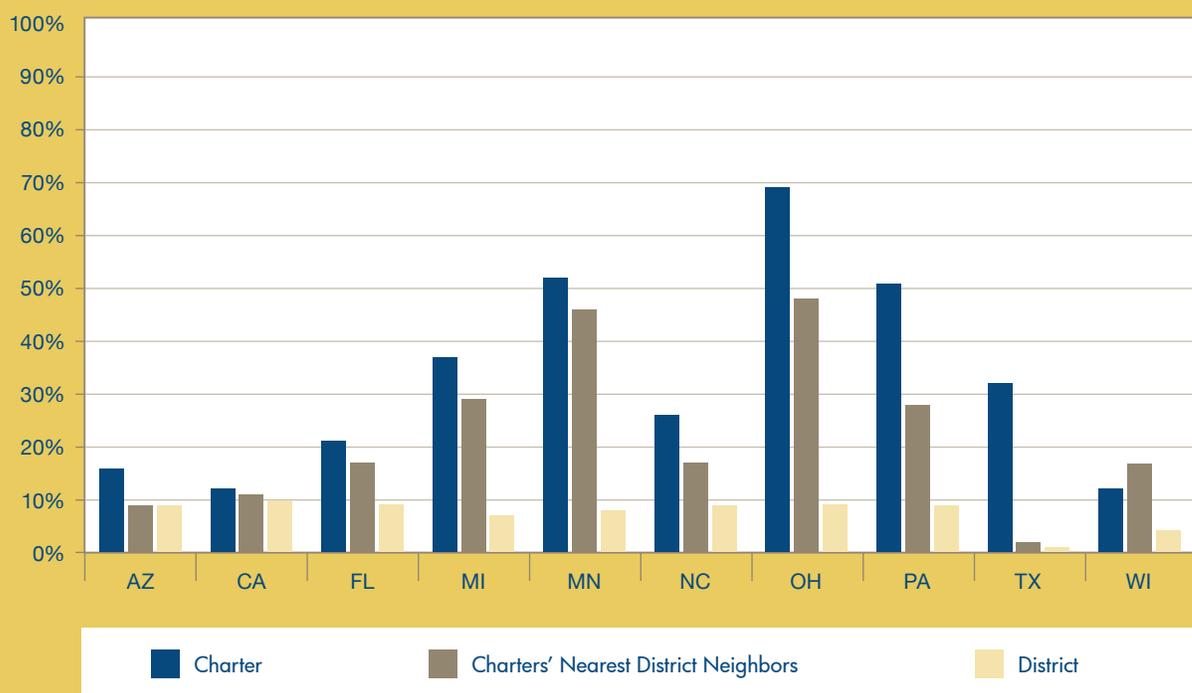
	DISTRICT SCHOOLS			CHARTER SCHOOLS		
	ALL DISTRICT SCHOOLS	LOW-PERFORMING	% LOW-PERFORMING	ALL CHARTER SCHOOLS	LOW-PERFORMING	% LOW-PERFORMING
AZ	1,007	95	9.4	119	19	16.0
CA	6,140	603	9.8	228	28	12.3
FL	2,183	206	9.4	123	26	21.1
MI	2,132	152	7.1	130	48	36.9
MN	807	67	8.3	33	17	51.5
NC	1,719	147	8.6	74	19	25.7
OH	2,413	207	8.6	49	34	69.4
PA	2,056	178	8.7	55	28	50.9
TX	5,064	60	1.2	108	35	32.4
WI	1,398	53	3.8	25	3	12.0
TOTAL	24,919	1,768	7.1	944	257	27.2

Notes: Dataset restricted to non-special-education elementary and middle schools with publicly available reading and math proficiency scores for more than twenty students in 2002-03 and 2003-04. Decile rankings of schools' proficiency rates were analyzed separately for elementary and middle schools within each state.

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

The disproportionate number of charters as compared to district schools in their states' lowest deciles may be misleading because in many states charters are concentrated in high-need urban communities. To better evaluate the propensity for low performance across sectors, charter schools were compared with their closest neighboring district schools with free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) percentages within ten points of the charters' FRL percentages. Figure 1 displays the proportions of low-performing schools in the charter, district, and matched samples. In all states but Wisconsin (which had only three low-performing charters), the proportion of charter schools designated as low-performing is greater than what is found in the matched district comparison group or among the entire sample of district schools. In the majority of states, however, the proportion of charters designated as low-performing is more akin to that of the matched district comparison group than to that of the district schools.

Figure 1. Proportion of Sector Designated as Low-Performing in 2003-04



Notes: "Charters' Nearest District Neighbors" refers to the geographically closest district school of the same type (elementary or middle) with a free and reduced-price lunch percentage within ten points of the charter school.

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

Characteristics of Low-Performing Schools

Who were the low performers in 2003-04? Table 4 (see page 25) compares the characteristics of low-performing schools to others in their respective sectors. In both, low-performing schools were about twice as likely to be located in an urban center. The percentages of poor and minority students in low-performing schools are roughly twice those of other schools. Additionally, the low performers were likelier to receive federal Title I funds for school-wide interventions such as after-school programs and additional academic support staff.

Note that the average enrollment in district schools exceeds that of charters by over 200 pupils. Charters' smaller size may provide an advantage in meeting the study's definition of a turnaround. Part of this advantage is statistical: Pushing a few students over a state's proficiency threshold will yield a larger benefit to the school-wide proficiency rate for small schools. At the same time, small schools may have an operational advantage because minor changes (e.g., replacing two underperforming teachers) will have larger repercussions.

