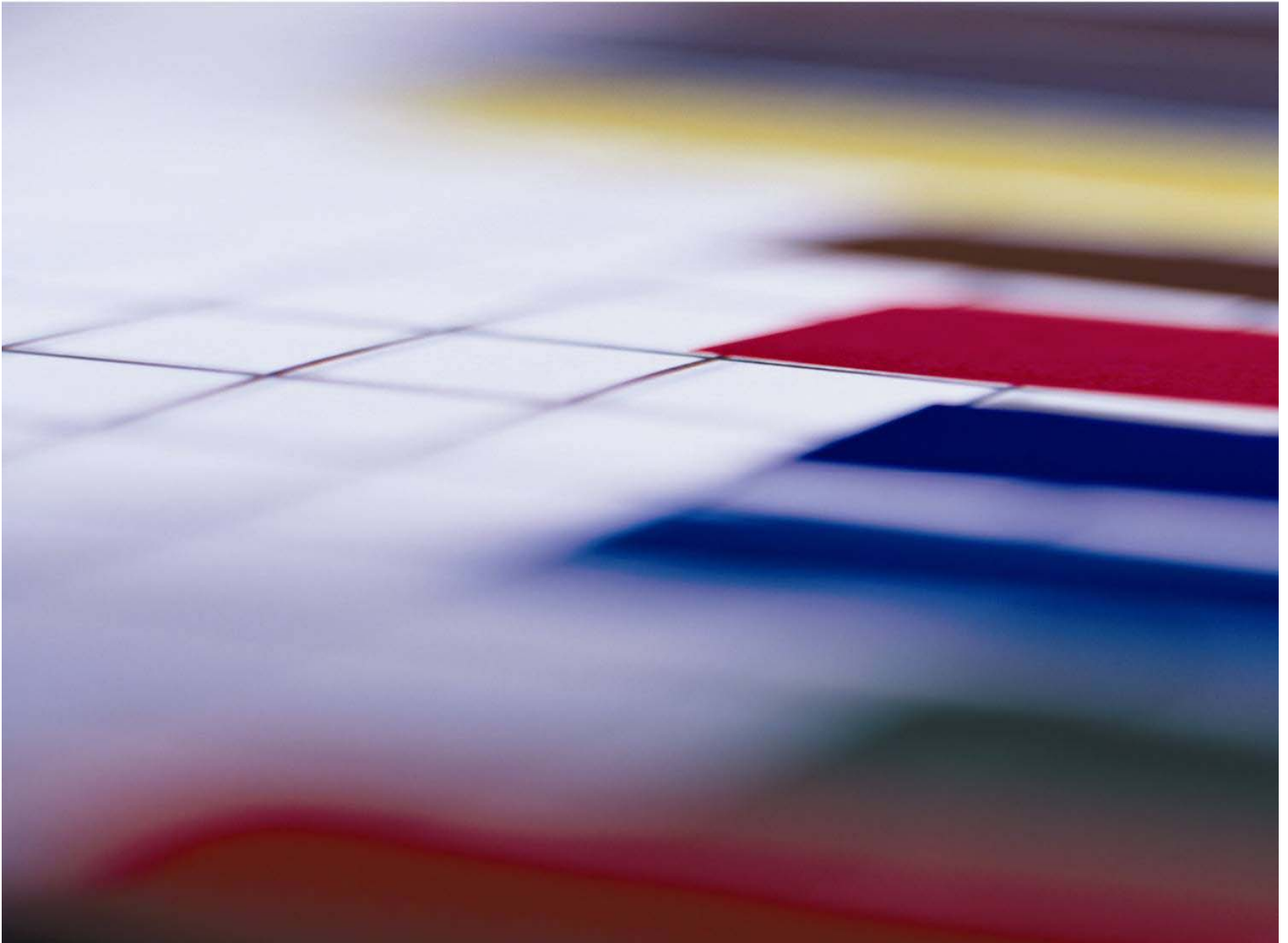




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Second Year Evaluation of Tennessee Charter Schools 2004-2005





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Preface

In 2002, Tennessee passed its first Public Charter School legislation. Four schools were successful in gaining approval to begin operating in the 2003-2004 academic year. The second cohort of three charter schools began operation during the 2004-2005 academic year. According to the charter school law, these charter schools were granted “maximum flexibility” to achieve alternative ways for public schools to educate school children. Though the flexibility granted to these schools is considered an advantage, previous research on charter schools has demonstrated mixed results in their success.

The purpose of the present evaluation study was to examine the progress made in program implementation, school climate, and student achievement by the seven charter schools. A “mixed-methods” design, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed. The questions upon which the evaluation methods are based relate to the progress of individual schools and the overall group in implementing desired strategies for curriculum, instruction, and organization, and in attaining the goals of No Child Left Behind by bringing every child to proficiency in reading and mathematics on the TCAP by 2014. It should be noted that student achievement will be more fully examined in a supplemental report when student-level data become available.

The work was conducted by the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP), a state of Tennessee Center of Excellence, located at The University of Memphis.

Executive Summary

The purpose of the present evaluation study was to examine the progress made in program implementation, school climate, and student achievement by the seven TN charter schools. Four of these charter schools opened in the 2003-04 school year and an additional three schools opened in the 2004-05 school year. Seven evaluation questions guided the methodology for this study. Student achievement results (Question 1) and start-up experiences (Question 7) are addressed in separate reports. The following evaluation questions (2-6) are addressed in this report.

2. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools and compared to national norms?
3. What is the school climate at the charter schools and how does the climate compare to national norms?
4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?
5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?
6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school?

Description of the Charter Schools

Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA)

COSLA is an urban school located in Memphis, Tennessee. In its second year of operation, COSLA enrolled a total of 72 students in grades K-3. All are African American, and nearly all (91.6%) were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. As a literacy-focused school using the Success for All reading program, COSLA emphasizes the integration of reading and writing activities across all curricular areas. The school uses scientifically-based methods and strategies in the delivery of the curriculum.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS)

MAHS is located in a high-poverty area north of downtown Memphis, Tennessee. The school served 180 sixth and seventh grade students in its second year of operation. African American students represented 100% of the school's population; 75% of the students received free or reduced-price lunches. The curriculum is a standards-based, interdisciplinary program that incorporates interdisciplinary projects and experiential learning centered on a health science theme.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering (MASE)

MASE is housed in an office building in downtown Memphis. During the 2004-2005 school year, there were 251 seventh and eighth grade students. The students were predominantly African American (97%), and 68% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The program includes longer days, Saturday school, high technology use, continuous monitoring of student progress, and an intense focus on core curricula integrated across subjects.

Smithson-Craighead Academy (SCA)

This urban charter school, located in the city of Nashville, Tennessee, is in its second year of operation. It served 148 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. The students were predominantly African American (99%), and all were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The mission of the school is to meet the academic and social needs of at-risk children through mastery of basic academic skills, student self control, obedience, and diligence.

City University School of Liberal Arts (CityU)

CityU is located in a Baptist church in an urban area of Memphis, Tennessee. The school enrolled 121 ninth grade students in its first year of operation. Just over 98% of the students were African American, and 78% were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The curriculum developed and employed at CityU has a liberal arts core and is aligned with College Board standards to build a strong college-oriented focus.

