



Charter School Performance Comparable to Other Public Schools; Stronger Accountability Needed

at a glance

On average, charter school students are academically behind when they enter their charter school compared to students remaining in traditional public schools. For this reason charter school students are slightly less likely to meet grade-level standards compared to students in other public schools.

Most charter school students achieve comparable learning gains in math and reading as similar students in traditional public schools. However, students who are furthest behind make slightly more progress in charter high schools than do students in traditional public high schools.

Charter schools vary widely in their performance. Successful charter schools exhibit many of the same characteristics long associated with successful schools, including setting high academic expectations, strong instructional leadership, and frequent progress monitoring.

Many charter schools' contracts and annual reports do not include the information needed to hold them fully accountable for student performance.

Scope

This report is one of a series of reports that examine Florida charter schools. These reports provide information to the Legislature to assist it in its review of charter schools as required by s.1002.33(22), *Florida Statutes*. This report analyzes the academic performance of charter school students and the systems used by the state and local school boards to hold charter schools accountable for student performance. This report is accompanied by a technical report that provides a detailed description of the research methodology we used. A separate report, [Report No. 05-11](#), focuses on Florida's process for establishing charter schools and charter schools' financial status.

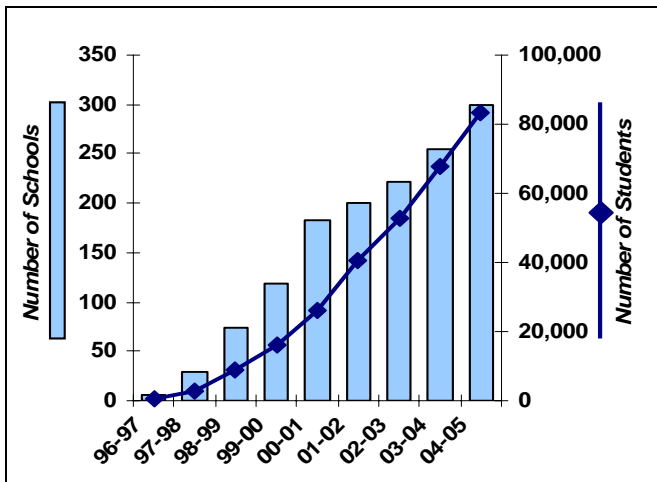
Background

The charter school movement emerged in the early 1990s, partly in response to public dissatisfaction with the performance of traditional public schools. Minnesota established the nation's first charter schools in 1991. In 1996, the Florida Legislature authorized charter schools as a means to improve student learning, increase teaching innovation, provide students and parents with more choice, increase accountability, and provide competition within the public school system.¹

¹ Chapter 96-186, *Laws of Florida*.

The number of charter schools in Florida has grown steadily since their inception (see Exhibit 1). In 1996, the state had five charter schools that served 574 students. By January 2005, 300 charter schools served over 83,000 students. Charter schools operate in 42 of the state’s 67 school districts.

**Exhibit 1
The Number of Charter Schools and Students Has Increased Steadily Over the Past Nine Years**



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Currently, 40 states authorize charter schools as part of their public school systems.² Florida ranks behind only California and Arizona in the number of charter schools in operation.

Florida’s charter schools are publicly funded, nonsectarian schools that operate under contracts (charters) with their sponsors, usually local school boards.³ They are largely independent of the school districts in which they operate and are managed by their own governing boards. Florida’s charter schools are open to all students and may offer a specialized curriculum that emphasizes science, the arts, and/or programs for at-risk students.

² In addition, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico authorize charter schools as part of their system of public education.

³ A university may grant a charter to a developmental research (laboratory) school created under s.1002.32, F.S., limited to one school per university except charter lab schools authorized prior to June 1, 2003.

Findings

Available test data indicates that charter schools, which often serve students who are academically behind, are reasonably successful in helping their students make learning gains. However, state accountability mechanisms need to be strengthened for these schools.

We assessed the performance of students attending charter schools in the 2003-04 school year. We analyzed six years of Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) results to assess students’ performance in math and reading before they entered a charter school, a year after they had attended their charter school, and their annual learning gains while in the charter school. (See *Charter School Review Technical Report*, Report No. 05-22 for a detailed description of our research methodology.) Based on our analysis, we made the determinations noted below.

- Charter schools serve students that are demographically very similar to those in other public schools. However, on average, charter school students are academically behind when they enter their school compared to students who remain in traditional public schools. Charter schools also tend to be smaller than other public schools.
- Due largely to the fact that charter school students enter with academic deficits, a slightly higher percentage of students in charter schools do not meet Sunshine State Standards grade-level expectations in math and reading compared to students in other public schools.⁴
- Most charter school students make similar annual learning gains in math and reading when compared to students in traditional public schools who start at similar developmental levels.

⁴ For purposes of this report, meeting Sunshine State Standards (SSS) grade-level expectations is defined according to Florida’s No Child Left Behind designations of proficient and advanced—FCAT SSS achievement level of 3 and above.

- Charter school students who are the furthest behind when they enter a charter high school make greater annual learning gains in math and reading when compared to students in traditional public high schools who start at similar developmental levels.
- Charter school performance varies widely. About one-third of all charter schools have a majority of students who are not meeting grade-level expectations in math and reading and a majority whose annual learning gains are less than their peers statewide.
- Successful charter schools exhibit characteristics that have long been associated with effective schools. Some of these characteristics are high expectations for student learning, strong instructional leadership, and frequent monitoring of students' progress.
- Currently, local contracts and annual reports are not effective in holding charter schools accountable for making improvements in student performance.

Charter schools are typically smaller, and generally serve students who enter academically behind

Charter schools are very similar to other public schools in terms of the students they serve. However, compared to traditional public schools, charter schools tend to serve fewer students and, in general, these students are academically behind when they enter a charter school compared to students who remain in traditional public schools. These differences need to be taken into account when examining the performance of charter schools, especially when comparing their performance to that of traditional public schools.

Charter schools tend to be smaller but serve students similar to those in other public schools. In general, Florida charter schools serve fewer students than other public schools regardless of level (elementary, middle, or high). During the 2004-05 school year, the average charter school served 277 students compared to traditional public schools that served an average of 799 students. The size of charter schools varied considerably, as the smallest charter schools

served fewer than 20 students while the largest served over 1,700.

The relatively small size of charter schools can pose both benefits and challenges. Small schools may have an advantage in fostering a sense of community, and teachers can know their students well and support academic excellence. However, small schools, particularly at the high school level, may have difficulty offering a wide range of academic courses and electives.

While smaller, charter schools serve a wide variety of students. The initial charter schools in Florida primarily focused on serving academically at-risk students. However, the missions of charter schools currently range from exceptional education centers that serve children with dyslexia or other disabilities to dropout prevention and recovery schools to college preparatory schools serving gifted students.

Charter schools generally serve similar students to those in traditional public schools. In 2004-05, the race and ethnicity of charter school students mirrored that of Florida's traditional public school students (see Exhibit 2). The percentages of charter school students that are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, classified as limited English proficient, classified as gifted or as having a disability were also similar to the percentages for students in traditional public schools.

**Exhibit 2
Charter School Students Are Demographically Similar to Traditional Public School Students**

Student Characteristic	Charter School Students	Traditional Public School Students
African-American	25%	24%
Hispanic	26%	22%
White	48%	49%
Eligible for free lunch	37%	46%
Students with disabilities	12%	16%
Limited English proficiency	6%	8%
Gifted	3%	5%

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education Survey 2 2004-05.