The average number of school years that low-performing charter schools had been in operation by 2003-04 was 4.9. In seven of the ten states in the study, the maximum allowable charter term is five years, so in 2003-04 many of the charters were entering a renewal year, or had recently completed a renewal, in which case they would be back for renewal in the final years of this study (2007-08 or 2008-09).

Table 4. Characteristics of Low-Performing Schools in Baseline Year (2003-04)

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHERS	ALL DISTRICT SCHOOLS	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHERS	ALL CHARTER SCHOOLS
Location (%)						
Urban	57	24	27	63	35	43
Rural	10	25	24	8	20	17
Other	33	50	49	29	45	41
Student Population (%)						
Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	80	44	48	68	35	49
Black	43	12	14	54	20	29
Hispanic	39	25	26	23	18	19
Special Education	14	13	13	12	11	11
Limited English Proficiency	22	12	13	10	10	10
Resources						
Students Per Teacher	17.6	17.5	17.5	16.9	19.4	18.7
State and Local Revenue Per Pupil	\$9,422	\$8,155	\$8,244	\$7,950	\$7,759	\$7,810
% Schoolwide Title I	88	55	49	79	38	57
Avg. Percentile Ranking of Reading and Math Proficiency Rates (2002-03 & 2003-04)	5.67	54.4	50.9	4.92	49.6	37.7
# Schools	1,768	23,151	24,919	257	687	944
Avg. Enrollment	582	569	570	339	364	357
Years in Operation	N.A.	N.A.	N.A.	4.92	4.95	4.94

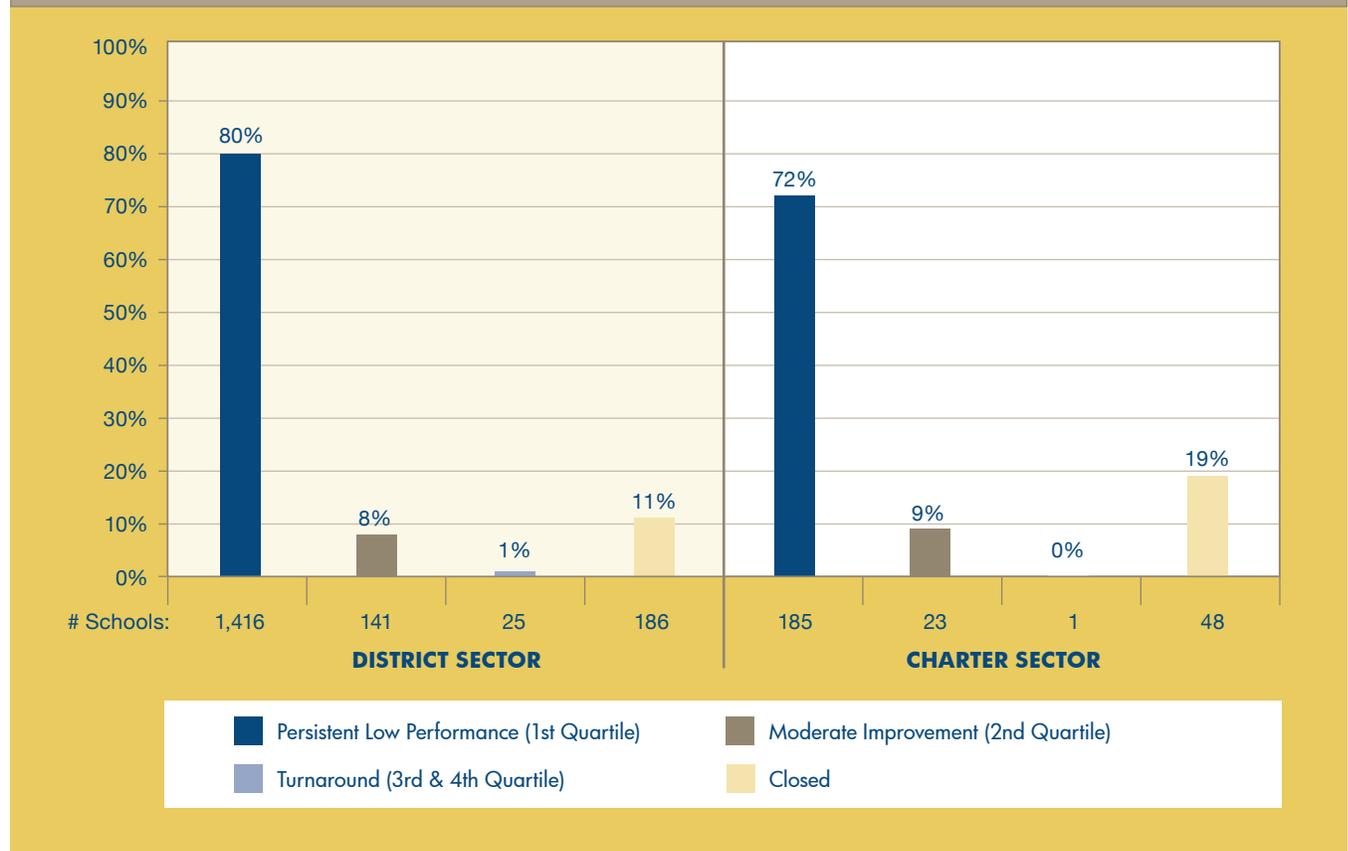
Notes: All figures are unweighted averages of school-level data from 2003-04. "Low Performers" refers to schools that failed to meet their respective states' Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) proficiency thresholds in 2002-03 and 2003-04 in addition to having average combined 2002-03 and 2003-04 reading and math proficiency rates that fell within lowest decile within their respective states. "Others" refers to all schools in the dataset that were not designated as low performers. "State and Local Revenue Per Pupil" is calculated using district-level NCES CCD files. District averages are used for charter schools that do not have Local Educational Agency (LEA) status. Therefore the reported funding averages likely overstate actual charter-school funding levels because most non-LEA charters are not eligible for all forms of state and local revenue received by their host districts. School locations based on 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. "Schoolwide Title I" schools are those with a poverty level (determined by free and reduced meal counts, Aid for Dependent Children [AFDC], census, or Medicaid) at or above 40 percent.

