

WISCONSIN

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 Wisconsin'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.

This study finds that the vast majority of Wisconsin's low-performing schools failed to make notable improvements in proficiency rates after five years. The number of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin was too small ($n=3$) to render meaningful comparisons between the state's charter and district sectors, but results from the other nine states in this analysis reveal that dramatic turnarounds are equally rare for charter and district schools. Yet, overall, the charter sector across all ten states proved itself more successful than the district sector at *closing* persistently low-performing schools, a positive sign that charter accountability is working.

Characteristics of Wisconsin'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

BACKGROUND ON WISCONSIN'S CHARTER SECTOR

Wisconsin passed charter legislation in 1993. According to the Center for Education Reform (CER), 223 charter schools operated in Wisconsin during 2009-10,¹ serving over 36,000 students, or 4 percent of all public-school pupils.² Thirty-nine Wisconsin charter schools have closed since 1993, representing 15 percent of all charters ever opened in the state.

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that 98 percent of Wisconsin's charter schools are independently operated, while 2 percent partner with for-profit education management organizations (EMOs). The strength of Wisconsin's charter law was ranked thirty-third (among forty states) by NAPCS.³ State law permits local school boards, the City of Milwaukee, and local universities to authorize schools in Milwaukee. There is no cap on the number of charter schools allowed to operate in the state.⁴

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, twenty-five Wisconsin charter schools and 1,398 district schools were included in the dataset.⁵

Table 1 shows that three of the twenty-five charter schools (12 percent) met the criteria for low-performance, as did fifty-three of the 1,398 district schools (4 percent). The sample of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin is too small to render meaningful comparisons of turnaround and closure rates between the sectors.

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

	CHARTER	DISTRICT	ALL SCHOOLS IN DATASET
Low-Performing	12% (n=3)	4% (n=53)	4% (n=56)
Others	88% (n=22)	96% (n=1,345)	96% (n=1,367)
Total Schools	25	1,398	1,423

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. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2010).

Table 2 (see page 114) 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 480, compared with 378 in other district schools; the average enrollment of low-performing charter schools was 521, compared with 332 in the other charters.

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

	DISTRICT SECTOR			CHARTER SECTOR		
	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE	LOW PERFORMERS	OTHER SCHOOLS	AVERAGE
Location (%)						
Urban	92.5	21.9	24.5	100.0	68.2	72.0
Rural	1.9	39.3	37.8	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	5.7	38.9	37.6	0.0	31.8	28.0
Student Population (%)						
Free/Reduced-Price Lunch	82.6	28.9	31.0	91.0	35.8	38.2
Special Education	16.8	14.5	14.6	12.9	15.3	15.0
Limited English Proficiency	6.5	2.4	2.6	2.2	5.9	5.5
Hispanic	17.2	4.6	5.0	0.3	9.1	8.1
Black	63.0	6.2	8.3	99.3	20.5	30.0
# Schools	53	1,345	1,398	3	22	25
Avg. Enrollment	480	378	382	521	332	355

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.