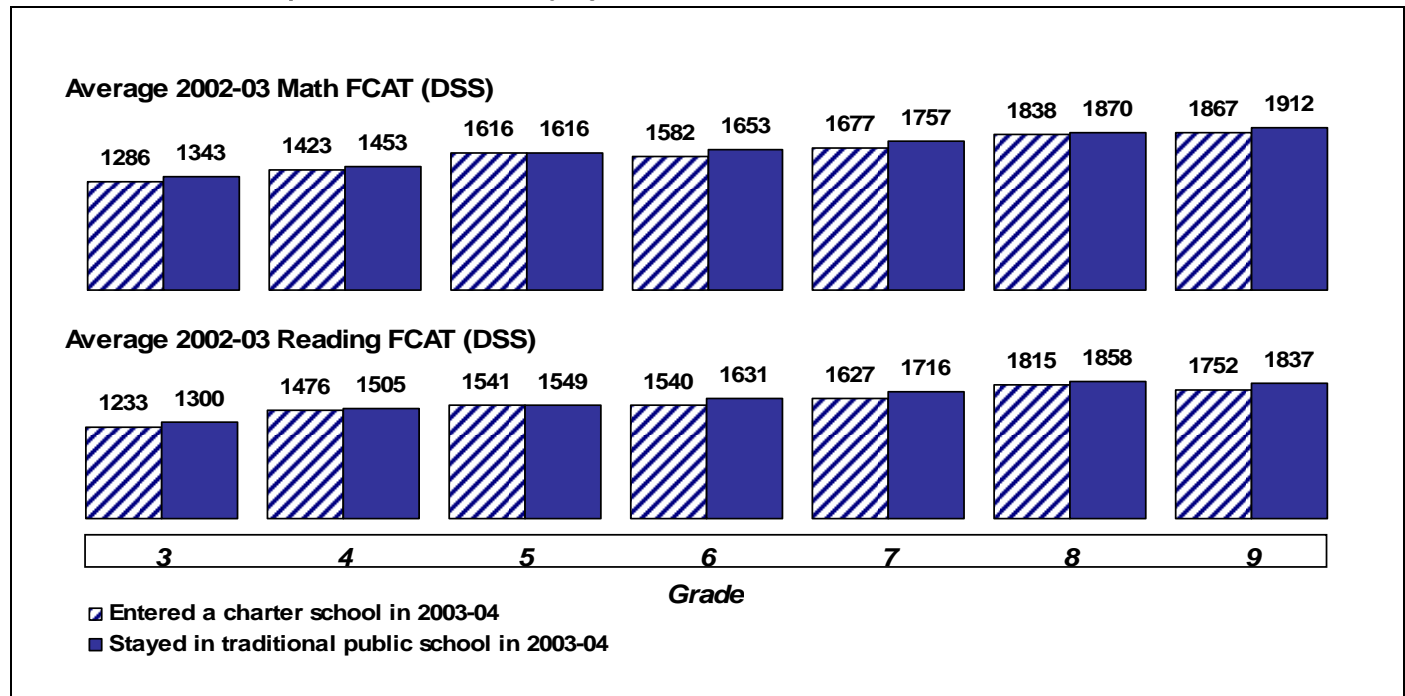
Students who enter charter schools tend to be behind academically compared to students who remain in public schools. While students who attend charter schools are demographically diverse, many do not do well in a traditional public school before entering a charter school. In general, students who left traditional public schools to attend charter schools in 2003-04 scored lower on state tests the year before they enrolled in their charter school. As shown in Exhibit 3, students who subsequently enrolled in charter schools had lower average math and reading developmental scale scores (DSS) on the FCAT test for all grade levels (except fifth grade math, where they tied) than did students who remained

in traditional public schools.⁵ Put in terms of meeting grade-level expectations, students who entered charter schools for the 2003-04 school year were less likely than students who stayed in traditional public schools to have met grade-level expectations in math and reading the previous year.⁶

⁵ The FCAT developmental scale score (DSS) is used to determine a student's annual progress from grade to grade. FCAT DSS are divided into ranges corresponding to FCAT achievement levels 1-5 to determine if a student is meeting the grade-level expectations of the Sunshine State Standards.

⁶ Florida's Sunshine State Standards establish benchmarks for concepts that students are expected to master in math and reading at each grade level.

Exhibit 3
Students Entering Charter Schools Generally Had Lower FCAT Scores in Math and Reading the Previous Year Compared to Students Staying in Traditional Public Schools



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

Charter school students are slightly less likely to meet grade-level expectations in math and reading

Given that students entering charter schools are academically behind when they enter their schools, it is not surprising that they are less likely to meet the state’s grade-level expectations. The majority of Florida’s students, whether in charter schools or traditional public schools, do not currently meet state grade-level academic standards.

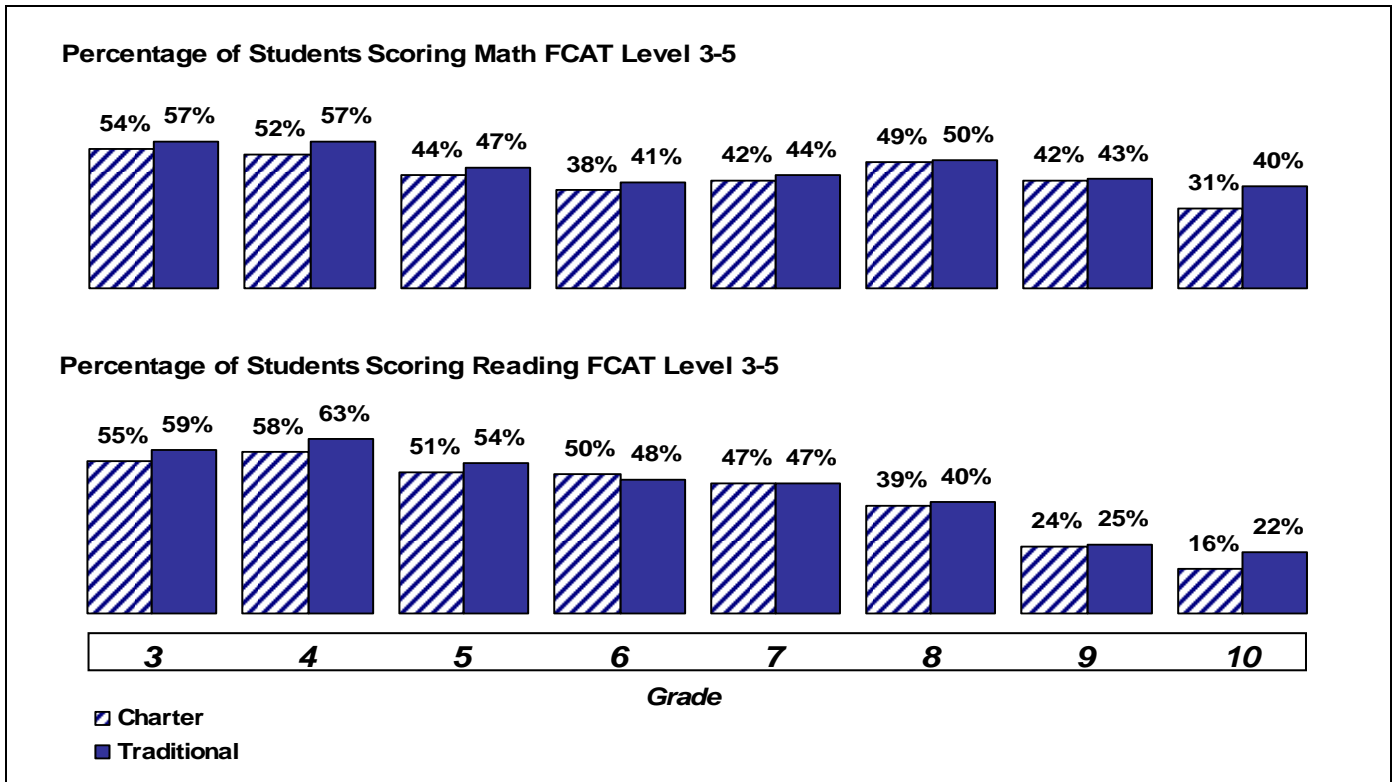
As shown in Exhibit 4, in comparison to students in traditional public schools, on the whole, students in charter schools were less likely to meet grade-level expectations in math and reading during the 2003-04 school year. Depending on the grade level, the percentage of students attending a charter school for at least one year who met expectations in math was between 1% and 9% lower than that of traditional public school