Source: Author's calculations. Data drawn from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Did Low Performers Improve by 2008-09?

In all ten states, the data indicate that the charter sector was slightly better at eliminating low-performing schools, although neither sector has cause for celebration. Figure 2 summarizes the status of the original 2003-04 low-performing schools in 2008-09. Seventy-two percent of the 2003-04 low-performing charter schools remained in their states' bottom quartiles, compared with 80 percent in the district sector.⁴⁷ These overall differences were statistically significant.⁴⁸

Figure 2. 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. Data drawn from state departments of education and the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

Table 5 shows that, in each of the ten states, the proportion of schools that remained in the lowest quartile of statewide proficiency was greater in the district sector than in the charter sector. However, these differences were statistically significant only in Arizona, Florida, and Michigan. (See Part 2 on page 39 for full analysis of state-level results.)

Table 5. Status of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools in 2008-09 by State

		SCHOOLS	PERSISTENT LOW PERFORMANCE (1ST QUARTILE)	MODERATE IMPROVEMENT (2ND QUARTILE)	TURNAROUND (3RD & 4TH QUARTILE)	CLOSURES		
						ACADEMICALLY BENEFICIAL CLOSURES	OTHER CLOSURES	TOTAL CLOSURES
AZ	District	95	0.83	0.12	0.00	0.02	0.03	0.05
	Charter	19	0.58	0.11	0.00	0.21	0.11	0.32
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.25**	0.01	0.00	-0.19**	-0.07*	-0.26***
CA	District	603	0.77	0.13	0.02	0.07	0.01	0.07
	Charter	28	0.71	0.11	0.00	0.18	0.00	0.18
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.05	0.03	0.02	-0.11***	0.01	-0.10**
FL	District	206	0.87	0.05	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.07
	Charter	26	0.73	0.04	0.00	0.23	0.00	0.23
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.14**	0.01	0.00	-0.17***	0.00	-0.16***
MI	District	152	0.90	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.05
	Charter	48	0.75	0.13	0.02	0.10	0.00	0.10
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.15***	-0.09	-0.01	-0.06*	0.01	-0.05
MN	District	67	0.94	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
	Charter	17	0.94	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.00	0.06
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.00	0.03	0.01	-0.04	0.00	-0.04
NC	District	147	0.86	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.11
	Charter	19	0.74	0.11	0.00	0.16	0.00	0.16
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.12	-0.08	0.01	-0.09	0.04	-0.05

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		SCHOOLS	PERSISTENT LOW PERFORMANCE (1ST QUARTILE)	MODERATE IMPROVEMENT (2ND QUARTILE)	TURNAROUND (3RD & 4TH QUARTILE)	CLOSURES		
						ACADEMICALLY BENEFICIAL CLOSURES	OTHER CLOSURES	TOTAL CLOSURES
OH	District	207	0.62	0.04	0.00	0.32	0.02	0.34
	Charter	34	0.56	0.09	0.00	0.29	0.06	0.35
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.06	-0.05	0.00	0.03	-0.04	-0.01
PA	District	178	0.85	0.05	0.01	0.09	0.00	0.09
	Charter	28	0.79	0.04	0.00	0.18	0.00	0.18
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.06	0.01	0.01	-0.09	0.00	-0.09
TX	District	60	0.77	0.15	0.05	0.00	0.03	0.03
	Charter	35	0.74	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.11	0.11
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.02	0.01	0.05	0.00	-0.08	-0.08
WI	District	53	0.83	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.15	0.15
	Charter	3	0.67	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.33	0.33
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.16	0.00	0.02	0.00	-0.18	-0.18
SECTOR TOTALS	District	1768	0.80	0.08	0.01	0.09	0.02	0.11
	Charter	257	0.72	0.09	0.00	0.15	0.04	0.19
	Difference (District - Charter)		0.08**	-0.01	0.01	-0.06***	-0.02**	-0.08***

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 “turn-around” 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. The difference between the percentages of charter and district schools within each classification is also reported for each state; * Significant at $p \leq .10$; ** Significant at $p \leq .05$; *** Significant at $p \leq .001$. Percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

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

The Scarcity of Turnarounds

Very few low-performing schools in either sector were able to exit the bottom 50 percent of schools in their states during this five-year period. Charter schools were not statistically more or less likely to turn around than their district peers. Of the 1,768 district schools in the dataset that were low-performing in 2003-04, only twenty-five (1.4 percent) raised their average 2007-08 and 2008-09 proficiency rates above their states' 50th percentiles, while only one of the 257 (0.4 percent) originally low-performing charter schools met the turnaround criteria.⁴⁹ The low rate of turnarounds in both sectors underscores the stubborn persistence of weak academic performance in individual schools and the slender odds of dramatic change in that performance.