Star Academy

Star Academy is located in the outskirts of Memphis, Tennessee. In its first year of operation the school served 116 students in kindergarten through second grade. The student population was predominantly African American, with approximately 90 percent qualifying for free or reduced price lunch. Reading and language arts were the primary focus for the first year. The McGraw-Hill series provides the core curricular materials.

Yo! Academy

Yo! Academy of Visual and Performing Arts is located in southwest Memphis in an industrial warehouse site. During the first year of operation, the school served 131 students in the tenth through twelfth grades. All students were African American and

were eligible for free or reduced price meals. The mission of the school is to provide at-risk students with a safe environment to pursue rigorous academic preparation while incorporating the visual and performing arts.

Method

A mixed methods design, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed. The instruments used in the data collection were: (1) School Observation Measure (SOM[®]), (2) Rubric for Student Centered Activities (RSCA[®]), (3) School Climate Inventory (SCI[®]), (4) principal interview, (5) teacher focus group, (6) student focus group, (7) Charter School Teacher Questionnaire, (8) Charter School Parent Questionnaire, and (9) Program Implementation Benchmarking.

A “site researcher” from CREP was assigned major data collection responsibility for each charter school. This individual and support research staff visited the assigned school several times during the year to conduct the observation visits, administer the questionnaires, and conduct the interview and focus groups. In addition, the site researcher worked with the school leadership team to develop “implementation benchmarks” describing beginning, intermediate, and full implementation phases and associated evidence indicators. At the end of the year, the site researcher met again with the leadership team to determine and identify the phase that had been achieved for each benchmark. Data from all instruments were then used to prepare individual school formative evaluation reports indicating status and progress during the year.

Results

Question 2¹. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools and compared to national norms?

Direct instruction was the predominant instructional orientation in all charter schools. These rates were typically higher or comparable to rates observed in the national samples. Four of the schools (COSLA, MASE, SCA, and Star) employed student-centered instruction to a moderate degree. The most frequent types of student-centered instruction included cooperative/collaborative learning and the teacher acting as coach facilitator. All but one school (MAHS) implemented higher-order strategies at moderate levels. Observations at the three schools in their first year of operation (CityU, Star, and Yo!) and COSLA revealed infrequent technology use. In contrast, technology use increased from the previous year in three of the first cohort of charter schools (MAHS, MASE, SCA). In some schools, the observed frequencies of student-centered strategies and technology usage were comparable to national norms, but the level of application was typically limited.

Question 3. What is the school climate at the charter schools and how does the climate compare to national norms?

School climate was a clear strength of all charter schools excepting SCA. SCA's less positive (but still moderate) rating was due to low quantitative and qualitative responses on the Order dimension, also relative weakness in comparison with other schools. With regard to trends across time, three of the four Cohort I schools showed

¹ Questions 1 and 7 are addressed in other reports.

decreases in SCI ratings. However, the overall mean ratings were still high in both an absolute (above a 4.00) and relative sense (i.e., compared to national norms).

Question 4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?

Not unexpectedly, the levels of benchmark implementation were more advanced among schools in their second year of operation compared to schools in their first year. However, the levels of implementation across most indicators were either the first or second phase of development across schools and years. Most schools were rated as moderate on their implementation of goals and strategies in the category of curriculum. Although some school leadership teams considered themselves to have made more progress in the implementation of benchmarks related to instruction, SOM and RSCA data did not consistently support this classification. Most charter schools were rated to be weaker in the implementation of support goals. The achievement of organizational goals was evaluated to be moderate in all but one school (Yo!), which achieved less progress in this area. There was more variation across schools in the implementation of goals and strategies related to evaluation. The need to improve benchmarks contributed to the weaker ratings among schools in this area.

Question 5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?

Teachers' reactions were very positive with respect to the school mission or educational program, but teachers were less enthusiastic about available resources and support. Among first cohort schools, teacher ratings were lower in the areas of resources and support than they had been in the previous year. Responses in all but

one school (Star) suggested deficiencies in meeting the requirements of special needs students. In general, teachers were less likely to agree that they received adequate assistance from state and local educational agencies, and in some cases external partners. There was more variation in the findings on the adequacy or quality of professional support. It was found to be strong in two schools (COSLA and Star) but weak in another (Yo!). Teacher responses to professional development in the remaining schools were more moderate or mixed.

Question 6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school?

Parent satisfaction was quite strong in all the charter schools. The only areas for which they expressed less satisfaction were those related to the physical building, facilities, surroundings, transportation, and the lack of extracurricular activities or additional programs. Ratings in the category of involvement were more varied. In some schools, parent involvement was considered to be parent support or communication rather than active, consistent participation in the educational program and more academically-related activities. Surprisingly, the level and extent of parent participation did not seem to differ depending on whether the school was in its first or second year of operation.

Recommendations

Based on the overall findings, the following recommendations apply to the charter schools as a group and not necessarily to individual schools. The recommendations specific to each school can be found in the individual reports provided to each school.

First, charter schools could more closely align instructional practices with their school improvement plans and incorporate more research-based practices linked with student achievement outcomes. Many of the research-based practices call for the implementation of more student-centered strategies that entail higher-order thinking and technology integration.

Second, order and discipline could be improved at most schools. School leadership teams may want to re-evaluate policies related to student conduct, discipline procedures, and attendance policies. Benchmark indicators targeting order might be developed to better formalize strategies to improve this dimension of school climate.

Third, benchmark documents need to be modified to better align with objective indicators and available data. Planning, evaluation, and ultimately improvement can be facilitated by a sound, ambitious, and long-range benchmark document.

Fourth, schools should make improvements in meeting the requirements of special needs students. Additional resources might be earmarked to hire extra staff and faculty with expertise in special education. Policies and procedures related to addressing these needs might be developed or reviewed.

Efforts to continue developing supportive, collaborative relationships with the school district and external partners should continue. Strategies include having more open channels of communication and meetings to clarify policies, procedures, and available resources. Furthermore, representatives of charter schools should continue to seek the support and assistance of various external partners.

The final recommendation is to increase active parent involvement or participation. Schools that had the highest levels of parent involvement also had formal

contracts or agreements with parents specifying the minimum number of hours of participation required. Benchmark documents that identify more specific strategies used to encourage involvement might be coupled with more objective evidence to indicate their effectiveness.

Second-Year Evaluation of Tennessee Charter Schools (2004 – 2005)

This report presents results from the evaluation by the Center for Research in Educational Policy of the seven charter schools currently operating in the State of Tennessee. The first cohort of four schools began operation in the 2003-04 academic year and have completed their second full year of operation. The second cohort of three schools completed their initial academic year that began in 2004. By way of historical background, the passage of the first charter school law and establishment of the first charter school occurred in Minnesota in 1991. As of January 2004, 2,996 charter schools were operating in the United States (Center for Education Reform, 2004). Additionally, under the recent No Child Left Behind legislation, children who attend schools identified as needing improvement have the opportunity to enroll in charter schools located within their district (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Although charter schools have been developed for a wide variety of reasons by diverse groups, they can be broadly characterized as publicly-funded schools that students can choose to attend. Additionally, they often operate with more autonomy than regular public schools, under a charter (contract) held by a public entity (e.g., school district, university, state department of education). The schools are also typically responsible for attaining, or making demonstrable progress toward, the goals set forth in their charter within a set amount of time.