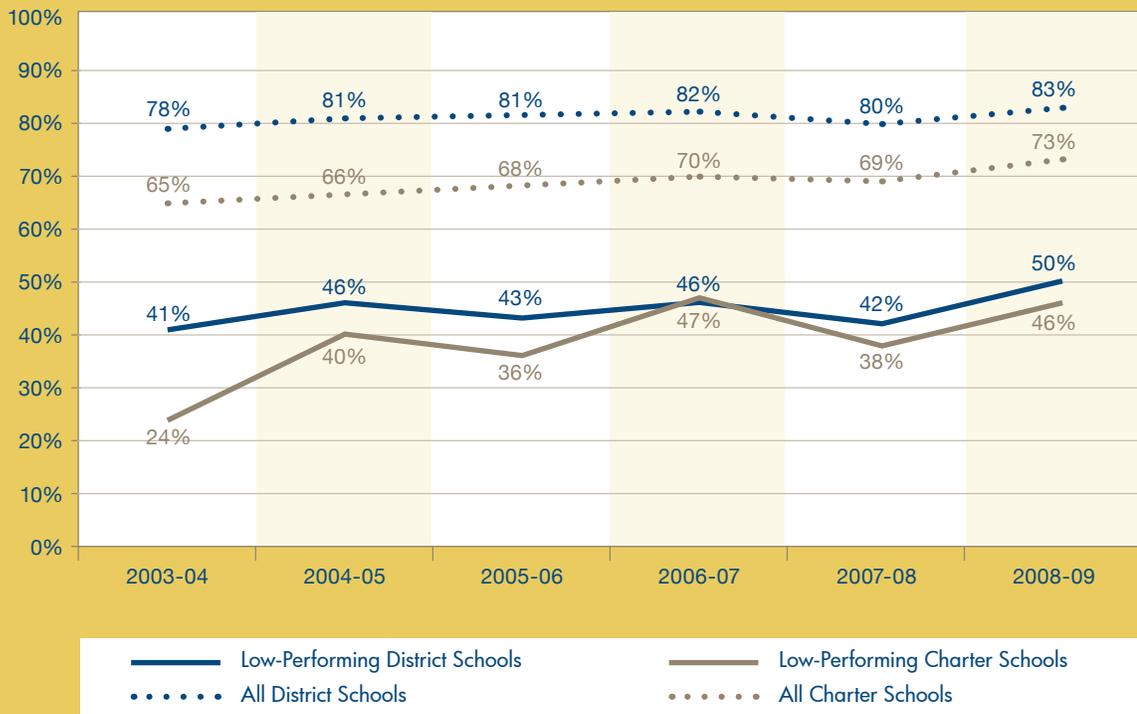
Source: Author's calculations. National Center for Education Statistics' Common Core of Data (2003-04).

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 115) 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 Wisconsin schools rose slightly during that five-year period.⁶

Average school proficiency rates for all schools from 2003-04 to 2008-09 were consistently more than ten percentage points lower in the charter sector than in the district sector. Comparing the rates by which proficiency rose suggests that neither sector dramatically outperformed the other in performance gains. Given that just three charters in our sample qualified as low-performing, the analysis cannot draw meaningful conclusions regarding whether Wisconsin's charter sector is more successful at addressing school failure.

Figure 1. Wisconsin’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 fifty-three low-performing district schools, 1,398 total district schools, three low-performing charter schools, and twenty-five total charter schools.

Source: Author’s calculations. Wisconsin 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 Wisconsin from 2003-04 to 2008-09, the original low performers (from 2003-04) were placed into four classifications (see Figure 2 on page 116) 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 2008-09.⁷

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.