students, with the largest difference occurring among tenth-grade students.

Exhibit 4 shows similar results for reading. The percentage of students attending a charter school for at least one year who met grade-level expectations for reading ranged from 1% to 6% lower than that of traditional public school students. For both traditional and charter school students, substantially lower percentages of high school students met reading standards compared to students in lower grades.

The lower percentage of charter school students who met grade-level expectations compared to students in traditional schools may be attributable to the fact that students generally enter charter schools academically behind and the schools have a greater challenge in trying to bring their students up to grade-level expectations.

**Exhibit 4
Charter School Students Were Less Likely to Meet Grade-Level Expectations in Math and Reading in 2003-04**



Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

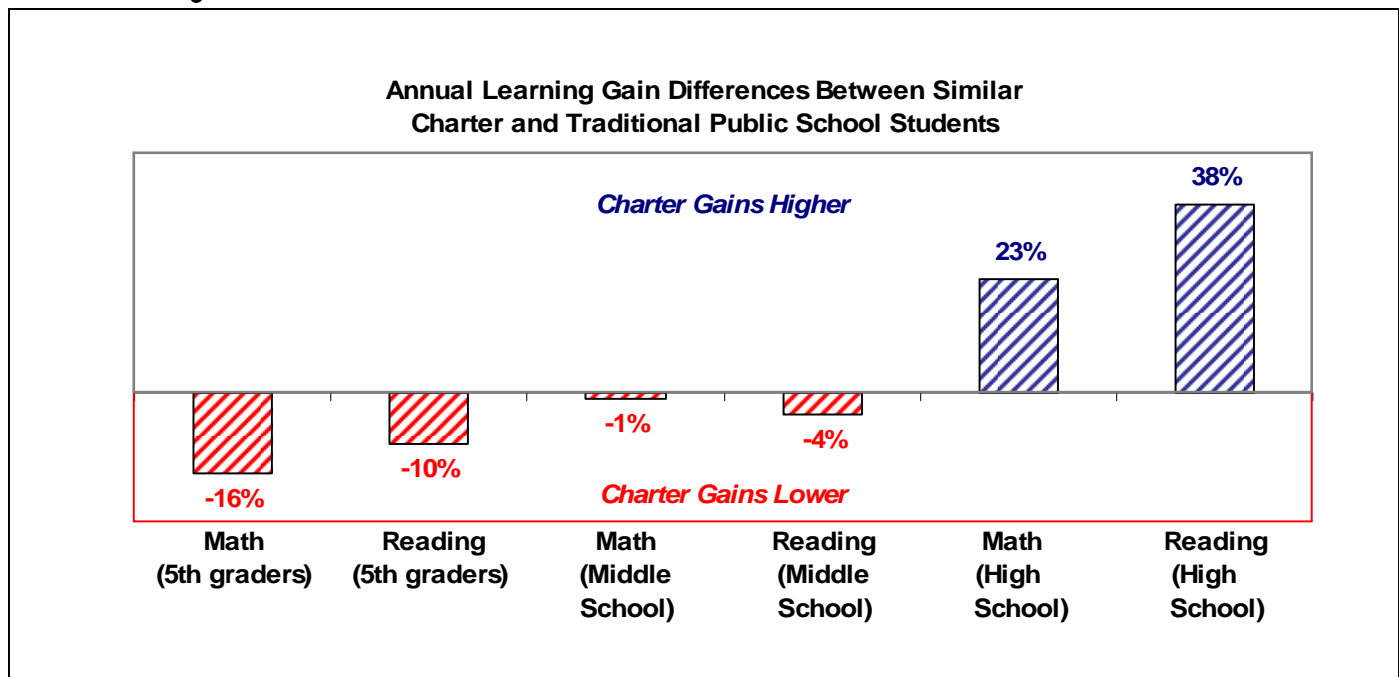
Charter school students made similar learning gains to students in traditional schools, with the strongest relative gains occurring in high school

Given that many charter school students are academically behind when they enroll, fully accounting for charter schools’ performance requires assessing students’ annual learning gains. We assessed students’ learning gains comparing similar students using statistical models that tracked a minimum of three years of FCAT scores.⁷ Accordingly, we compared learning gains for elementary, middle, and high school students who attended charter and traditional public schools.⁸

⁷ The statistical models estimated students’ learning gains taking into consideration students’ baseline developmental levels in math and reading and student demographic characteristics.
⁸ As FCAT testing begins in third grade, students in fifth grade and above (and a small percentage of fourth graders who repeated a grade) had a minimum of three years of FCAT scores to assess in our model.

As shown in Exhibit 5, the largest differences in annual learning gains between like charter and traditional school students occurred at the high school level. The annual learning gains of students in elementary schools were mixed, but should be interpreted with caution as they are based on primarily fifth graders and a small percentage of fourth graders who were held back. Learning gains could not be calculated for grades 1-3 using FCAT. The fifth graders’ annual learning gains in reading were similar for charter and traditional elementary students, although the charter school students made somewhat lower gains in math (approximately 27 FCAT DSS points, or about 16% of the typical learning gains of 165 points). Charter school students made essentially the same annual learning gains in the middle grades as their peers in traditional public schools; these gains were slightly lower but statistically no different. However, charter high school students the furthest behind academically made stronger reading and math learning gains than did similar traditional high school students.