In 2002, the state of Tennessee passed its first public charter school legislation. According to this law, charter schools were intended to receive “maximum flexibility” to achieve alternative ways for public schools to educate school children. Though the

flexibility granted to these schools is considered an advantage, previous research on charter schools has demonstrated mixed results in their success.²

Although this legislation marks an important precedent in Tennessee policy, it will be critical in the coming years to determine and document the effectiveness of charter schools relative to traditional schools in promoting effective educational practices and raising student achievement. One of the most important foundational assumptions of charter schools is that the combination of autonomy and accountability will facilitate the development of innovative and high-quality instruction, which will then be implemented in the classrooms. These innovative, accountable, and autonomous schools will in turn, it is proposed, lead to improved student achievement as well as increased satisfaction among stakeholders (Bulkley & Fisler, 2002). However, in a review of the research on charter schools by RAND (Zimmer et al., 2003), wide variation in student achievement results was found across schools. Accordingly, different groups have used the RAND report and other charter school research to support both positive and negative claims.

The purpose of the present evaluation study was to examine the progress made in program implementation, school climate, and student achievement by the seven TN charter schools. A “mixed-methods” design, encompassing both qualitative and quantitative data, was employed, as will be described in the following sections. The questions upon which the evaluation methods are based relate to the progress of individual schools and the overall group in implementing desired strategies for

² The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) compiled data in August, 2004, ostensibly showing that students attending charter schools in the United States were not surpassing, and were even trailing, students attending regular schools on the NAEP tests (Page, 2004). These analyses, however, have been strongly criticized for restricted sampling and failing to adjust for student differences in ethnicity, prior achievement, and other characteristics.

curriculum, instruction, and organization, and in attaining the goals of No Child Left Behind by bringing every child to proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014.

In the following section, evaluation questions and the assumptions from which they were derived are presented. Table 1 shows each question with associated data collection tools, which in turn will be described in more detail in the Methodology section. One of the major evaluation areas dealing with the experiences of administrators and founders in establishing the charter school prior to school opening (see Table 1), has already been answered in a separate report (see Bates, Potter, Avis, McDonald, 2004). A summary of those findings will be provided below in establishing a framework for the present report.

Charter School Assumptions and Associated Evaluation Questions

1. *Assumption:* The major goal of school reform (i.e., specifically the creation of a charter school) is to raise student achievement and improve educational outcomes (attendance, socialization, etc.).
 - *Question:* What are the immediate and long-term impacts of the charter school implementation on student achievement, attendance, dropout rates, behavior, and mobility?³
2. *Assumption:* High student achievement is fostered by effective teaching.
 - *Questions:* (A) What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools?; (B) What is the frequency of usage of selected instructional strategies associated with best practices?; (C) How do charter school climate outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?
3. *Assumption:* Positive educational outcomes at schools are fostered by positive school climate.

³ At the time this report is being prepared (September, 2005), student-level data from the 2004-05 Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program/Achievement Test (TCAP/AT) are not yet available. It is anticipated that such data will be released in October/November, 2005, at which time an addendum to this report will be prepared.

- *Questions:* (A) What is the level of school climate at each charter school?; (B) Does school climate improve over time?; (C) How do charter school climate outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?
4. *Assumption:* To impact schools positively, educational reforms must be properly implemented.
- *Question:* To what degree and levels of quality are the identified goals and strategies of each charter school being implemented?
5. *Assumption:* To be implemented effectively, educational reforms must have teacher support, sufficient professional development, and adequate resources.
- *Questions:* (A) What are teacher reactions to and experiences in TN charter schools?; (B) What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and needed resources?
6. *Assumption:* The effectiveness and sustainability of educational reform and intervention programs are enhanced when students' families are supportive and involved.
- *Questions:* (A) What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with TN charter schools?; (B) To what degree and in what ways are caregivers involved with each charter school?
7. *Assumption:* Charter school personnel may face unique challenges in developing and establishing a functional charter school.
- *Questions:* (A) What are the experiences of the core-founding group in developing a charter school?; (B) What are the key strategies used during the pre-operation phase to successfully open a charter school?

Summary of 2004 Start-Up Study

Preliminary studies were conducted to examine the start-up (preoperational) processes of the four Tennessee charter schools that began operation in 2003 (Robertson et al., 2003) and of the three additional schools that began operation in 2004 (Bates et al., 2004). Interviews with each of the school's principals and their sponsors (core founding groups) were conducted. Key findings that emphasize the

results from the most recent cohort are summarized below. It should be noted that start-up experiences were very similar across schools for both years of initiation.

Several obstacles impacted one or more of the charter schools, including issues such as acquiring timely funding, acquiring building space, finalizing student enrollment, and hiring quality faculty. Two of these concerns reportedly stemmed from unclear charter school law and procedures. The first was that the timing of the state's release of the high priority list conflicted with the starting date of school and subsequently hindered enrollment. The second was that the timing of the release of funds was not optimum to support initial startup costs.

Several sources of support and continuing school needs were identified. The support for each of the schools came from local, state, and national sources. Common areas of support included the students and parents of the school, civic and community leaders, the school's board of directors and sponsors, faith-based organizations, the Hyde Family Foundation, the Tennessee Charter School Resource Center, Memphis City Schools, and the TN Department of Education. School principals had differing responses to the ongoing needs of the school. The needs cited by the principals included time, student-teachers, technology, buildings, a library, corporate sponsorships, tutoring programs, faculty professional development, donation of goods and services, additional funding, and further parent education and involvement.

The experiences of the second cohort of Tennessee's charter school stakeholders resembled those of the first cohort. This is not surprising since the business of starting a school necessarily involves the same core components: establishing an organization, articulating a vision, securing funds, navigating

bureaucracies, identifying and preparing facilities, choosing leadership and staff, defining curriculum, implementing a community relations strategy, recruiting and admitting students, and obtaining the school building. While the experiences were new for the charters, they were not new for the district, state, and technical service supporters. According to the stakeholders who provided information for this report, there was evidence that both the state and the district provided focused technical support that alleviated some of the challenges facing the first cohort of charter schools. Nevertheless, systemic challenges remain.

Summary of First Year Evaluation Findings

In addition to the start-up studies, first year evaluations of the four schools that began operation in the 2003-04 academic year were conducted (Ross, McDonald, & Bol, 2004; Ross, McDonald, & Gallagher, 2005). The four schools were: Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA), Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS), Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering (MASE), and the Smithson-Craighead Academy (SCA). The same evaluation questions presented in the preceding section guided the evaluation of these schools after their initial year of operation.