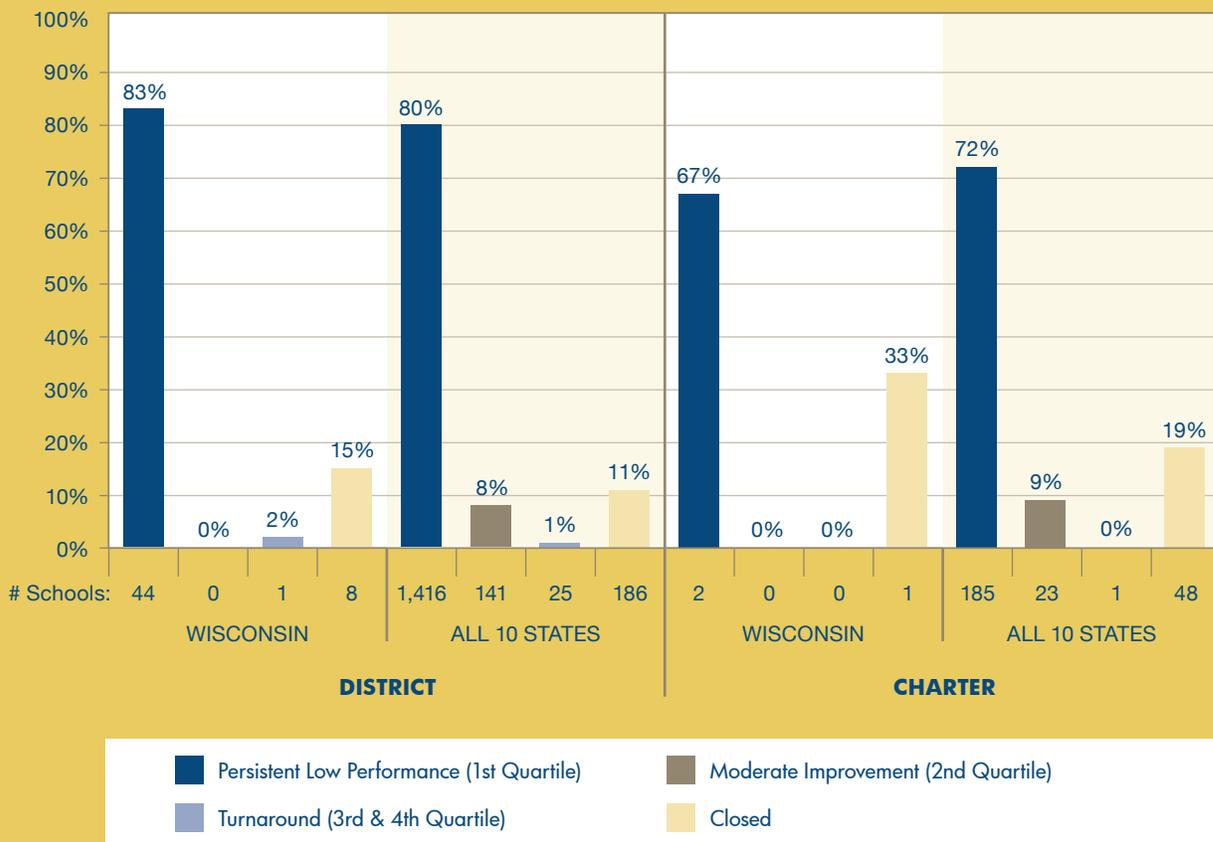
Figure 3 (see page 117) shows the extent to which low-performing charter and district schools in 2003-04 altered their status by 2008-09. Wisconsin's figures are presented alongside those for the full 10-state sample. The sample of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin is too small ($n=3$) to render meaningful comparisons between the sectors. Still, three notable findings for the district sector emerge:

- The majority of district schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 remained that way five years later. Eighty-three percent ($n=44$) of low-performing district schools failed to exit the bottom quartile by 2008-09, much like the overall rate of the ten states in the study.
- Only one of the fifty-three district schools (2 percent) met the criteria for a “turnaround.” Turnaround rates in the 10-state sample were not much better, with only 0.4 percent and 1.4 percent of charter and district schools meeting the criteria, respectively. These statistics quantify the tough odds facing America's numerous school turnaround efforts.
- Fifteen percent ($n=8$) of Wisconsin's low-performing district schools closed before the start of the 2009-10 school year, a higher rate than all states but Ohio.

In sum, this analysis shows that low performance is a remarkably stubborn condition in Wisconsin as elsewhere. The vast majority of Badger State schools that were low-performing in 2003-04 failed to make notable improvement over a five-year period, and a negligible fraction made dramatic turnarounds.

The sample of low-performing charter schools in Wisconsin is too small ($n=3$) to render meaningful comparisons between the sectors. But data from the other nine states underscore the common challenge facing failing schools in both sectors, and suggest that charter and district sectors across the country need to improve their efforts to eliminate bad schools. State public-education systems may benefit if both sectors ramp up efforts to close weak performers; this may prove more beneficial than investing time and resources in improbable 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. Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the National Center for Education Statistics’ Common Core of Data.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

We offer here two illustrative cases of Wisconsin 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.