**Exhibit 5
 Charter School and Traditional Public School Students Made Similar Annual Learning Gains in Middle Grades**



Note: Middle school math/reading and fifth-grade reading are not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. Annual learning gain differences between charter and traditional public school students was calculated as a percentage point difference of total average annual learning gain.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

High school students lagging furthest behind made the most progress in charter schools. Charter high schools were more successful than traditional public high schools in improving the performance of the lowest achieving students. To illustrate, our statistical models predicted (based on the performance of all students) the academic progress made by comparable eighth-grade students who were academically behind (scoring FCAT level 1 in math and reading) and who entered charter high schools and traditional public high schools with the same FCAT test scores. As shown in Exhibit 6, the eighth graders in charter high schools would be predicted to make slightly greater learning gains in grades 9 and 10 than those students in traditional public high schools. However, neither group of students would be predicted to score high enough to meet tenth-grade expectations (i.e., FCAT level 3). To meet tenth grade-level expectations, a student must achieve a FCAT DSS of 1,947 in math and 2,068 in reading.⁹

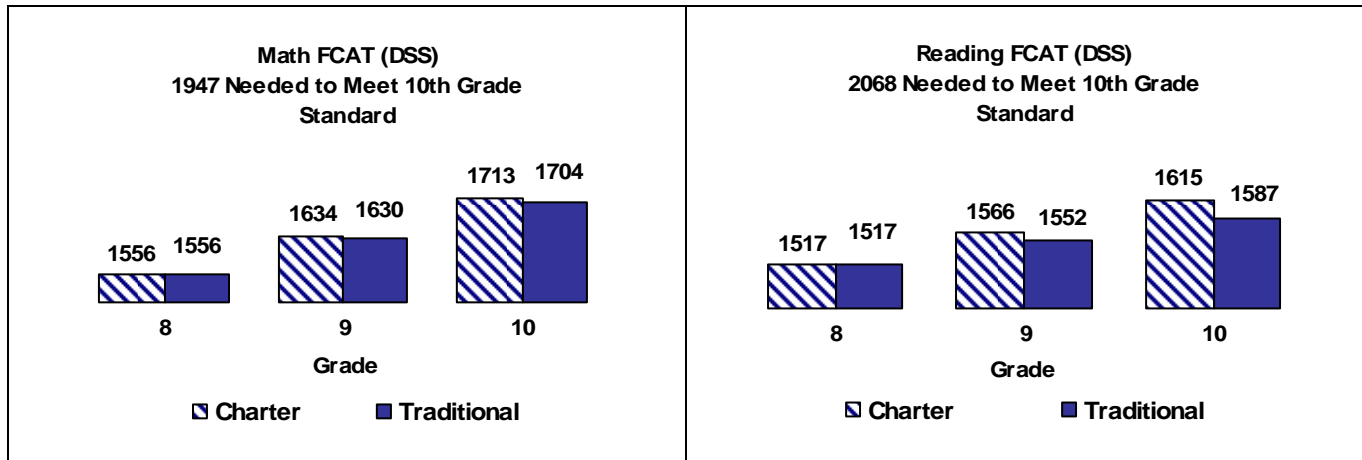
⁹ A FCAT developmental scale score of 1,889 in math and 1,926 in reading is required for graduating from high school.

While student performance in most charter schools is encouraging, it is poor in one-third of charter schools

The academic performance of charter schools varies greatly. We compared the academic performance of charter schools by calculating the percentage of schools that were meeting state grade-level expectations in reading and math, as well as whether their students were making strong performance gains compared to similar students statewide.¹⁰ Our analysis includes only those charter schools with 25 or more students for which learning gains could be calculated. We determined that while most charter school students did not meet grade-level expectations in reading and math, some charter schools were much more successful than others in helping their students catch up towards these standards. As with our prior analysis, our assessment of charter elementary schools was limited to primarily fifth-grade students as our model required a minimum of three years of FCAT learning gain data.

¹⁰ The statistical models estimated students' learning gains taking into consideration students' baseline developmental levels in math and reading and student demographic characteristics

Exhibit 6
High School Students the Furthest Behind in Math and Reading Before Entering High School Made More Progress in Charter Schools



Note: Based on statistical model of all charter and traditional high school students, using estimated FCAT developmental scale score (see *Charter School Review Technical Report*, Report No. 05-22).

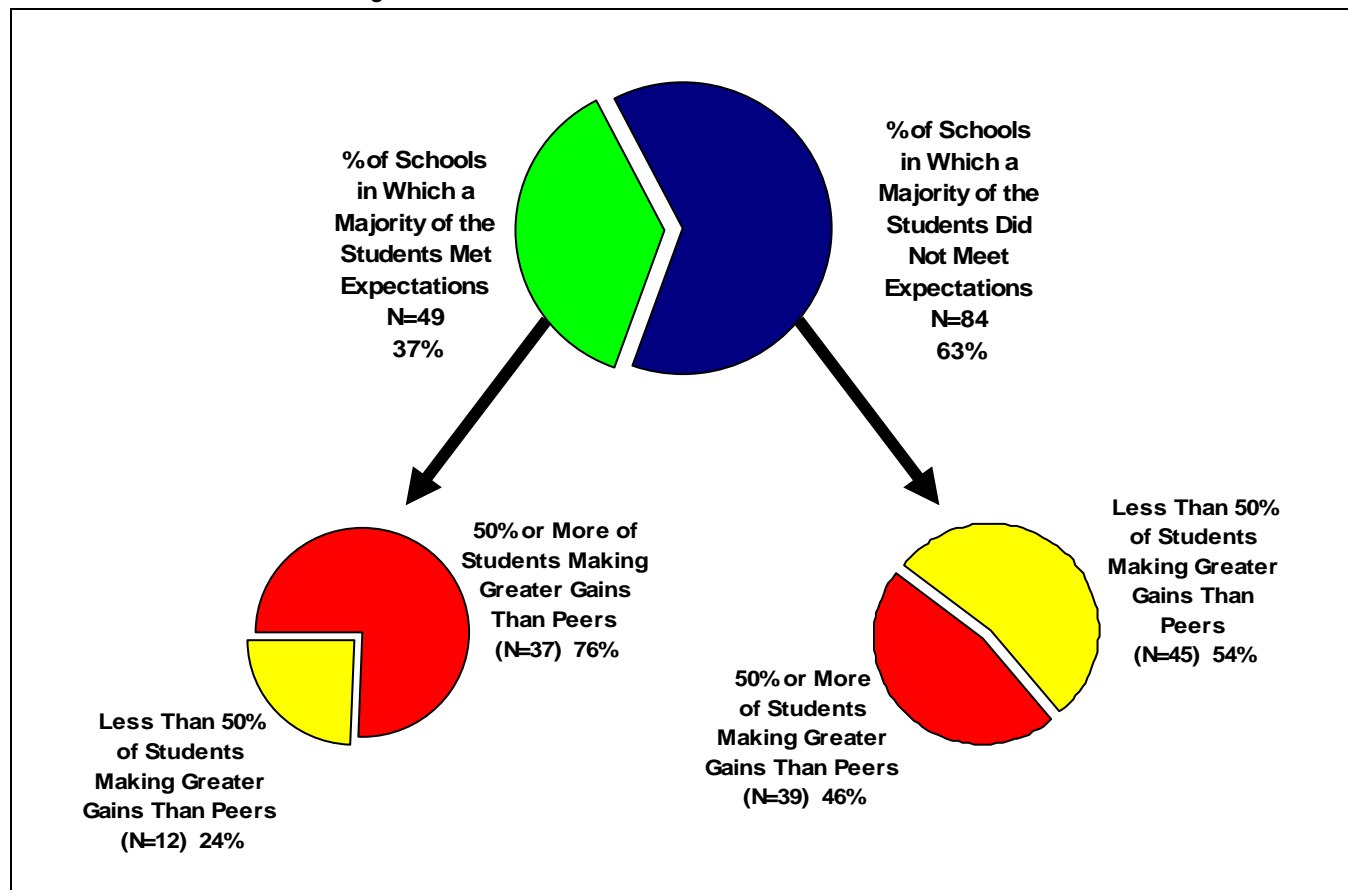
Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education data.

As shown in Exhibit 7, a majority of students in only about one-third (49 of 133, or 37%) of the charter middle and high schools met state grade-level expectations in 2003-04. In most of these schools (37, or 76%), students also were making stronger learning gains than were comparable students in other traditional and charter schools. Thus, these were the most academically successful charter schools in the state. Another 12 charter schools met state academic standards, but their students on average were not making as strong learning gains as comparable students in other schools.