Achievement Outcomes. Scores on the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program/Achievement Test (TCAP/AT) in Reading, Language Arts, and Math were used to measure achievement. The analyses of scores for COSLA, MAHS, and MASE showed directional advantages for the charter school students over their matched control counterparts on all three subtests. However, only the effect for MASE in Math was statistically significant. The median effect size was +0.15, indicating small to moderate effects. When the results for all three schools were combined, significant

advantages for the charter schools occurred on both Reading and Math, with a directional advantage in Language Arts. For SCA, the comparisons to control students yielded comparable to negative results. However, the SCA results need to be interpreted with caution because of the small sample of matched cases. Overall, these results were impressive given that the charter schools were only in their first year of operation and the transition of students to a new school is typically associated with lower achievement.

Instructional Strategies. Classroom observation data revealed that all four schools primarily relied on teacher-centered instruction. With the exception of the percentages reported for MASE, the results obtained in this instructional category were typically higher than those observed in national samples. Moderate levels of student-centered instruction were observed across schools. Technology usage was not extensive at any of the four schools, and was considered weak at the two elementary schools (COSLA and SCA). The prevalence of higher-order strategies (e.g., higher level questioning and feedback) was markedly higher at SCA when compared to national norms and was found to be weak at MAHS.

School Climate. Each of the four schools was characterized as having a strong school climate as measured by School Climate Inventory (SCI) scores. Nearly all of the mean ratings were higher than 4.0 (on the five point scale) for each of the dimensions comprising overall school climate. Two exceptions were somewhat lower mean ratings obtained for Order at MAHS and SCA. However, encouragingly, the mean ratings for all schools surpassed the national norms on the overall SCI score on each of the separate dimensions.

Implementation of Charter School Goals. Given that all schools were in their first year of operation, it was not surprising that most implementation benchmarks were judged to be in their initial phases. COSLA had the strongest evidence for more extensive implementation of curriculum and organization goals. In terms of implementing specific support goals, most of the schools were still in their early to intermediate stages. Lack of support was most apparent for criteria related to support from local and state education agencies as well as parent involvement.

Teacher Perceptions and Resources. Teacher responses were mostly positive with respect to school mission or educational program and professional development. All schools were rated as moderate in the area of support. This intermediate rating was based on a perceived lack of support from state and local educational agencies, but a presence of support from other external agencies, the community, and in the case of COSLA, parental involvement. Although there were some mixed reactions to the availability and adequacy of resources, no school was rated as strong in the resource category because there was at least one area of resources judged as insufficient in each school.

Parent Perceptions and Involvement. In general, parents appear to be very satisfied with the charter schools. Some common themes included the principals' leadership as well as small school and class sizes that afford increased student safety, individual attention, and effective pedagogy. In three of the schools (COSLA, MAHS, and MASE) parents were dissatisfied with inadequate transportation services. There was some variation in the findings for parental involvement. Positive and consistent findings across sources were only obtained for COSLA.

Methodology

Description of the Charter Schools

As noted, four schools comprise the first cohort and three comprise the second cohort. Table 1 presents an overview of the schools by cohort. A more detailed, narrative description of each school follows the table.

Table 1
Overview of Schools

School	Cohort	Level	Grades (04-05)	Enrollment (04-05)	Location
Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA)	1	Elementary	K-3	72	Memphis
Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS)	1	Middle	6-7	180	Memphis
Memphis Academy of Science & Engineering (MASE)	1	Secondary	7-8	107	Memphis
Smithson-Craighead Academy (SCA)	1	Elementary	K-4	148	Nashville
City University of School of Liberal Arts (CityU)	2	Secondary	9	121	Memphis
Star Academy	2	Elementary	K-2	116	Memphis
Yo! Academy	2	Secondary	10-12	131	Memphis

Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA). The Circles of Success Learning Academy (COSLA) is an urban charter school located in Memphis, Tennessee. During the 2004-2005 school year, COSLA served 72 students in grades K-3, with 91.6% of the students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

COSLA's staff consists of four teachers with a teacher-student ratio of 1:18. Other staff members include a principal, a curriculum facilitator, a Title I coordinator, an administrative assistant, and three teacher assistants. Thirty percent of the staff responding to the School Climate Inventory described their educational attainment as culminating in an associates degree, 50% as culminating in a bachelor's degree, 10%

as culminating in a Master's degree, and 10% as culminating in a doctorate degree. The majority of the staff (60%) have worked at the school for the two years of its operation, and 40% have worked at the school for one year.

The general focus at COSLA is literacy development. With its school-wide program, attempts are made to integrate literacy across subject areas. The school utilizes scientifically-based methods and strategies in the delivery of the curriculum. Accordingly, curriculum content and performance standards are aligned with current school district and state assessment goals. COSLA also seeks to ensure that teachers use a variety of teaching strategies in the delivery of instruction. Organizational structures are designed to facilitate high levels of learning and therefore include the systematic monitoring of grade level planning, classroom teaching practices, and student progress. Support structures include feedback from the principal and the curriculum facilitator, the modeling of effective practices, regular professional development opportunities for all staff, and both internal and external support services.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences (MAHS). The Memphis Academy of Health Science (MAHS) is located in an urban area of Memphis, Tennessee. The school is housed in the upper floor of Caldwell Elementary School. There are 180 students attending grades six and seven. African-American students make up 100% of the school's population. According to school administrators, 75% of the students receive free or reduced-price lunches.

The school's faculty and staff consist of 12 teachers (including one Special Education teacher), one principal, and one secretary. The administration reports the teacher-student ratio as 1:20. Based on responses to the School Climate Inventory,

approximately one-third of the respondents (36.4%) have earned masters degrees and the remaining staff members (63.6%) have bachelor degrees. Most (72.7%) of the faculty and staff have less than six years of experience working in school settings. Another 18.2% have six to ten years experience, 9.1% have 11-15 years experience, and none has more than 15 years experience. Approximately one-third (36.4%) of the faculty and staff have had two years experience working in this school, and a majority (63.6%) have only one year experience given that a new grade (7) was added this year.

The curriculum is a standards-based program that incorporates interdisciplinary projects and experiential learning centered on a health science theme. Benchmarks established by the school for its second year of operation primarily focus on establishing structures that enable effective implementation and evaluation of the instructional program, effective communications between stakeholders, and a positive environment for teaching and learning.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering (MASE). The Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering (MASE) is housed in an office building in downtown Memphis. The school is on the two upper floors of the building, with the seventh grade inhabiting one floor and the eighth grade the floor above.

During the 2004-2005 school year, there were 107 seventh-grade students and 144 eighth-grade students. The students were predominantly African-American (97%) with a few White (2.3%) and Hispanic (0.7%) students. Free or reduced-priced lunches were provided for 68% of the students. A total of 24 students left MASE during the school year, of which 12 left within the first two weeks because they had been accepted

by other schools. The others left of their own accord, moved out of the district, or were asked to leave.

There were 12 teachers at MASE this year. There were also two support staff and three administrators, and one person with both administrative and support duties. The administration consisted of a principal, a vice principal, an educational specialist, and a technology specialist/support person.

