

PENNSYLVANIA

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 Pennsylvania'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 Pennsylvania's public-school sectors. The vast majority of the Keystone State's low-performing charter and district schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. Furthermore, neither sector was particularly successful at *closing* persistently low-performing schools. Eighteen percent of the charter schools in the study that were low-performing in 2003-04 closed by 2008-09, versus 9 percent of similarly low-performing district schools. Regrettably, 79 percent of the charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make substantial improvement (or close) by 2008-09; eighty-five percent of district schools fared the same.

Characteristics of Pennsylvania'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)

BACKGROUND ON PENNSYLVANIA'S CHARTER SECTOR

Pennsylvania passed charter legislation in 1997. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 144 charter schools operated in Pennsylvania during 2009-10,¹ serving over 79,000 students, or 4 percent of all public-school pupils in the state.² Fourteen charter schools have closed since 1997, representing 9 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 86 percent of Pennsylvania's charter schools are independently operated, while 7 percent partner with nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and 7 percent are affiliated with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Pennsylvania's charter law was ranked twelfth (among forty states) by NAPCS.³ The state permits local school boards to authorize "brick and mortar" charters and the Pennsylvania Department of Education to authorize virtual charters. State law places no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.⁴

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 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, fifty-five Pennsylvania charter schools and 2,056 district schools were included in the dataset.⁵

Table 1 shows that twenty-eight charter schools (51 percent) met the criteria for low performance, as did 178 district schools (9 percent). The fact that Pennsylvania'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. Pennsylvania Schools Designated as Low-Performing in Baseline Years

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	51% (n=28)	9% (n=178)	10% (n=206)
Others	49% (n=27)	91% (n=1,878)	90% (n=1,905)
Total Schools	55	2,056	2,111

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. Pennsylvania Department of Education (2010).

Table 2 (see page 98) compares characteristics of the low-performing charter and district schools with other schools in their sectors. Low-performing schools 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 603, compared with 514 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 404, compared with 480 in the other charters.

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

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	84.3	12.4	18.6	89.3	37.0	63.6
Rural	2.2	32.5	29.9	3.6	7.4	5.5
Other	13.5	55.2	51.6	7.1	55.6	30.9
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	75.7	28.6	32.7	37.6	14.3	26.2
Special Education	14.0	14.0	14.0	9.7	8.4	9.1
Limited English Proficiency	--	--	--	--	--	--
Hispanic	15.6	3.6	4.6	14.0	3.5	8.9
Black	67.5	8.4	13.5	77.9	29.0	53.9
# Schools	178	1,878	2,056	28	27	55
Avg. Enrollment	603	514	521	404	480	442

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.

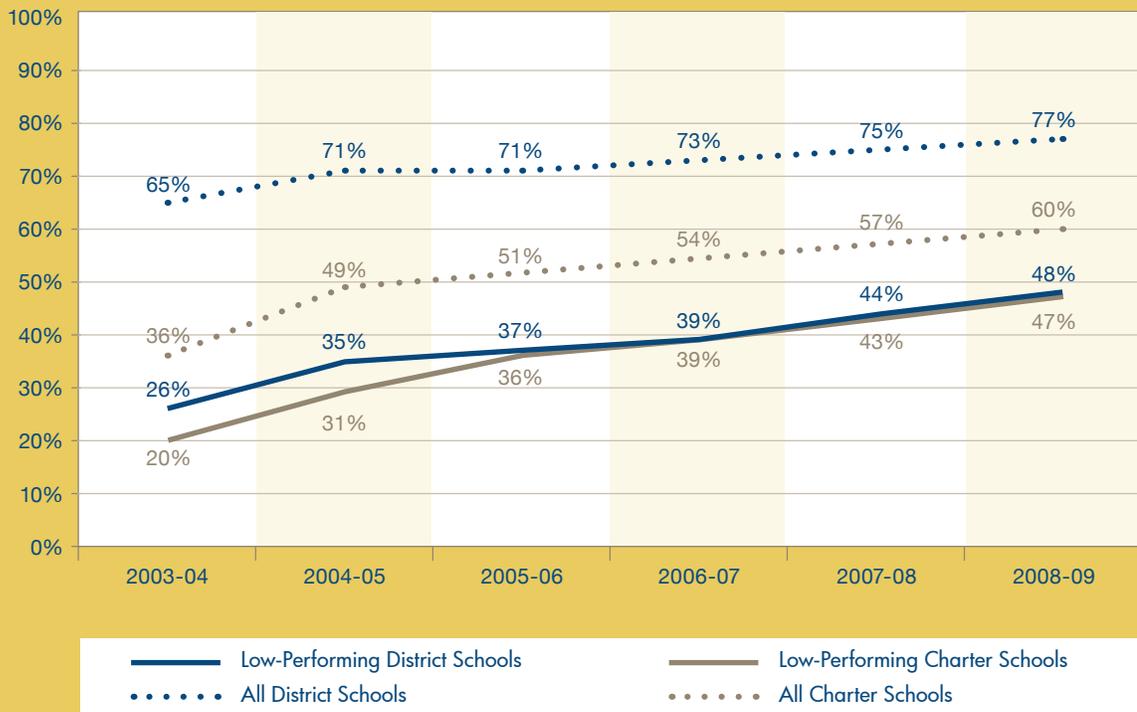
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

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 99) presents the average reading and math proficiency rates of the original low-performing charter and district schools from 2003-04 through 2008-09 as compared with all charter and district schools in the statewide dataset.