Because the successful turnarounds were statistical outliers, it is difficult to accurately determine what factors contributed most to their success. Still, the data do not suggest that turnarounds resulted from major changes in school population demographics. On average, the turnaround schools served a larger proportion of FRL and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students and a smaller proportion of special-education students in the baseline year than did other low-performing schools (Table 6). These proportions shifted by roughly 1 percent, on average, from 2003-04 to 2008-09. Four of the twenty-six turnaround schools experienced double-digit increases in their

Table 6. Student-Population Characteristics of Turnarounds

	TURNAROUNDS	OTHERS
Student Population in Baseline Year		
Avg. Enrollment	508	551
Number of Tested Students	212	206
% Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	83	78
% Special Education	10	14
% Limited English Proficiency	34	20
Change in Student Population from 2003-04 to 2008-09		
Δ Avg. Enrollment	-90	-75
Δ Number of Tested Students	-22	-9
Δ % Free and Reduced-Price Lunch	1	1
Δ % Special Education	1	0
Δ % Limited English Proficiency	0	1
# SCHOOLS	26	1,999

Notes: "Others" refers to all charter and district schools that were originally designated as low-performing in 2003-04 that did not meet the criteria for a turnaround by 2008-09. Schools were classified as "turnaround" if their proficiency rates rose above the 50th percentile in the state.

Source: Author's calculations. Data collected from the National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data.

FRL percentages, suggesting they made dramatic improvements despite increasingly challenging student populations. Turnaround schools had slightly smaller enrollments, but tested more students on average, indicating that changes in proficiency scores were not systematically more influenced by sampling error, i.e., year-to-year shifts in the characteristics of tested students.

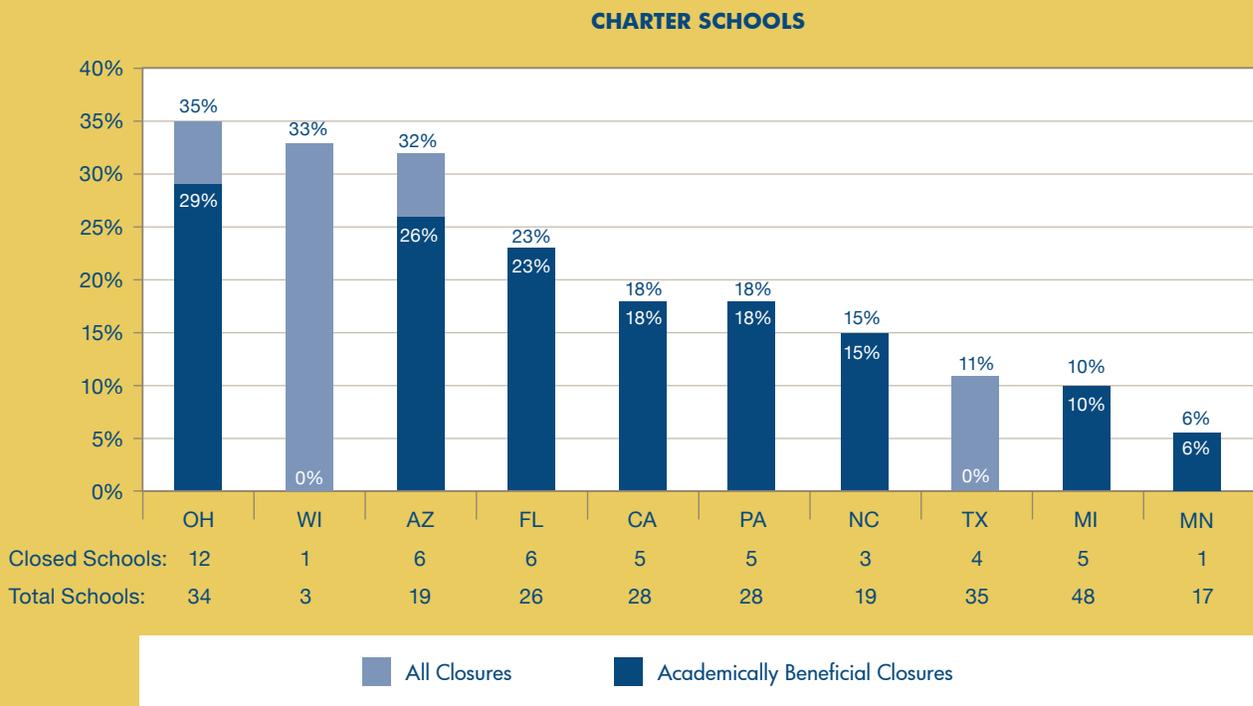
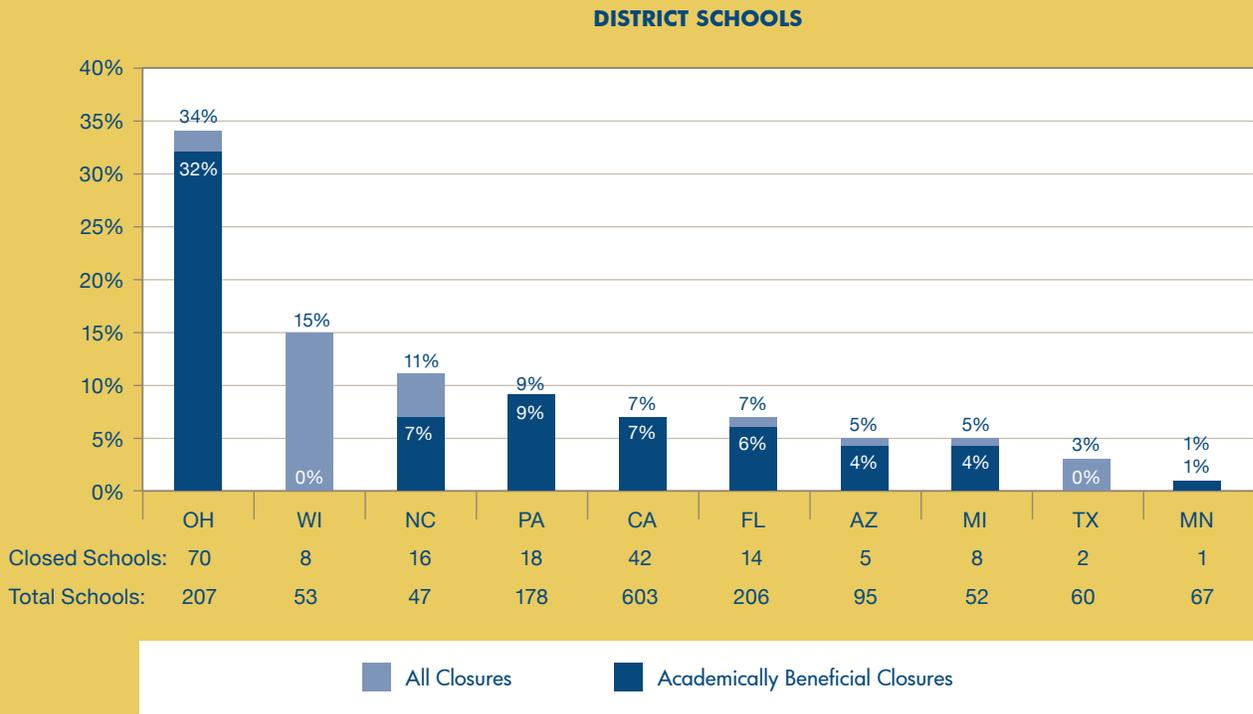
Internet searches were conducted to verify the status of turnarounds. All evidence suggests that these turnarounds were genuine. For example, the one turnaround school in Florida (Stewart Street Elementary) rose from a state rating of an “F” to a “B” in two years, which it partly attributes to adopting the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP)—a comprehensive reform that includes performance pay, career ladders, and professional development. Another turnaround school was Columbus Elementary in Appleton, Wisconsin, which was selected as a 2009 Blue Ribbon School because of its dramatic improvement. And Carstens Elementary, a high-poverty school in Detroit, was recently described by the *Detroit News* as a “beacon of hope in a southeast Detroit neighborhood.”⁵⁰