The student-teacher ratio was 21:1. Eight of the teachers had master's degrees and the other four had bachelor's degrees. The staff members had bachelor's degrees and the administrators all had master's degrees. The teachers had experience levels from first year (one teacher), fourth year (two teachers), sixth year (four teachers), seventh year (four teachers), and 22nd year (one teacher). Ten teachers, one administrator, and one support staff member were new to MASE. Two teachers, two administrators, one support person, and the technology specialist/support person were in their second year.

The program includes longer days, Saturday school, high technology use, continuous monitoring of student progress, and an intense focus on core curricula integrated across subjects. Mathematics, science, and language arts are emphasized using authentic, varied, and integrated instruction and assessment strategies. The schedule entails a full day of school (8 - 5pm) so that all classes could meet twice. The students extended, practiced, finished, or redid the morning's lessons in the afternoon. Community projects (excursions) were added to allow for real-life applications of the students' work.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. Smithson-Craighead Academy, an urban school in Nashville, TN, serves 148 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. The students are predominantly (99%) African-American. All students are eligible for free (90%) or reduced-price (10%) lunches. The student body is classified by the administrators and teachers as “at-risk.”

Staff and faculty of the school include ten teachers and five teaching assistants. Other staff members include the principal, a curriculum coordinator, and four specialists: librarian, special education teacher, computer instructor, and computer/special education coordinator. The founder, Sister Sandra Smithson, provides administrative and instructional consultation. This spring (2005), an additional staff member was hired to serve as a liaison between parents and school personnel. The majority (73.7%) of faculty/staff report that their education culminated in either a bachelor’s (31.6%) or a master’s (42.1%) degree. Experience as a school employee ranges from five years or less (57.9%) to over 20 years (21.1%). Over half (68.4%) have 1-10 years of experience. The same percentage (68.4%) have more than one year of experience at SCA.

The focus of the school is to meet the academic and social needs of at-risk children. Students are taught three goals: self-control, work before play, and obey your teachers. They recite these goals on a daily basis. The curriculum for the lower grades includes benchmark testing to ensure mastery of basic skills before proceeding to more advanced skills. The scope and sequence of the curriculum is based on both research-supported practices and state curriculum standards. Teachers are given the latitude to use innovative strategies to meet the school’s educational goals. A daily, after-school

program is available to provide students with additional educational support. Many teachers and administrators participate in the after-school program.

City University School of Liberal Arts. City University School of Liberal Arts (CityU) is located in an urban area of Memphis, Tennessee. The school is housed in Greater Middle Baptist Church. In this first year of operation, there are 121 students attending grade 9, the only grade served presently. African-American students constitute 98.3% of the school's population. There was also one Caucasian and one Hispanic student. According to the school's administration, 78% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

The school's faculty and staff consist of eight teachers, one principal, one office manager, one instructional leader, and one part-time counselor. The administration reports that the teacher to student ratio for core classes is 1:20 and for non-core classes is 1:30. Of those responding to the School Climate Inventory, 62.5% of the faculty and staff described their educational attainment as culminating in bachelor's degrees, 12.5% as culminating in master's degrees, and 25% as including a degree beyond Master's. One-fourth (25%) of the faculty and staff have more than 20 years of experience as school employees, while one-half (50%) have less than 11 years of experience. Because CityU is a new charter school, all faculty and staff have one year of experience working specifically in this school.

The curriculum developed and employed at CityU has a liberal arts core and is aligned with College Board standards to build a strong college-oriented focus. This theme is continued throughout CityU's operations, with teachers being referred to as "professors" and students as "scholars." Students change classes after each lecture,

not when a bell rings, and school policies reflect a more collegiate atmosphere (such as allowing cell-phone usage between classes). The educators at CityU want their students to be prepared for college and are attempting to provide them with an opportunity to learn in an atmosphere they would not experience in most high schools.

Star Academy. Star Academy is located in the northwest region of Shelby County in the urban outskirts of Memphis, Tennessee. Star Academy serves 116 students in kindergarten through second grade. The student population is predominantly (98%) African-American, with approximately 90% of the students qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunch.

There are six classroom teachers at Star Academy, plus a Title I Coordinator and Curriculum Coordinator. There is a 20:1 student-teacher ratio across classrooms. All professional faculty maintain licenses in their assigned area. One-third of the respondents to the School Climate Inventory indicated that they have a bachelor's degree while the remaining two-thirds indicated having at least a master's degree. Slightly less than half of the respondents (44%) indicated that they have worked in a school-based setting for six to ten years, while one-third indicated that they have more than 20 years of experience. Only 11% reported having less than six years of experience.

In its first year of operation, Star Academy's primary area of focus was on Reading and Language Arts. The McGraw-Hill series provides the core curricular materials in reading and math. For students identified as needing extra support, supplementary programs are used (Head Sprout and Failure Free Reading). A variety of

instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning, peer tutoring, and direct instruction, are employed.

Yo! Academy. Yo! Academy of Visual and Performing Arts is located in southwest Memphis in an industrial warehouse area. In its first year, the school initially held classes off-site. Academic classes met in space leased from a church approximately six miles north of the school building, while visual and performing arts classes met in the facility that housed the city's Youth Opportunity Movement program. By midyear, the school's own facility was adapted for secondary school use so that all classes could be conducted under a single roof. The school operates with a year round calendar that includes one Saturday per month.

During the first year of operation, the school served only students in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades. The school is scheduled to add ninth grade in the second year of operation.

The school opened in July 2004, with 131 students. All students were African-American and were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Nearly half of the students (49%) were tenth graders, over a third (37%) were eleventh graders, and the remainder (14%) were twelfth graders. By the end of the year, the tenth-grade class had grown by seven students, while the eleventh-grade class lost eight and the twelfth-grade class lost six students.

The faculty consists of one principal, one assistant principal, seven teachers, two office staff members, and a case manager/psychologist. All are African-American. Both the principal and assistant principal also teach classes. All of the teachers have teaching certification and the current principal is in the final stages of a doctoral degree

in school leadership. Two teachers teach one course for which they are uncertified. Since the beginning of the school year, the school has had four different principals. In addition, the original executive director of the sponsoring agency (Yo! Memphis Foundation) has been replaced.

Of the faculty and staff members responding to the School Climate Inventory, four reported having master's degrees and two reported having a degree beyond a master's. Four reported having between six and ten years of experience working in a school setting, while the remaining three had less than six years of experience. One teacher had taught in a charter school before Yo! Academy.

The mission of the school is to provide a rigorous academic preparation for students while incorporating the visual and performing arts, all within a safe environment for youths who are considered to be at-risk. Yo! Academy was established on the foundation of work done in Memphis under a five year demonstration program funded by the U. S. Department of Labor called the Youth Opportunity Movement. Funding for that program concluded June 30, 2005. The school's focus on visual and performing arts is a direct outgrowth of the success of the Youth Opportunity Memphis ("Yo! Memphis") program. In the Academy's first year, over half of its students had experience with Yo! Memphis. The director of the Yo! Memphis Show Choir continues in that capacity at the Academy while serving as the school's assistant principal.