In Wisconsin, findings showed that the vast majority of district schools failed to make notable improvement from 2003-04 to 2008-09. Therefore, one case study highlights a persistently low-performing district school; the other describes a closed charter school.

John Burroughs Middle School

John Burroughs Middle School serves roughly 500 students in grades six through eight. This Title I school is located on the north side of Milwaukee and serves a predominately African American student population. Ninety percent of its students are poor and 22 percent receive special-education services. Burroughs is plagued by high student mobility and frequently retains students from grade to grade.⁸

Burroughs consistently ranks near the bottom of the state in reading and math proficiency. Its proficiency rates were nearly stagnant from 2003-04 to 2008-09, increasing only from 30 to 36 percent over five years. By the district's own metric, the school has demonstrated low value-added and attainment scores in reading and math since 2004-05, except for 2007-08. The school is currently under NCLB-mandated corrective action due to repeated failures to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Like many schools designated as low-performing in this study, it was recently listed as a "persistently lowest-achieving school" in the state's application for federal Title I school improvement funds.

Money does not appear to be the problem, however. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) receives close to \$12,000 per pupil, \$1,500 above the state average. Burroughs Middle houses six computer labs, a large media center equipped with smart boards, an extensive community

learning center that provides homework assistance and enrichment programs, and an array of after-school tutoring programs. Yet MPS does not impel dramatic school improvement. Compared to charter schools, which undergo annual performance reviews, MPS utilizes no consistent process for monitoring school performance and responding to persistent failure.

Malcolm X Charter School

Wisconsin law designates two types of charter schools—instrumentality and non-instrumentality. The former are authorized by districts, must employ district staff, and enjoy less autonomy, while the latter have greater autonomy and may employ non-district personnel. In 2009-10, twenty-five of the thirty-four charter schools authorized by the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) were instrumentality.⁹

Malcolm X Charter School was such a school until its closure in 2007. The middle school enrolled around 400 students in grades six through eight, nearly all of them African American and poor. The school created its own curriculum and instructional approach inspired by Kwanzaa philosophy.

Malcolm X opened in 2002 and was eventually closed by MPS on the grounds of low academic performance. During its tenure, its proficiency rates—never above fifty percent—placed it in the bottom 1st or 2nd state percentile. The school failed AYP in four of five years and there is no evidence that it embraced rigorous school-improvement interventions.

Malcolm X's experiences exemplify weak charter-school policies that blur distinctions between charter schools and district operations. For example, MPS moved the principal of Malcolm X to a different low-performing charter school after Malcolm X shut down. When the other charter school also shut down (also due to low performance), the principal then moved to a central office position. This mingling of district and charter affairs runs contrary to the notion of autonomy that is central to the logic of charter schools. It is no surprise that both district and instrumentality schools within MPS have similarly stubborn performance trajectories, given that school staffing and operations are both controlled by the central office.

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—Wisconsin," <http://charterschoolresearch.com/laws/wisconsin.htm>.
5. The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD) reports a total of 2,250 public schools in Wisconsin in 2003-04. The analysis was limited to 1,424 schools after excluding ten schools designated by NCES as special-education schools, 513 schools designated by NCES as high schools, eighteen schools that NCES designated as "new" in 2003-04, and 285 other schools that did not have publicly available reading and math proficiency data for 2002-03 and 2003-04 from the Wisconsin Department of Education.
6. Results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that 4th- and 8th-grade math scores rose slightly from 2003 to 2009, while reading scores remained flat (National Center for Education Statistics, "NAEP State Profiles," U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/>).
7. 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.
8. Milwaukee Public Schools, "John Burroughs Middle School," <http://mpsportal.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/portal/server.pt?open=512&objID=331&PageID=38232&cached=true&mode=2>.
9. "Snapshot: Charter Instrumentality & Non-Instrumentality School Programs, 2009-2010" Milwaukee Public Schools, www2.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/dcs/Charter_Snapshot.doc.