In the remaining two-thirds of the charter schools (84 of the 133), students were not meeting state

grade-level standards. However, one-half (39) of these schools were helping their students catch up, as more than half of their students made larger learning gains than comparable students at other charter and traditional schools. Thus, these schools were relatively academically successful. However, the remaining 45 schools were not successful in either meeting the state standards or helping their students catch up; their students made lower learning gains than comparable other students. Thus, students at these schools fell further behind their peers while attending their charter schools. At three of these schools the learning gains of 70% of students failed to keep pace with their peers statewide.

Exhibit 7
Some Middle and High Charter Schools Are More Successful Than Others at Ensuring That Their Students Make Progress Towards State Academic Standards



Note: This analysis includes 133 charter schools. Schools with fewer than 25 students tested were not included.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of Department of Education FCAT data, 1998-99 through 2003-04.

Most elementary charter schools (55%, 50 out of 91) in 2003-04 were relatively successful at helping a majority of their fifth graders meet grade-level expectations in reading and math.¹¹ One-third (30 of 91, 33%) of elementary schools were also successful in helping a majority of students make greater learning gains. For instance, in 20 charter elementary schools, a majority of fifth graders both met grade-level expectations and made greater learning gains compared to similar students statewide. In addition, 10 charter elementary schools made progress improving the learning gains of the majority of their fifth graders even though a majority of their students did not meet grade-level expectations.

On the other end of the student performance spectrum, like middle and high school charters, the majority of fifth graders in 31 elementary charter schools did not meet grade-level expectations and made smaller gains than their peers.

Successful schools are performance-driven

Charter schools thus vary greatly in their degree of academic success and these differences exist even after taking into consideration the students they serve. These differences reflect the schools' differing use of strong instructional and leadership practices.

We visited 15 charter schools with varying levels of academic performance to determine whether the schools with high student learning gains were operating differently from those with little or no learning gains. The students in nine of the schools in our sample achieved strong learning gains, while the students in the remaining six schools made weaker learning gains than comparable students at other schools. Our review teams were not aware of whether the school was higher or lower performing while conducting their assessments. During our site visits, the teams surveyed principals and teachers to determine whether the schools demonstrated characteristics that studies have shown to be effective in raising student performance. Exhibit 8 lists these characteristics.

¹¹ Elementary schools with fewer than 25 students tested are not included.

Exhibit 8 Effective Schools Have Common Characteristics

Correlates of Effective Schools

- A culture of high expectations for success
- Strong instructional leadership
- Teachers committed to a clear mission focused on instructional goals and priorities
- Significant amount of classroom time spent on instruction
- Frequent monitoring of student progress
- Partnership between the school and parents focused on student learning
- Safe and orderly environment

Source: Lezotte, Lawrence. *Correlates of Effective Schools: The First and Second Generation*, 1991.

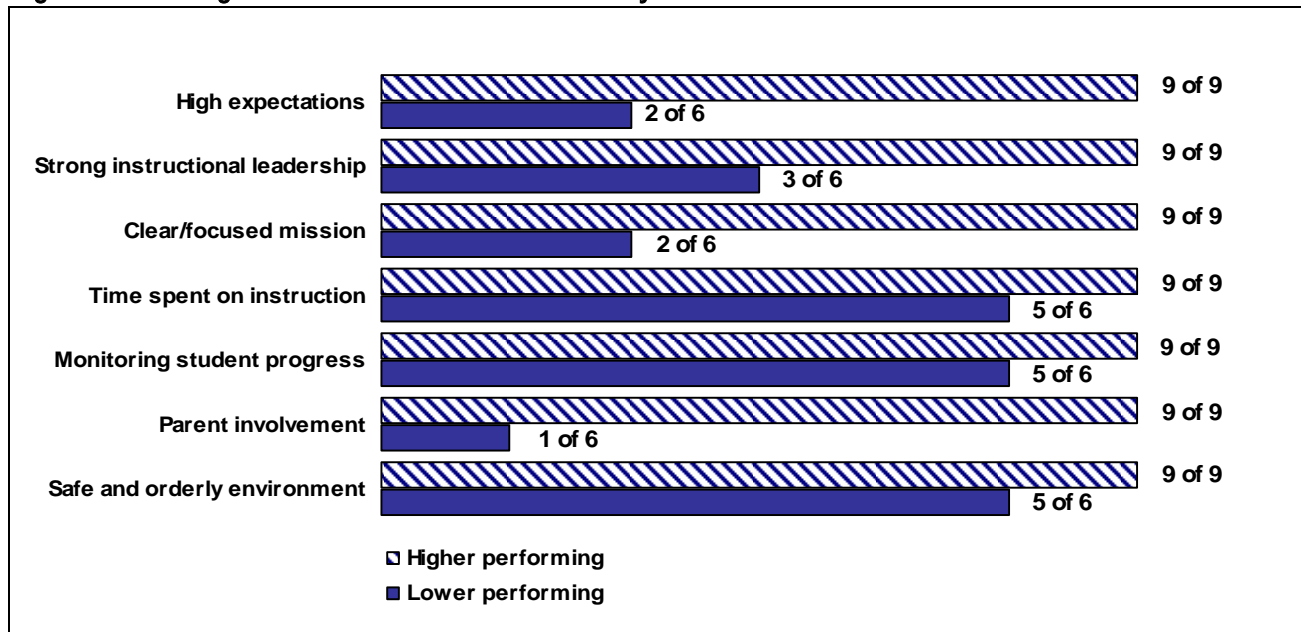
Higher-performing charter schools demonstrated characteristics of effective schools. As can be seen in Exhibit 9, there was a marked difference between higher- and lower-performing schools when assessed against the characteristics of effective schools. For instance, all of the nine higher performing charter schools exhibited all seven of the effective schools characteristics. In contrast, most of the six low-performing schools we visited exhibited only a few of these characteristics.

For example, one of the key characteristics of highly effective schools—creating a culture of high expectations for academic success—was much more evident in the higher-performing charter schools than in the lower-performing schools. When discussing expectations for their students, principals and teachers at the higher-performing schools consistently said their students could master state grade-level expectations and that they had the skills necessary to help their students do so. In contrast, attitudes were quite different at the lower-performing schools. Teachers and principals at these schools expressed the opinion that their students were very far behind and/or did not come from home environments that fostered learning and therefore could not be expected to be academically successful.¹²

¹² The reasons provided in the lower-performing charter schools did not reflect a difference in the student populations between the higher and lower performing charter schools. We selected schools comparing learning gains of students with similar characteristics including developmental learning levels and student demographics.

Exhibit 9

Higher-Performing Charter Schools Were More Likely to Have Characteristics of Effective Schools



Notes: OPPAGA assessment of six lower-performing charter schools and nine higher-performing charter schools.

Source: OPPAGA analysis.

In addition, teachers at the higher-performing schools discussed how they used a wide variety of teaching techniques to meet student academic needs. These teachers frequently assessed student performance throughout the school year and tailored teaching strategies to ensure that they met the needs of individual students and paid particular attention to students who failed to master grade-level expectations. In contrast, teachers at the lower-performing schools were less likely to conduct extensive assessments or develop individual teaching strategies for their students.