Instrumentation

Instruments used for data collection were developed and validated by the Center for Research in Educational Policy (CREP) as part of the Formative Evaluation for School Improvement Process (FEPSI) (see www.memphis.edu/crep). A description of

each instrument is provided below. A summary of the instrumentation employed to address each research question is provided in Table 2. The standard data collection schedule is shown in Table 3.

Table 2
Evaluation Questions by Instrument

Evaluation Questions	Instruments
1. What are the immediate and long-term impacts of the charter school implementation on student achievement, attendance, drop-out rates, behavior, and mobility?	Analysis of achievement data and archival data (attendance, discipline referrals, transfers, drop-out rates)
2. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative instructional strategies? What is the quality of usage of selected instructional strategies associated with best practices? How do charter school outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?	SOM RSCA
3. What is the school climate at the charter school? Does school climate improve over time? How do charter school climate outcomes compare to those reflected in national norms?	School Climate Inventory (SCI) Teacher Focus Group Student Focus Group Principal Interview
4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?	Implementation Benchmarks Teacher Focus Group Principal Interview CSTQ SOM RSCA
5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?	CSTQ Teacher Focus Group Principal Interview
6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school? To what degree and in what ways are caregivers involved with the school?	Parent Survey Principal Interview Teacher Focus Group Student Focus Group
7. What are the experiences of the core-founding group in developing a charter school? What are key strategies used during the pre-operation phase to successfully open a charter school?	Core Founding Group (School Design Team) Survey/Interview

Table 3
Data Collection Outline

Instrument	Timeline	Description
Core Founding Group Survey/Interview	Summer 2004	Survey and interview of key planning/pre-operational phase personnel
Benchmark training, development, revision	Fall 2004	Train school Principal and Staff; develop draft document
SOM	Fall 2004; Spring 2005	6 three-hour observations
Rubric for Student-Centered Activity (RSCA)	Fall 2004; Spring 2005	Same as SOM Data Collection
Principal Interview	February 2005	1 hour interview
Charter School Teacher Questionnaire (CSTQ)	March 2005 (Faculty Meeting)	Teachers complete the questionnaire (part-time faculty can also complete)
School Climate Inventory (SCI)	March 2005 (Faculty Meeting)	Professional staff complete inventory (part-time faculty/staff can also complete)
Parent Survey	Spring 2005	Parents/caregivers complete the survey
Teacher Focus Group	Spring 2005	1 hour group interview
Student Focus Group	Spring 2005	30-50 minute group interview
Benchmarking Review	May 2005	Principal/Staff review progress

School Climate Inventory (SCI). The School Climate Inventory (SCI) was developed by researchers at the Center for Research in Educational Policy, at The University of Memphis in 1989. Since that time, the instrument has been used for school-based improvement planning in schools and school districts in several states, and has proven to be especially valuable for the monitoring and management of change initiatives.

The SCI consists of seven dimensions logically and empirically linked with factors associated with effective school organizational climates. Each scale contains seven items, with 49 statements comprising the inventory. Responses are scored through the use of Likert-type ratings [strong disagreement (1) to strong agreement (5)]. Each scale

yields a mean ranging from 1 to 5 with higher scores being more positive. Additional items solicit demographic information.

Face validity of the school climate items and logical ordering of the items by scales were established by the research team during the development of the inventory (Butler and Alberg, 1991). Subsequent analysis of responses collected through administration of the inventory in a variety of school sites substantiates validity of the items. Scale descriptions and current internal reliability coefficients, obtained using Cronbach's alpha, appear in Table 4.

Table 4
School Climate Inventory Internal Reliability and Scale Descriptions

Scale	Internal Reliability	Description
Order	$\alpha=.8394$	The extent to which the environment is ordered and appropriate student behaviors are present
Leadership	$\alpha=.8345$	The extent to which the administration provides instructional leadership
Environment	$\alpha=.8094$	The extent to which positive learning environments exist
Involvement	$\alpha=.7582$	The extent to which parents and the community are involved in the school
Instruction	$\alpha=.7453$	The extent to which the instructional program is well developed and implemented
Expectations	$\alpha=.7275$	The extent to which students are expected to learn and be responsible
Collaboration	$\alpha=.7417$	The extent to which the administration, faculty, and students cooperate and participate in problem solving

School Observation Measure (SOM[®]). The SOM was developed to determine the extent to which different common and alternative teaching practices are used throughout an entire school (Ross, Smith, & Alberg, 1998). The standard, or whole-school, SOM procedure involves observers' visiting 10-12 randomly selected classrooms, for 15 minutes each, during a three-hour visitation period. The observer

examines classroom events and activities descriptively, not judgmentally. Notes are taken relative to the use or nonuse of 24 target strategies. At the conclusion of the three-hour visit, the observer summarizes the frequency with which each of the strategies was observed across all classes on a data summary form. The frequency is recorded via a 5-point rubric that ranges from (0) Not Observed to (4) Extensively. Two global items are used to rate, respectively, the level of academically-focused instructional time and the degree of student attention and interest.

The SOM strategies include traditional practices (e.g., direct instruction and independent seatwork) and alternative, predominately student-centered methods associated with educational reforms (e.g., cooperative learning, project-based learning, inquiry, discussion, technology use as a learning tool). The strategies were identified through surveys and discussions involving policy makers, researchers, administrators, and teachers, as those most useful in providing indicators of schools' instructional philosophies and implementations of commonly used reform designs (Ross, Smith, Alberg, & Lowther, 2004).

To ensure the reliability of data, observers receive training, a manual providing definitions of terms, examples and explanations of the strategies, and a description of procedures for completing the instrument. After receiving the manual and instruction in a group session, each observer participates in sufficient practice exercises to ensure that his/her data are comparable with those of experienced observers. In a reliability study (Lewis, Ross, & Alberg, 1999), pairs of trained observers selected the identical overall response on the five-category rubric on 67% of the items and were within one category on 95% of the items. Further results establishing the reliability and validity of

SOM are provided in the Lewis et al. (1999) report. In a reliability study using Generalizability Theory, Sterbinsky (2003) found reliability at the .74 level for 5 SOMs conducted at a school. Reliability increased to .82 with 8 SOMs and to .85 with 10 SOMs conducted at a school.

Rubric for Student-Centered Activities (RSCA). The Rubric for Student-Centered Activities was developed by CREP (Lowther, Ross, & Plants, 2000) as an extension to SOM. The RSCA is used by observers to more closely evaluate the degree of learner engagement in seven selected areas considered fundamental to the goals of increasing student-centered learning activities (cooperative learning, project-based learning, higher-level questioning, experiential/hands-on learning, student independent inquiry/research, student discussion, and students as producers of knowledge using technology). These strategies reflect emphasis on higher-order learning and attainment of deep understanding of content, and whether or not technology was utilized as a component of the strategy. Such learning outcomes seem consistent with those likely to be engendered by well-designed, real-world linked exercises, projects, or problems utilizing technology as a learning tool.

Each item on the RSCA includes a two-part rating scale. The first is a four-point scale, with 1 indicating a very low level of application, and 5 representing a high level of application. The second is a Yes/No option to the question: "Was technology used?" with space provided to write a brief description of the technology use. The RSCA was completed as part of SOM observation periods.