More schools in the study demonstrated moderate improvement (n=164) than met the turnaround criteria, though those proportions were still low across all ten states. Low performers in Texas were most successful in demonstrating moderate improvement, with 15 and 14 percent of low-performing charter and district schools, respectively, exiting the state’s bottom quartile of proficiency over five years.

The Silver Lining—School Closures

Low-performing charter schools were statistically likelier to close by 2008-09 than low-performing district schools, though neither sector closed large proportions of their low performers. In the full dataset, 19 percent of low-performing charter schools (48 of 257) were closed, compared with 11 percent of low-performing district schools (186 of 1,768). In both sectors, the majority of closed schools were lower-performing than their neighbors and thus termed “academically beneficial closures.” Eighty-one percent of the closed charter schools (39 of 48) and 84 percent of the closed district schools (156 of 186) had proficiency rates that were lower than the average proficiency rate of schools within a three-mile radius. Figure 3 (see page 31) presents the percentages of low-performing district and charter schools that were shut down in each state and distinguishes between academically beneficial closures and others. In each of the ten states, a higher proportion of charter schools was shut down. These differences were statistically significant in Arizona, California, and Florida.

Figure 3. Proportions of 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools That Closed by 2008-09



Notes: Bars indicate for each state the percentage of schools designated as low-performing in 2003-04 that had closed by 2008-09. Darker shades indicate rates of “academically beneficial” closures, i.e., closures where the surrounding schools averaged higher proficiency rates than those of the closed schools.

Source: Author’s calculations. Data on school operational status gathered from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data.

DISCUSSION

Data underscore the distressing durability of low performance among both charter and district schools. Of the 2,025 low-performing schools in the dataset (257 charters and 1,768 district schools), only one in five exited its state's bottom quartile of proficiency after five years (including closures). Turnarounds were rare: Only twenty-six schools demonstrated enough improvement to meet the study's turnaround criteria, and the probability of turnarounds across all ten states was approximately 1 percent. Despite the current emphasis placed on school turnarounds in federal and state school-improvement strategies, the data show that America's numerous turnaround efforts face overwhelming odds. That said, it is unlikely that all low-performing schools in the dataset engaged in the intensive reforms that proponents of turnarounds emphasize as critical to success. We can fairly suppose that most of them engaged in *some* type of school-improvement effort—more than likely, multiple types. Yet this study's findings raise doubts about those who claim to know the secret to turning around failing schools. If silver-bullet solutions existed, a good many more than 1 percent of all low-performing schools in ten states would have turned around.

The charter sector was no more successful in turning around its low performers than its district counterpart. Only one of the 257 low-performing charter schools in the dataset (0.4 percent) made a turnaround. The proportion of turnarounds in the charter sector was lower than in the district sector, though not statistically different. The prevailing theory maintains that low-performing charter schools—given the freedom that all charters have to innovate—will have greater incentive to improve because if they don't, they will presumably be shuttered.⁵¹ Our data, however, show that this autonomy-accountability dynamic has not resulted in turnarounds of low-performing charter schools in ten major charter states.