While our sample was relatively small, the degree of the differences we observed in the schools' operations suggest that just as in traditional public schools, differences in academic performance among charter schools is greatly affected by factors largely within a school's control, including the expectations its leadership and staff set for students and strong instructional leadership.

Charter schools are not adequately held accountable for student performance

While charter schools are subject to several accountability systems, the current systems do not hold all charter schools accountable for student academic performance. Many charter schools are not covered by the federal No Child Left Behind Act or Florida's A+ Plan because of the number of students they serve and their grade configurations. While charter schools also must meet performance objectives as part of their contracts negotiated with their local school board, these contracts often contain insufficient performance standards and the schools inadequately report on their attainment of these standards. As a result, parents and the public have limited information with which to hold charter schools accountable for providing high quality educational services to students.

Many charter schools are not held accountable for student performance by No Child Left Behind or A+ Plan. Charter schools are generally subject to two state and federal accountability mechanisms that apply to public schools.

- No Child Left Behind Act. This federal law requires each subgroup of students demonstrate adequate yearly progress in reading and math.¹³ Florida also includes writing in assessing adequate yearly progress.
- Florida's A+ Plan. This state-level accountability system uses school grades to show how well students have mastered the Sunshine State Standards as measured by the FCAT and how much students are improving their FCAT scores from year to year. Schools receive a letter grade (A through F) that summarizes their students' performance.

The Florida Department of Education and school districts distribute information to parents on how well all public schools, including charter schools, are performing based on these two accountability systems. This information is provided through annual reports cards and school performance accountability reports that are sent home to parents, and is also available on the websites of the Florida Department of Education and local school boards.

However, many charter schools are not held accountable by the No Child Left Behind Act or the A+ Plan due to small enrollments. In 2003-04, almost half (47%) of charter schools were not graded under the A+ Plan because the schools had fewer than 30 students or because the school did not serve the grades 3-10, those grades in which FCAT is administered. Similarly, 12% of charter schools were not subject to adequate yearly progress designations under the No Child Left Behind Act because the schools did not serve more than 10 students. Appendix A provides summary information on the school grades and No Child Left Behind measures of adequate yearly progress earned by charter schools for 2003-04.

Contracts and annual reports do not include the information needed to hold charter schools accountable for student performance. Charter schools also are accountable for meeting performance objectives established in their contracts negotiated with the local school board and reporting on their performance annually. These performance contracts are critical because they are the only accountability mechanism that applies to all charter schools, and they are locally negotiated to be tailored to the specific student population served by the school.

Charter schools must annually report on their attainment of the performance standards established in their contracts. These reports are reviewed by local school boards and the Florida Department of Education. From these reports and other data the Florida Department of Education produces an annual report that assesses the overall performance of charter schools. In principle, these reports should hold charter schools accountable by considering if students are meeting grade-level expectations and making learning gains, and if sub-groups of students are performing well.

However, there are critical weaknesses in both the performance standards established in charter school contracts and their annual performance reports. We reviewed the 2002-03 contracts and annual reports for a sample of 50 charter schools to determine the extent to which they were effective in holding the schools accountable for making improvements in student performance. We found that although most charter schools contracts specify that the schools will focus on making improvements in core academic subjects such as reading and math, the contracts often fail to establish clear expectations with which to hold the schools accountable for the performance of their students. In addition, annual reports generally do not contain the data necessary to assess whether charter schools are meeting expectations set forth in their contracts.

¹³ Student subgroups include all race/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, students learning English, and economically disadvantaged students.

Although most charter contracts establish general objectives focusing on academics, they generally do not specify clear performance expectations for schools. Florida law requires charter schools to improve student learning and academic achievement. Of the sample of 50 charter school contracts we reviewed, two-thirds (66%) included one or more general objectives to improve student performance in core academic subjects. These contracts included at least one goal or objective that related to a specific academic subject, such as math, reading, writing, science, or social studies. In addition, about one-third (30%) of the contracts included one or more other general academic objectives such as improving graduation rates, attendance, readiness for college, dropout prevention, and/or student promotion, safety, and behavior.

However, the contracts typically did not establish clear performance standards for the charter schools. For example, 16 of the contracts did not specify any student performance-related outcome. An additional 18 contacts specified general outcomes (such as improving reading or math scores) but did not establish targets for how much academic improvement students were expected to show in these areas or how success would be evaluated.

The charter contracts also often did not provide academic objectives covering all the grades they

served. Almost half (24, or 48%) of the contracts reviewed did not clearly establish performance expectations for all grades served. For example, the contract for one school that served students in grades kindergarten through grade five included academic performance outcomes for only grades three through five. The absence of performance objectives for younger students makes it more likely that the children could develop learning gaps that are not identified before they reach higher grades, where remediation is more difficult.

Overall, two-thirds of the contracts we reviewed lacked essential information needed to hold the charter schools accountable for student performance. Exhibit 10 provides examples of the charter schools’ outcome statements and their weaknesses, as well as suggested enhancements that would better hold the schools accountable for meeting their objectives.

One reason that charter school outcomes can be vague is that schools must develop their initial contracts before they open and know the full extent of their students’ needs. Thus, schools must establish outcome objectives in the absence of baseline student performance data. This limits school districts’ and charter schools’ ability to negotiate clear student performance outcomes and to determine whether these outcomes are achievable.

**Exhibit 10
Charter School Performance Contract Outcomes Were Often Vague**

Outcome Statement	Deficiency	Improved Outcome Statement
"Average student FCAT scores to improve every academic year."	This outcome does not indicate the specific subjects in which results are being sought (e.g., reading, math, and/or writing) or how much academic improvement students are expected to show in each specific subject area and grade level.	Increase by 10 points the percentage of third-grade students achieving Level 3 or above on FCAT in reading and increase by 15 points the percentage of fourth-grade students achieving Level 3 or above on FCAT in math.
"Seventy percent of students will show a decrease in observable aggressive behavior."	This outcome does not indicate how much of a decrease in aggressive behavior is expected, when this decrease is expected to occur, or the measure the school will use to evaluate success.	By the end of the 2004-05 school year, the school will show a decrease of 10% in both disorderly conduct and fighting as reported in the School Environmental Safety Incident Report (SESIR).
"Mastery of performance standards of elementary students as set forth by the state statutes."	This outcome could be clearer by identifying the specific subjects in which improvements are being sought (such as reading, math, writing, and/or science), what is meant by "mastery," when these improvements are expected to occur, and/or how success will be evaluated (such as FCAT grades, portfolios, teacher observation, etc.)	Each year, all students in grades three to five will achieve level 3 or above at their appropriate grade level in reading and math.

Source: OPPAGA analysis of charter school contracts.

In developing their contracts, charter schools generally used templates developed by the Florida School Board Association and the Florida Department of Education. These templates are intended to help ensure that the contract and applications (usually included as an attachment to the contract) follow a prescribed format and include essential components. However, these instruments were not intended to provide charter schools with direction on how to develop meaningful student performance outcomes. Both charter school applicants and school boards could benefit from additional guidance, training, and technical assistance in developing measurable and meaningful objectives.

Charter school annual reports generally do not contain the information needed to determine whether they meet contract and legal requirements. District school boards are charged with the responsibility to operate, control, and supervise all schools and may terminate charters for failure to meet student performance expectations. To facilitate this, Florida law requires that charter schools annually report their progress in meeting the performance expectations as defined in their contracts.¹⁴ However, weaknesses in charter school annual reports hamper school districts' and parents' ability to hold the schools accountable for meeting academic and other goals.