To ensure the reliability of data, observers receive training consisting of terms, examples, and explanations of the target strategies, and a description of procedures for

completing the instrument. After receiving the manual and instruction in a group session, each observer participates in sufficient practice exercises to ensure that his/her data are comparable with those of experienced observers.

Charter School Teacher Questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to assess teacher perceptions about the school in the areas of professional development, support, pedagogical change, and outcomes. Included on the questionnaire are 20 closed-ended items using a five-point Likert-type scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree), and the following four open-ended questions: What do you see as positive or most successful aspects of your charter school?; What do you consider to be negative aspects or areas in need of improvement at your school?; In your opinion, what makes a charter school (like this one) different from a regular public school?; and, Any other comments you would like to make regarding your experiences as a charter school teacher?

Charter School Parent Questionnaire. This instrument was designed to obtain parent perceptions of the school in areas such as instruction, curriculum, communication, and opportunities for involvement. Included on the questionnaire are 17 closed-ended items using a five-point Likert-type scale (from strongly disagree to strongly agree), and the following four open-ended questions: What are the strengths of this school?; What would you like to see improved at this school?; In your opinion, what makes a charter school (like this one) different from a regular public school?; and, Any other comments you would like to make about this school or charter schools in general?

Focus groups and interviews. To supplement the survey data, site researchers at each charter school conducted a principal interview, a teacher focus group, and a

student focus group. The time period for each was approximately 30 – 60 minutes for each interview. Teacher and student participants were randomly selected to participate. A semi-structured protocol, involving standard questions with flexibility for follow-up on selected responses, was used. In all three protocols the basic questions concerned experiences during the year, differences from regular (non-charter) schools, reactions to major school components (e.g., teaching methods, curriculum, parent involvement), perceived strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement.

Procedure

A “site researcher” from CREP was assigned data collection responsibility for each charter school. This individual and support research staff visited the assigned school several times during the year to conduct the SOM visits, administer the questionnaires, and conduct the interview and focus groups. In addition, the site researcher worked with the school leadership team to develop “implementation benchmarks” describing beginning, intermediate, and full implementation phases and associated evidence indicators for major school components in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and organization. At the end of the year, the site researcher met again with the leadership team to determine and identify the phase that had been achieved for each benchmark. Data from all instruments were then used to prepare individual school formative evaluation reports indicating status and progress during the year, as well as the present evaluation report.

Results

In this section, the second-year findings from the first cohort of schools and the first year findings from the second cohort are summarized separately and then integrated to address each research question. There are two exceptions: Research Question 1 (see Table 2), regarding student achievement will be addressed in a separate report prepared in late fall, 2005. Research Question 7, regarding the experiences of leaders and founders in opening the charter school, has already been addressed in detail in separate reports (Bates et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2003) and also summarized in the introduction to the present report.

Question 2. What is the frequency of usage of various traditional and alternative (student-centered) instructional strategies in the charter schools and compared to national norms?

Observational data collected via the School Observation Measure (SOM) and the Rubric for Student-Centered Activities (RSCA) was used to gauge the frequency with which various traditional and alternative instructional strategies were observed in the charter schools. More specifically, patterns in results were organized under four different categories of instructional orientation and strategies: teacher-centered, student-centered, technology usage, and higher-order instruction. The findings from the observations conducted in the charter schools were compared to the national normative data available for the SOM. For reference purposes, these norms are provided in Appendix A. Because the RSCA was more recently developed, normative data are not yet available for this instrument but will be used to supplement the SOM data. In

addition to comparing the observational data to norms, we also noted trends in the results across years for those charter schools in their second year of operation.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. As we reported during COSLA's first year of operation, direct instruction was the most frequently observed instructional strategy. In fact, the percentage of time direct instruction was frequently to extensively observed increased from 67% in the first year to 83% in the second year. These percentages were higher than the national elementary school norms. In contrast to the increase in direct instruction, the percentage of time students were engaged in independent seatwork, another more traditional strategy, was low relative to national norms and to the previous year. With regard to student-centered strategies, the percentage of time allotted to cooperative/collaborative learning remained constant across years and was higher than in the normative sample. Additionally, increases were observed in teachers' adoption of the role of coach or facilitator, and the findings compared favorably with national norms. Based on data obtained from the RSCA, student-centered activities, especially cooperative learning and higher level questioning, were implemented with greater quality than in the first year. However, findings suggest no use or very limited use of technology.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. Much of the instruction observed at MAHS was traditional and teacher-centered. The percentage of time devoted to direct instruction remained high in the second year and was somewhat higher than the normative data for secondary schools. The strategy was used at least occasionally 100% of the time in MAHA classrooms compared to 90% in the national sample. Student engagement in independent seatwork was frequently observed but these

figures were more comparable to the normative data. Although student-centered strategies were used more frequently than in the first year, their application was still limited. For example, cooperative learning was observed more frequently in the second year but the frequency or levels of use were low in an absolute sense and when compared to normative data. This pattern of results was also found for higher-order instructional strategies and use of technology. That is, there was some increase from the first year, but the results still reflected low levels of implementation that did not compare favorably with national norms. A notable exception to this trend was computer use for instructional delivery. This use of technology was occasionally used 50% of the time, and this value was higher than the percentage observed in other secondary schools.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. Although there was a decrease in teacher-centered strategies when compared to last year, time spent in direct instruction remained high. The results were similar to levels observed in secondary schools nationally. A similar declining trend was noted for independent seatwork. The strategy tended to be frequently rather than extensively observed when contrasted with the previous year. Higher-order strategies were more frequently observed. Specifically, we observed more high-level instructional feedback and questioning when compared to the previous year and to national norms. Progress in increasing student-centered instruction was evidenced by observed increases in teacher acting as coach or facilitator, project based learning, experiential learning, and independent inquiry or research. However, it should be noted that these trends in student-centered strategies mostly represented a move from not observed to rarely or occasionally observed, and

they still occurred at lower rates than for national samples. In contrast, technology use not only increased this year, but the percentages exceeded those reported in the normative sample. This was especially true for its implementation as a learning tool or resource. While there was an increase in the frequency of technology usage, RSCA data indicates that its application tended to be limited when used in conjunction with student-centered activities.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. With regard to teacher-centered instruction, we observed a decrease in the time spent in direct instruction. Direct instruction was still employed at occasional to frequent levels, but these levels were more comparable than in Year 1 to national norms. Independent seatwork was also frequently observed but less extensively than in the previous year and at rates comparable to those in the normative sample. There was frequent use of higher-order strategies when compared to the national sample, yet there was an overall decrease in their usage levels in comparison with last year. For instance, higher-level instructional feedback was used at least occasionally during all of the visits last year, but this percentage dropped to 50% of the time for the second year. RSCA data shows a similar decline in student-centered activities in terms of both frequency and quality of application. More encouragingly, there was an increase in the use of technology compared to the previous year. SOM data suggests more frequent use of computers for instructional delivery and technology for learning or resources, with rates higher than those reported in the national norms for elementary schools.