Still, the news is not all bad for the charter sector. Across all ten states, it did roughly twice as well as the district sector in shutting down low-performing schools. Nineteen percent of the low-performing charter schools were closed, compared with 11 percent of the low-performing district schools. While shutting down an additional 8 percent of low-performing schools is not earth-shattering, it is also not inconsequential. In fact, it's somewhat reassuring since the capacity to close rather than maintain bad schools, despite the pain that school closure ordinarily brings, is part of what distinguishes the charter movement from its traditional brethren.

Yet the charter sector has left itself with much room for improvement. Seventy-two percent of the low-performing charter schools in the sample neither exited the bottom quartile nor closed over a five-year period. Such a high rate of persistent failure is hard to swallow—some might say inexcusable—within a reform movement built upon the pillars of strong school accountability. Children entering first grade in such a school in 2003-04 were exiting sixth grade at the end of 2008-09. If their bad schools failed during that period to build for them the foundations of a solid education, it is extremely unlikely that they will ever acquire one.

CONCLUSION

The NCLB era was marked by schools side-stepping dramatic turnaround labors in favor of less-intrusive improvement efforts.⁵² If schools continue to skirt the dramatic reforms that turnaround proponents deem critical, there's little reason to expect better results from low-performing schools in the next five years than we've seen in the last five—or twenty-five, for that matter.

The success of the new turnaround agenda will hinge partly on how the charter sector responds. As the charter movement has matured, charter leaders have questioned whether authorizers should attempt to turn around failing charter schools rather than shut them down. Though the conversation has shifted from quantity to quality, in practice many authorizers are hesitant to close schools. For instance, the charter authorizing board of the State University of New York (SUNY) is considering replacing the administration and staff at one failing school instead of pushing for its closure.⁵³ The results of this study suggest that such an intervention is misguided: The likelihood that a charter school will make a dramatic turnaround is about one in 250.

More recent debates have centered on whether the charter sector should accept Secretary Duncan's challenge to take over and transform bad district schools. Thus far charter leaders have proven exceptionally reluctant to do so—and this study appears to justify their reluctance if only because the records of transformation in both the charter and district sectors are so limited.

Rather than embarking on dubious turnaround efforts, charter authorizers and district leadership alike should ramp up efforts to close low performers, particularly in cases where better-performing schools are nearby. This will signal to school leaders and policy makers that failure will not be tolerated in either sector. In states with charter caps, this will also free up charter slots that other proven operators can use to start successful new schools.

Authorities can certainly choose to table closure options in hopes that a failing school will turn around. But they will likely be disappointed. Worse, charter authorizers who fail to hold schools accountable will continue to threaten the legitimacy of the charter-school movement.

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3. There are several possible explanations for the relatively high level of school closings in Ohio during this period and not all of them have to do with educational achievement or accountability. Enrollments in urban districts were declining and districts were closing and consolidating schools for this reason. Several major urban districts built significant numbers of new school buildings during this time, which led to some old schools being closed and their pupils transferred. In the charter sector, some schools closed for financial reasons, often because Ohio's low per-pupil reimbursement rate for charters means that very small schools have great difficulty making ends meet.
4. U.S. Department of Education, Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference, July 1, 2010, <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/remarks-secretary-arne-duncan-national-alliance-public-charter-schools>.
5. Andy Smarick, "The Turnaround Fallacy," *Education Next* 10, no. 1 (2010): 21-26, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20101_20.pdf.
6. A school was identified 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 it 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. However, it does not reflect a school's value-added performance. Some schools designated as low-performing may actually have above-average impact on student growth, despite producing consistently low proficiency rates.
7. *Federal Register* 74, no. 164 (August 2009): 43101.
8. For example, New York—where teacher unions have long waged battle to end school choice—more than doubled its charter cap from 200 to 460, and Louisiana removed the cap entirely.
9. U.S. Department of Education, "Turning Around the Bottom Five Percent," Secretary Arne Duncan's Remarks at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Conference, June 22, 2009, <http://www2.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/06/06222009.html>.
10. Terry Ryan, "Should Federal Dollars Be Used to Try and Turnaround Failing Charters?," *Flypaper*, April 6, 2010, <http://www.educationgadfly.net/flypaper/index.php/2010/04/should-federal-dollars-be-used-to-try-and-turnaround-failing-charters/>; Diane Ravitch, "The Big Idea -- It's Bad Education Policy," *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/14/opinion/la-oe-ravitch14-2010mar14/2>.
11. Andy Smarick, "The Turnaround Fallacy," *Education Next* 10, no. 1 (2010): 21-26, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20101_20.pdf.
12. Tom Loveless, "Do Schools Ever Change? An Empirical Investigation," in *The 2009 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2010), 19-25.
13. Ronald C. Brady, *Can Failing Schools Be Fixed?* (Washington, D.C.: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2003).
14. A recent study found that students' test scores increased when they moved to schools with higher performance levels. See Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1373-1414.
15. Tom Loveless, "Charter Schools: Achievement, Accountability, and the Role of Expertise," in *The 2003 Brown Center Report on American Education* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003), 27-35.