While most annual reports provided some performance data, most (35 or 70%) of the 50 annual reports we examined for the 2002-03 school year did not report on whether the schools met their performance objectives. For example, one school's contract included an objective indicating that those students who performed poorest on the previous year's FCAT would show one year of growth on the subsequent FCAT test. However, the school's annual report provided test score results for all students combined and did not break out the scores of the lowest performing students from the previous year. Accordingly, the district and parents could not determine whether the school met its contractual obligation.

In addition, the annual reports often failed to include other information that is specifically required by Florida law.¹⁵ As shown in Exhibit 11, almost three-quarters of the reports did not include information on the certification status of teachers the charter school employed. Other commonly missing information included documentation of the school facilities, salary levels for school employees, and the percentage of instructional staff teaching in- and out-of-field. The annual reports did generally include required information on the schools' finances and salary levels.

These weaknesses in establishing and reporting on charter schools' performance expectations and achievements affect the charter schools themselves in addition to school districts and parents. Charter schools can lack critical information needed to focus their limited resources. School districts can lack key information to assist and hold charter schools accountable for meeting contract requirements. Finally, parents can lack meaningful information to make informed school choice decisions. Further, establishing and reporting on vague goals and objectives increases the potential for school districts, charter schools, and parents to interpret expectations differently and therefore disagree on a school's progress.

**Exhibit 11
Annual Reports Include Financial Data, But Are Often Missing Teacher Certification Information**

Required Information	Number of Schools with Missing Data	Percentage Missing
Revenues and Expenditures	7	14%
Teacher Salary Levels	9	18%
Principal Salary Levels	14	28%
Documentation on Facilities	20	40%
Teacher In/Out-of-Field	27	54%
Teacher Certification	36	72%

Source: OPPAGA analysis of school year 2002-03 annual reports of a sample of 50 charter schools.

In September 2004, the Department of Education took steps to improve charter school accountability. The department produced an annual report template, disseminating it to the school districts for charter school use. This template should assist

¹⁴ Section 1002.33(9)(l)1., F.S.

¹⁵ Sections 1002.33(9)(l)2., 3., and 4., F.S.

charter schools and school districts improve the content of charter school annual reports.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although Florida charter schools serve demographically diverse student populations, they tend to serve students who have not done well academically in traditional public schools. Consequently, a higher percentage of charter school students are not meeting the grade-level expectations of the Sunshine State Standards.

The academic performance of charter school students is generally comparable to that of traditional public school students in terms of annual learning gains. However, high school students with the greatest academic deficits tend to make slightly more progress in charter schools than in traditional public schools, although they still often do not meet grade-level expectations by the end of high school.

Charter schools vary greatly in their academic performance, with some successful in helping students meet state grade-level expectations and/or catch up towards these standards while others are not attaining these academic outcomes. Our field visits showed that better-performing charter schools are using widely recognized practices of successful schools, while lower-performing charter schools are not following these practices. Like traditional public schools, it is thus important that charter schools set high student expectations, have strong leadership, use innovative practices, and involve parents.

Many charter schools are not being held accountable by Florida’s A+ Plan or the federal No Child Left Behind measure of adequate yearly progress. The Legislature intended that the charter schools’ contracts with school districts and annual reports would hold charter schools accountable for student performance. However, charter schools’ contracts generally do not establish clear academic performance expectations and often fail to include outcomes covering all grades served. The charter schools’ annual performance reports generally do not contain either the information needed to determine whether schools met the outcomes specified in their contracts or the information required by law. These weaknesses make it difficult

for school boards and the general public to hold charter schools accountable for the performance of their students.

To improve the academic accountability of charter schools, we recommend that the Department of Education

- create a template for charter school contracts and provide school districts with implementation guidelines, particularly in regard to establishing clear academic objectives for charter schools; and
- provide training for charter school applicants and school board members on establishing comprehensive and measurable performance outcomes.

To help ensure that charter schools use practices that are widely recognized as promoting high academic achievement, we recommend that the Department of Education

- provide training and technical assistance to charter schools on these practices, giving priority to schools that are not meeting their performance outcomes to help them implement effective schools strategies. For instance, this could include partnering high performing charter schools exhibiting the *Correlates of Effective Schools* with demographically similar lower-performing charter schools.

In addition, we recommend that the Florida Legislature consider

- amending s. 1002.33, *Florida Statutes*, to require that performance expectations in contracts of newly approved charter schools be revised at the end of the first year of operation to allow the charter schools to gather baseline student performance data upon which expected performance outcomes can be established; and
- requiring that school districts verify whether performance outcomes contained in charter school contracts have been met. This could include amending s. 1002.33, *Florida Statutes*, to require superintendents and/or school boards to certify to the State Board of Education that charter schools are meeting the performance expectations established in their contracts.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(6), *Florida Statutes*, a draft of our report was submitted to the Commissioner of Education to review and respond.

The Commissioner's written response has been reproduced in Appendix C.

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021 or 800/531-2477), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

Florida Monitor: www.oppaga.state.fl.us

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Gary R. VanLandingham, OPPAGA Director

Appendix A

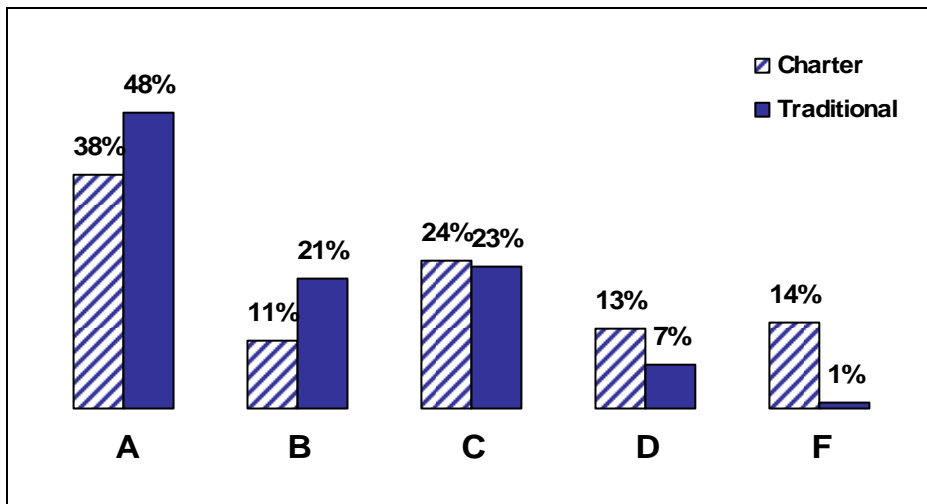
Charter School Performance: A+ Plan School Grades and No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly Progress

This appendix reports the performance of charter schools as measured by Florida's A+ Plan school grades and the federal No Child Left Behind measure of adequate yearly progress.

A+ Plan School Grades

Under the A+ Plan, Florida grades its schools A through F based on students' scores on the writing, reading, and math FCAT. Almost half of charter schools (47%) are not held accountable by the A+ Plan because they do not have the required minimum of 30 students taking the FCAT. As demonstrated in Table A-1, of those schools that are graded, a higher percentage of traditional public schools (69%) received a grade of A or B compared to charter schools (49%) in 2003-04, largely reflecting the fact that charter schools often serve children who are slightly behind academically when they enter a charter school.

Table A-1
A+ Plan School Grades for Charter and Traditional Public Schools, 2003-04



Source: Department of Education.