Average proficiency rates for all Pennsylvania schools improved steadily over the five-year period.⁶ Charter-sector proficiency lagged that of the district sector during that time, but the charter sector was able to narrow that gap from twenty-nine points in 2003-04 to seventeen in 2008-09. As far as the low-performing schools, there were no meaningful differences in proficiency trends between the two sectors.⁷

Figure 1. Pennsylvania'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 178 low-performing district schools, 2,056 total district schools, twenty-eight low-performing charter schools, and fifty-five total charter schools.

Source: Author's calculations. Pennsylvania 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 Pennsylvania from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 100) based on their average combined 2007-08 and 2008-09 reading and math proficiency rates and whether or not they were still in operation.⁸

Figure 2. Four Pathways for 2003-04 Low-Performing Schools

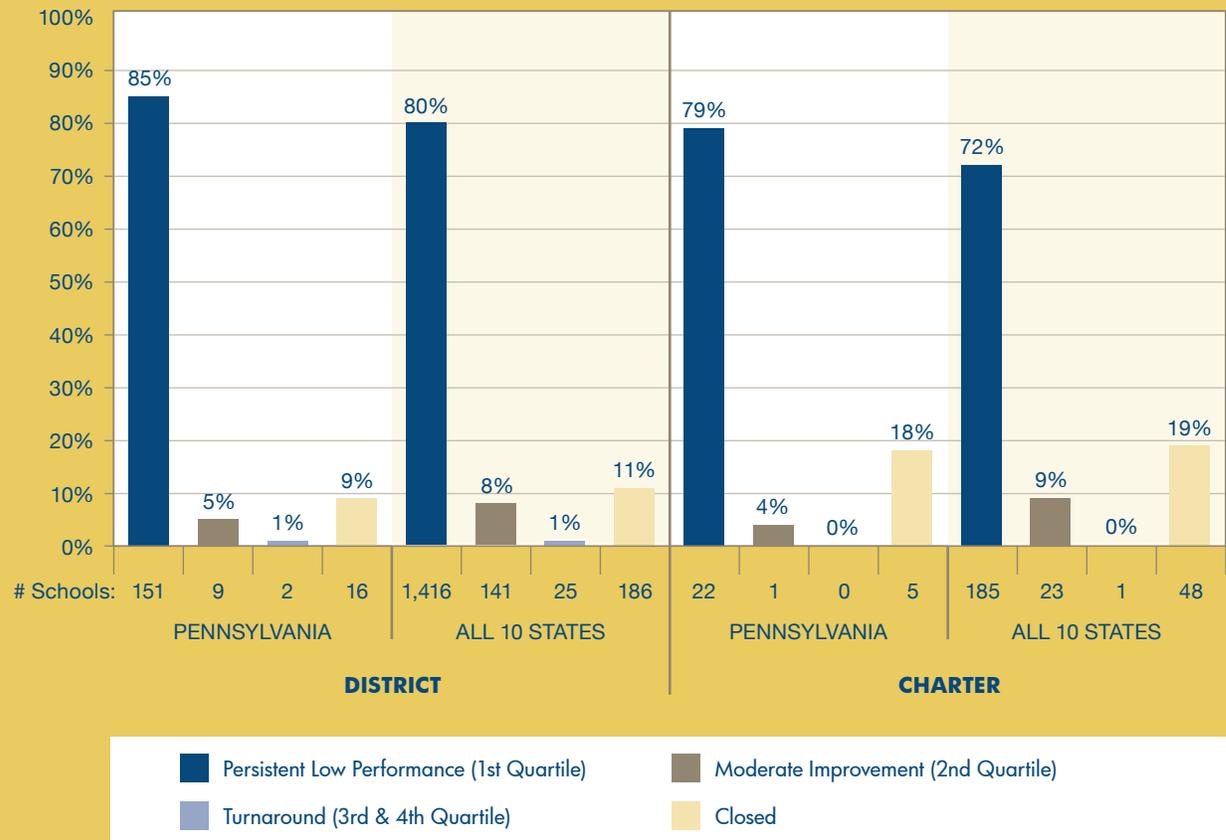
Turnaround:	By 2008-09, school performed at or above the 51st state percentile in reading and math proficiency.
Moderate Improvement:	By 2008-09, school performed between the 26th and 50th state percentiles in reading and math proficiency.
Persistent Low Performance:	By 2008-09, school performed at or 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 101) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Pennsylvania's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. Three takeaways are notable:

- The vast majority of schools in both sectors that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained that way five years later. Seventy-nine percent of charter schools (n=22) remained in the bottom quartile, as did 85 percent (n=151) of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.)
- None of the low-performing charter schools and only two of the 178 district schools (1 percent) qualified as a “turnaround” by 2008-09. 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.
- As with the other nine states in the study, Pennsylvania's low-performing charter schools were more likely to close than their district-operated counterparts. Eighteen percent (n=5) of the low-performing charter schools closed before the start of the 2009-10 school year, compared with 9 percent (n=16) of district schools. (This difference was not statistically significant.) These rates of closure were not very different from the overall charter and district closure rates of the ten states.

On balance, this analysis reveals that weak school performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in both of Pennsylvania's public-school sectors. Seventy-nine percent of Pennsylvania's charter schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 continued to operate without notable improvement over a five-year period, as did 85 percent of low-performing district schools; a negligible fraction in both sectors made dramatic turnarounds during that time. Eighteen and 9 percent of Pennsylvania's charter and district sectors closed, respectively, roughly on par with the 10-state charter and district averages. The findings underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter schools, despite their greater operational autonomy, are no better at turnarounds than their district counterparts.

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. Pennsylvania Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data.

Both of Pennsylvania’s public-school sectors need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. The state’s public-education system may benefit more by ramping up efforts to close down low performers than by investing time and energy in school 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 gains, these results suggest that they are likely to be disappointed.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Pennsylvania schools—one charter and one district—that were low-performing in 2003-04. Though anecdotal, they provide some insight into the divergent trajectories 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.

While most low-performing schools in Pennsylvania remained that way five years later, Pennsylvania was home to two of the twenty-six turnaround schools in the 10-state analysis. The following two cases profile one charter school that remains open despite consistently low test scores, as well as one district school that turned around over five years.

Campbell Elementary School

Campbell Elementary School* is a K-5 school located in a low-income, urban neighborhood in Philadelphia. Nearly all of its students are poor and African American.

The school made consistent improvement from 2002-03 to 2008-09, with the most dramatic gains in the last three years. Its overall proficiency rate rose from 17 percent in 2003-04 to 43 percent by 2006-07, but consecutive Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) failures required it to undergo NCLB-mandated restructuring. As part of that process, much of the staff was replaced (though not the principal). After restructuring, the school’s performance rose dramatically—from 43 percent in 2006-07 to 76 percent in 2007-08 and then to 83 percent in 2008-09, placing it in the 70th percentile statewide.

School officials attribute the successful turnaround to a number of factors. In 2003, Campbell entered into partnership with a behavioral health-care agency to address school discipline and violence issues. Since 2003, reported incidents of violence have dropped dramatically. Other interventions targeted teacher collaboration, including teacher participation in screening and hiring new colleagues, a task previously handled at the district level. The principal noted a “snowball effect”: as the school

improved, more people and outside groups wanted to be a part of its improvement process. In the past year, it was invited to team up with the Office of the Mayor. The school’s next goal is to enter the prestigious “90-90” club, i.e., schools where 90 percent of students are proficient though 90 percent are poor.

Sanders Community Academy

Seventy-nine percent of the low-performing charters in 2003-04 remained in the bottom proficiency quartile five years later. One such school was Sanders Community Academy,* a Pittsburgh charter serving approximately 300 students in grades six through twelve. The school’s population is predominantly poor and minority, with 97 percent of students African American (in 2008-09) and 88 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Sanders’ performance stagnated from 2003-04 to 2007-08, with a statewide proficiency ranking that never exceeded the 10th percentile. Since the school opened in 1999, leadership has been inconsistent, with new principals taking over in 2003-04, 2004-05, and 2007-08. It has undergone NCLB-mandated school improvement since 2003-04. In 2006, the Pittsburgh Public School Board voted to close the school, but a week later reversed that decision due to community pressure. There is a glimmer of hope, however. Proficiency rates rose more than twenty points from 2007-08 to 2008-09 and the school made AYP for the second consecutive year. In addition, its instructional staff has stabilized and teacher turnover is down from previous years.

*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—Pennsylvania," <http://charterschoolresearch.com/laws/pennsylvania.htm>.
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 3,267 public schools in Pennsylvania in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 2,111 schools after excluding twelve schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 615 schools designated by NCES as high schools, thirty-four schools that NCES designated as new in 2003-04, and 495 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.
6. Increases were also observed in 4th- and 8th-grade math and reading scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>).
7. Proficiency trends of the charter and district sector could reflect changes in student characteristics. In Pennsylvania, 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.
8. 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.