16. Brian Gill and others, *State Takeover, School Restructuring, Private Management, and Student Achievement in Philadelphia* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007).
17. Matthew M. Chingos and Paul E. Peterson, "For-Profit and Nonprofit Management in Philadelphia Schools," *Education Next* 9, no. 2 (2009): 65-70, http://educationnext.org/for-profit-and-nonprofit-management-in-philadelphia-schools/educationnext.org/files/ednext_20092_64.pdf.
18. Marisa de la Torre and Julia Gwynne, *When Schools Close: Effects on Displaced Students in Chicago Public Schools* (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, 2009).
19. Viki M. Young and others, *Renaissance Schools Fund-supported Schools: Early Outcomes, Challenges, and Opportunities* (Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, 2009).
20. Rebecca Herman and others, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008), http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf.
21. Emily Ayscue Hassel and Bryan Hassel, "The Big U-Turn: How to Bring Schools from the Brink of Doom to Stellar Success," *Education Next* 9, no. 1 (2009): 21-27, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_20091_20.pdf.
22. Despite some positive research findings on charter-school effectiveness, there are concerns that the sector is not effectively policing itself. The Center for Education Reform reports that 657 (12.5 percent) of the 5,250 charter schools opened across the nation have been shuttered as of 2009. Ninety-two closures were primarily for academic reasons, implying that only 2 percent of all charter schools have been shut down due to low performance. According to the 2009 survey of charter-school authorizers conducted by the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), schools are most likely to be closed when their charter is up for renewal. They found that one in seven schools (14 percent) that were up for renewal did not survive the process. Only 1 percent of schools were closed (voluntarily or involuntarily) outside the renewal process. See Sean Conlan, Alex Medler, and Suzanne Weiss, *The State of Charter School Authorizing 2009: 2nd Annual Report on NACSA's Authorizer Survey* (Chicago: National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2009), http://www.qualitycharters.org/images/stories/2009_Facts_Report.pdf.
23. The final school-level CCD files from 2002-03 to 2007-08 were used in addition to the preliminary 2008-09 CCD file. At the time of this study, CCD had not published free and reduced-price lunch data for the 2008-09 school year, so these data were retrieved from state department of education websites.
24. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Public Charter School Dashboard, <http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2009>.
25. In addition, these states have mature charter-school programs. All schools had passed charter legislation by 1997. Therefore, authorizers had ample time prior to the baseline year of this study to refine their accountability practices, figure out which schools were low-performing, and develop protocols for intervening in low-performing schools.
26. These ratings are based on a number of factors that signal state favorability towards charter schooling, including allowing multiple authorizers, automatic waivers from state rules and regulations, and equitable per-pupil funding. See *A New Model Law for Supporting the Growth of High-Quality Public Charter Schools* (Washington, D.C.: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009), http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/ModelLaw_P7-wCVR.pdf.
27. Schools with non-traditional grade spans that tested in grades 3-8 were classified as either elementary or middle, depending on whether they tested more students in grades 3-5 or 6-8. For example, a K-8 school that tested 300 students in grades 3-5 and 200 in grades 6-8 would be classified as an elementary school, and only proficiency rates for their 3rd- to 5th-graders would be analyzed.
28. Past studies have found that schools perform worst in their first year of operation. See Ron Zimmer and others, *Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009). Excluding schools opening in 2003-04 avoids misclassifying a new school as low-performing in the base years. Alternative schools were included in the dataset. For most states, the inclusion of alternative schools is inconsequential because there are not many exclusively alternative schools in the elementary and middle grades. However, in Texas, close to 50 percent of charter schools are alternative. Differences in the rates of turnaround and closure between charter and district schools in Texas may partly reflect the high proportion of alternative schools in the charter sector.
29. See, for example, Thomas J. Kane and Douglas O. Staiger, "The Promise and Pitfalls of Using Imprecise School Accountability Measures," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (2002): 91-114.