No Child Left Behind Measure of Adequate Yearly Progress

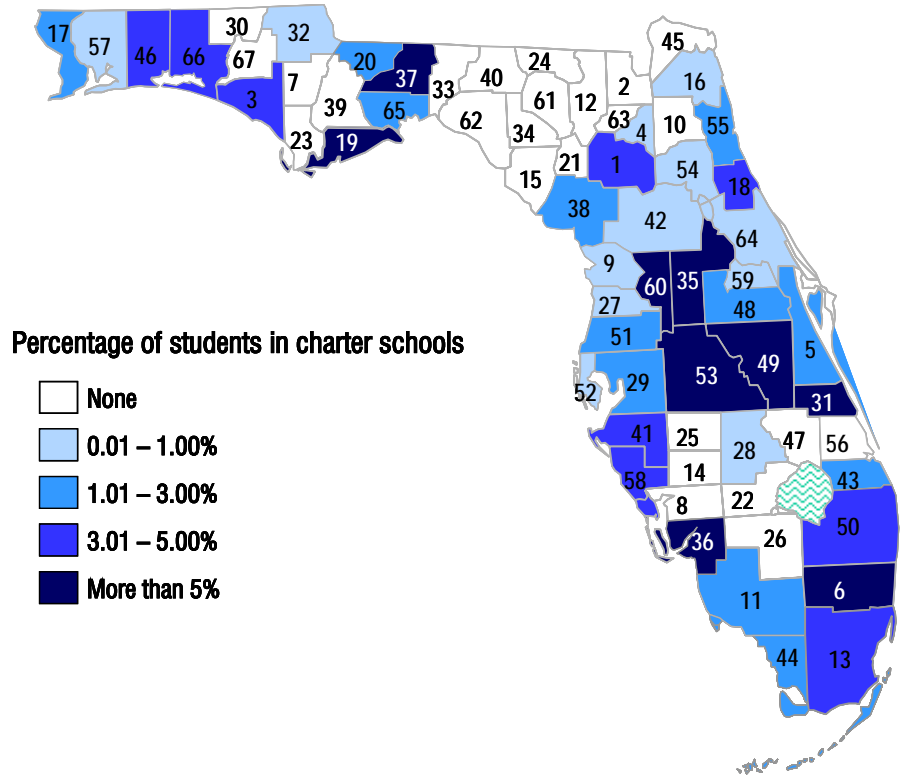
The federal No Child Left Behind program measures adequate yearly progress based on the percentage of students overall and in eight subgroups who are tested and who score as proficient in reading and math. The student subgroups are based on race, ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced price lunch, proficiency with English, and disability status. In addition, schools are held accountable for the percentage of students doing well on the FCAT writing test and, if applicable, their graduation rates and A+ Plan school grades. Schools must have at least 11 eligible students. In 2003-04, 88% of charter schools were held accountable for student performance under No Child Left Behind.

Charter schools and traditional public schools do just as well as each other on the percentage of applicable adequate yearly progress criteria met. In 2003-04, charters schools averaged meeting 82% of eligible criteria compared to 83% for other public schools. However, for a school to be designated as its students meeting adequately yearly progress, the school must meet all applicable criteria. In 2003-04, 29% of charter schools and 23% of traditional public schools met all applicable criteria.

Appendix B

Percentage of Students Served by Charter Schools by School District, 2004-05

The map below shows the percentage of public school students attending charter schools by school district. School districts with no charter school students are shown in white. The number in each school district is keyed to the county name below.



Florida Counties

1 - Alachua	18- Flagler	35- Lake	52- Pinellas
2 - Baker	19- Franklin	36- Lee	53- Polk
3 - Bay	20- Gadsden	37- Leon	54- Putnam
4 - Bradford	21- Gilchrist	38- Levy	55- St. Johns
5 - Brevard	22- Glades	39- Liberty	56- St. Lucie
6 - Broward	23- Gulf	40- Madison	57- Santa Rosa
7 - Calhoun	24- Hamilton	41- Manatee	58- Sarasota
8 - Charlotte	25- Hardee	42- Marion	59- Seminole
9 - Citrus	26- Hendry	43- Martin	60- Sumter
10- Clay	27- Hernando	44- Monroe	61- Suwannee
11- Collier	28- Highlands	45- Nassau	62- Taylor
12- Columbia	29- Hillsborough	46- Okaloosa	63- Union
13- Dade	30- Holmes	47- Okeechobee	64- Volusia
14- DeSoto	31- Indian River	48- Orange	65- Wakulla
15- Dixie	32- Jackson	49- Osceola	66- Walton
16- Duval	33- Jefferson	50- Palm Beach	67- Washington
17- Escambia	34- Lafayette	51- Pasco	

Appendix C

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



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Commissioner of Education



March 31, 2005

Mr. Gary R. VanLandingham, Interim Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street
Claude Pepper Building
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-1475

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for the opportunity to review and respond to the OPPAGA report regarding charter schools, *Charter School Performance Comparable to Other Public Schools; Stronger Accountability Needed* and the accompanying technical report. As one of Florida's fastest growing choice options, charter schools have a key role in achieving the State Board of Education's priority to increase the quantity and improve the quality of education options in Florida.

Accountability is essential to success of Florida's charter school program. Every charter school must be evaluated on academic progress and held strictly accountable for meeting high standards of student achievement outlined in the school's contract with its sponsor. Beginning in 2002, the use of developmental scale scores (DSS) has made it possible to report annual growth scores for student achievement in reading and mathematics. The use of DSS has enabled the Department to analyze and compare the performance of students enrolled in charter schools with students in traditional public schools as required by Section 1002.33, Florida Statutes.

Overall, the Department agrees with the methodology that OPPAGA used in the charter school accountability study and with the report's general conclusions. The approach used by OPPAGA is similar to the methodologies used by the Department in producing the 2002-2003 and 2003-2004 Florida Charter Schools Annual Accountability Reports. However, OPPAGA and the Department structured and utilized the data in slightly different ways and this likely contributed to OPPAGA's findings being somewhat more positive than the Department's. We are pleased that the report's conclusions are generally consistent with those reached by the Department. Overall, Florida's charter schools match the academic performance of traditional public schools and offer parents a viable school choice option.

Mr. Gary VanLandingham
March 31, 2005
Page 2

One of the report's most significant conclusions is that higher-performing charter schools demonstrate the characteristics of effective schools research. Since 1991, Florida's school improvement and accountability initiatives have been predicated on research identifying the characteristics and practices that are associated with improved student learning. One of the Department's priorities is to assist all public schools, including charter schools, implement a student achievement continuous improvement model that will support and enable Florida to continue to be a national leader in learning. Therefore, the recommendation to partner high performing charter schools exhibiting effective school correlates with lower performing charter schools is consistent with the Department's current school improvement initiatives.

The Department concurs with the report's finding that establishing clear performance expectations is essential to accountability and the operation of high quality charter schools. Over the past several years, the Department's continuous improvement initiative has provided technical assistance and training to help districts and schools establish and measure performance expectations. We recognize the need for additional assistance in this area and will be taking steps consistent with the report's recommendations.

The Department would like to thank OPPAGA for the professional and collaborative process used in this charter school accountability study. We appreciate the feedback received as a result of OPPAGA's review of charter school student achievement and look forward to working with you toward ensuring state, district, and school responsibilities for improved accountability.

Sincerely,

/s/
John L. Winn
Commissioner

JW/pm

cc: Phil Handy
John Franco
Jeanine Blomberg
Jim Warford