30. The analysis averaged tested grades in 2002-03 and 2003-04 within the 3rd- to 5th-grade span for elementary schools and within the 6th- to 8th-grade span for middle schools. The average of 2002-03 and 2003-04 was weighted based on the number of students tested in each year. Many states did not test in all grades 3-8 in 2002-03 and 2003-04, and therefore their averages were based only on the grades tested. California, Florida, North Carolina, and Texas tested math and reading in all grades 3-8. Arizona tested in grades 3, 5, and 8. Michigan tested math in grade 4 and 8 and reading in grades 4 and 7. Minnesota tested in grades 3 and 5, and therefore no Minnesota middle schools were included in the analysis. Ohio tested in grades 4 and 6 in both subjects. Pennsylvania tested in grades 5 and 8 in both subjects. Wisconsin tested both subjects in 4 and 8. Schools' percentile rankings were calculated separately for elementary and middle schools. Averaging across years and combining subjects and grades into a composite score yields a more reliable estimate of the schools' overall performance status than using a single year. See Robert L. Linn and Carolyn Haug, "Stability of School Building Accountability Scores and Gains," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 24, no. 1 (2002): 29-36; Vonda L. Kiplinger, "Reliability of Large-Scale Assessment and Accountability Systems," in *The Future of Test-based Educational Accountability*, ed. Katherine E. Ryan and Lorrie A. Shepard (New York: Routledge, 2008), 93-114.
31. Schools that made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) because of safe-harbor provisions but failed to meet the state's absolute proficiency targets were considered to have met the study's criteria for low-performing.
32. SIG funds are reserved for Title I schools performing in the bottom 5 percent in reading and math proficiency. In the case that SIG funds remain after distribution to the bottom 5 percent of schools, the remaining funds flow to the next lowest 5 percent. See *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development, 2010), <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/blueprint/blueprint.pdf>. In their applications for SIG funds, many states incorporated multiple years of proficiency rates to target schools lacking progress. For example, North Carolina targeted schools with reading and math proficiency rates below 50 percent in 2008-09 and either 2007-08 or 2006-07. California and Minnesota used a three-year average of reading and math proficiency rates.
33. For a thorough critique of the problems of proficiency rates see Andrew Ho, "The Problem with 'Proficiency': Limitations of Statistics and Policy Under No Child Left Behind," *Educational Researcher* 37, no. 6 (2008): 351-360. The author explains that proficiency trends will be unrepresentative of the schools' complete performance trends because they are heavily influenced by the proportion of examinees who fall near the proficiency cut score. Some states have incorporated schools' value-added scores into their identification of SIG schools. Using value-added scores for this purpose—particularly simple methods such as changes in proficiency from one year to the next—is precarious because value-added scores can be highly unreliable predictors of a schools' future effectiveness. Idiosyncratic "non-persistent" factors cause the relative standing of schools' value-added scores to fluctuate from year to year. Therefore, incorporating value-added scores may result in the misclassification of schools as "persistently" low-performing. See Dale Ballou, "Sizing Up Test Scores," *Education Next* 2, no. 2 (2002): 10-15, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext20022_10.pdf.
34. *School Turnarounds: The Cross-Sector Evidence* (Chapel Hill, NC: Public Impact, 2007), http://publicimpact.com/~publici1/images/stories/publicimpact/documents/Turnaround_evidence_review.pdf.
35. A 2008 expert panel convened by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) defined chronically low-performing schools as those with high proportions of students failing to meet state standards for two or more consecutive years (Rebecca Herman and others, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: IES Practice Guide*, Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008, http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/Turnaround_pg_04181.pdf).
36. See page 5 in Herman et al., 2008. Turnaround experts at MASS Insight suggest significant gains in two academic years (*School Turnaround Models Emerging Turnaround Strategies and Results*, Boston: Mass Insight Education & Research Institute, 2010, http://www.massinsight.org/publications/stg-resources/112/file/1/pubs/2010/07/20/Turnaround_Models_7_19_10.pdf). Schools receiving School Improvement Grants (SIGs) are expected to show results within three years ("School Improvement Grants—January 23, 2010," U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/nastid2.pdf>).
37. Jeff Kutash and others, *The School Turnaround Field Guide* (New York: Wallace Foundation, 2010), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/school-turnaround-field-guide-executive-summary.pdf>.
38. Natasha Ushomirsky and Daria Hall, *Stuck Schools: A Framework for Identifying Schools Where Students Need Change—Now!* (Washington, D.C.: Education Trust, 2010), <http://www.edtrust.org/sites/edtrust.org/files/publications/files/StuckSchools.pdf>; Tom Loveless, "Do Schools Ever Change? An Empirical Investigation," in *The 2009 Brown Center Report on American Education: How Well Are American Students Learning?* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2010), 19-25.

39. Justine S. Hastings, Thomas J. Kane, and Douglas O. Staiger, "Parental Preferences and School Competition: Evidence from a Public School Choice Program," *NBER Working Paper Series* 11805 (2006).
40. The current performance of students in the neighboring schools provides no guarantee that the displaced students will benefit because it does not tell us if the surrounding schools are actually more effective. However, a recent experimental study found students' test scores increased when they moved to a school with higher performance levels. See Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1373-1414. Other non-experimental studies have found that the academic, demographic, and socio-economic characteristics of peers can have a greater impact on students than their own characteristics. See, for example, Geoffrey Borman and Maritza Dowling, "Schools and Inequality: A Multilevel Analysis of Coleman's Equality of Educational Opportunity Data," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 5 (2010): 1201-46.
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42. Justine S. Hastings and Jeffrey M. Weinstein, "Information, School Choice, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Two Experiments," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 4 (2008): 1373-1414.
43. A recent Department of Education blog post identified a Kentucky middle school as an example of a successful turnaround because it now ranks in the top 15% in the state. J. Johnson, "Illuminating Positive Change: Rural Transformation at West Carter Middle School," *Ed.gov Blog*, July 12, 2010, <http://www.ed.gov/blog/topic/turnaround-schools/>.
44. National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>.
45. A third drawback of the relative approach is that the difficulty of a turnaround will differ from one state to the next. Schools in states such as Texas that have low proficiency cut scores will have a narrower distribution of school proficiency rates because the scale of proficiency rates is censored, i.e., schools cannot perform better than 100 percent proficiency. Consequently, states that have low proficiency cut scores are prone to have schools concentrated by the 100 percent proficiency ceiling. For states with a narrow distribution, a smaller increase in absolute proficiency rates may lead to a larger jump in a school's ranking.
46. Many researchers have pointed out that trends on state assessments are misleading because states have modified their testing systems. See, for example, Bruce Fuller and others, "Gauging Growth: How to Judge No Child Left Behind?" *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 5 (2007): 268-78. The authors show that trends on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are flat, while most states have shown double-digit growth in proficiency rates since the introduction of NCLB.
47. Seventy-seven percent of the schools that were designated as persistently low-performing failed to make overall AYP in 2007-08, and over 52 percent were in some form of state-mandated school improvement. For example, of the nineteen Ohio charter schools that were labeled persistently failing, all were designated by the state in Ohio for 2008-09 as either in academic emergency or academic watch (the lowest two of five performance categories).
48. Test of significant differences conducted using a two-sided binomial proportion test.
49. These findings are due in part to the strong effect of student poverty on school performance. The correlation of schools' proficiency rates to their free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) percents ranged from 0.55 to 0.78 across the ten states.
50. Marisa Schultz, "18 DPS Schools Off Closure List, but 32 Others Will Be Shuttered," *Detroit News*, June 8, 2010.
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52. Caitlin Scott, *A Call to Restructure Restructuring: Lessons from the No Child Left Behind Act in Five States* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2008).
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