City University School of Liberal Arts. The most frequently observed instructional strategy was direct instruction. It was frequently to extensively observed about 83% of

the time, and this percentage is somewhat higher than the national norm for secondary schools. The second most frequent instructional strategy was independent seatwork, and these rates were comparable to national norms. Student-centered strategies were observed less frequently than teacher-directed strategies with most student-centered strategies not observed or rarely observed. Technology use was not observed in any of the classrooms during the observation visits. Compared to national norms, City U had much lower rates of student-centered instruction or technology use in their classrooms. However, some higher-order instruction occurred at rates similar to those observed nationally. Higher-level feedback and questioning were both observed at least occasionally about 50% of the time.

Star Academy. Although direct instruction was the dominant instructional strategy observed, the student-centered strategies of cooperative/collaborative learning and teacher as coach or facilitator were also commonly employed. The percentage of time spent in these three categories of instruction was higher than the national norms obtained for elementary schools. Independent seatwork was another prevalent strategy used and was observed at least occasionally during all of the visits. The rates for this strategy were also higher than those reported in national norms. Engagement in higher-order strategies was evident from both the SOM and RSCA data. The use of higher-level instructional feedback was observed occasionally or frequently during half of the visits, a rate modestly higher than in the normative sample. Technology use was not observed or at best, rarely observed.

Yo! Academy. Traditional instructional strategies were primarily observed at Yo! Academy. The most dominant strategies were direct instruction and independent

seatwork, and they occurred more frequently than in the national sample of secondary school classrooms. Few student-centered instructional strategies were employed with at least occasional frequency. One exception was the teacher acting as coach or facilitator, yet this rate occurred at a lower rate than in the normative sample. There was some indication of the use of higher-order pedagogical strategies. Higher-level questioning strategies were occasionally used about 33% of the time. Results for this strategy compared favorably to the national sample. However, the frequencies for technology use did not compare favorably with normative data. Technology as a learning tool or resource was rarely observed and computer use for instructional delivery was seen no more than occasionally during 20% of the visits.

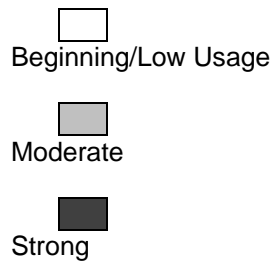
Summary findings across schools. Table 5 presents the summary findings by school in four major categories associated with instructional orientation and strategies. All seven schools were rated as strong with respect to teacher-centered instruction. The rating was primarily due to the findings that direct instruction was the predominant instructional orientation. These rates were typically higher or comparable to rates observed in the national samples. It should be noted that the percentage of time spent in direct instruction is high in both the elementary and secondary school classrooms nationally. Four of the schools (COSLA, MASE, SCA, and Star) employed student-centered instruction to a moderate degree. The most frequent types of student-centered instruction included cooperative/collaborative learning and teacher acting as coach facilitator. This trend makes logical sense because teachers are more inclined to assume a coaching role as students work together in groups. A wide array of student-centered strategies was observed at these schools, albeit at a lower frequency than the

previously mentioned strategies. Three of the charter schools were categorized as weak in this category (MAHS, CityU, and Yo!) due to low levels of occurrence and engagement in an absolute sense and relative to national norms. All but one school (MAHS) implemented higher-order strategies at moderate levels. The frequencies were not consistently high, but they compared favorably to the normative samples. MAHS was considered weak because high-level feedback and questioning were not commonly observed, and their rates of occurrence were much lower than those reported nationally. The three schools in their first year of operation (CityU, Star, and Yo!) were rated as weak in technology use. Technology use for any purpose never or rarely occurred in these schools. Technology use also remained weak in COSLA where a similar pattern was observed. In contrast, technology use increased in three of the first cohort of charter schools (MAHS, MASE, SCA). Although the percentages compared favorably with normative samples, RSCA data indicated that the level of application was not yet strong in intensity or quality.

Table 5
Summary Ratings for Schools on Teaching Orientations

School	Indicator			
	Teacher-centered	Student-centered	Higher-order strategies	Technology usage
COSLA	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Beginning/Low Usage
MAHS	Strong	Beginning/Low Usage	Beginning/Low Usage	Moderate
MASE	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
SCA	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
CityU*	Strong	Beginning/Low Usage	Moderate	Beginning/Low Usage
Star*	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Beginning/Low Usage
Yo!*	Strong	Beginning/Low Usage	Moderate	Beginning/Low Usage

*First year schools



Question 3. What is the school climate at the charter schools and how does the climate compare to national norms?

To address this research question, we primarily relied on the rating scale data obtained from the School Climate Inventory (SCI). Because we compared the SCI results for the charter schools with national norms, the national averages for elementary and secondary schools (middle and high schools) are presented in Table 6. The interpretation of SCI data was augmented by the qualitative responses obtained from focus group interviews, principal interviews, and open-ended items on the SCI. Any themes related to the dimensions of school climate were identified and used to illuminate the quantitative findings.

Table 6
School Climate Inventory (SCI-R) Dimension Averages for Elementary and Secondary Schools

Dimension	COSLA	SCA	Star	Elementary Norm
Collaboration	4.63	3.79	4.62	3.88
Environment	4.37	3.84	4.73	3.96
Expectations	4.71	4.25	4.78	4.04
Instruction	4.66	4.21	4.70	4.17
Involvement	4.64	3.95	4.50	3.91
Leadership	4.75	4.15	4.90	4.08
Order	4.39	3.23	4.59	3.50
OVERALL	4.58	3.94	4.69	3.93

Dimension	CityU	MAHS	MASE	Yo!	Secondary Norm
Collaboration	3.89	4.09	4.20	3.96	3.71
Environment	3.88	3.77	4.06	3.80	3.73
Expectations	4.20	4.29	4.57	4.12	3.82
Instruction	4.29	4.34	4.43	4.20	4.06
Involvement	4.29	3.86	4.06	3.60	3.63
Leadership	4.20	4.08	4.24	3.98	3.94
Order	3.93	3.47	3.68	3.60	3.26
OVERALL	4.10	4.00	4.15	3.93	3.73

Circles of Success Learning Academy. SCI findings suggest that school climate continues to be very positive at COSLA. The overall mean rating was 4.58 with means for each dimension ranging from a low of 4.37 for Environment to a high of 4.75 for Leadership. Compared to the initial year, the mean ratings increased on six of the seven dimensions of climate. Although the mean rating for Environment was lowest (4.37), this area did increase from 4.18 last year. A small decrease was observed for Involvement from 4.74 to 4.64, though this area remains positive overall.

The mean ratings also continue to compare favorably with national norms. The SCI mean ratings for COSLA exceeded the means obtained for the normative sample of elementary schools on each dimension. In most cases these differences were

substantial. For example, COSLA's mean rating for 4.63 for Collaboration can be contrasted with the national average of 3.88.

The positive SCI findings were confirmed by qualitative interview responses. Student responses provided insight into the school climate at COSLA and perhaps, the increased mean ratings on the Order dimension. Their responses reflect a great deal of respect and caring among teachers and students that appears to impact classroom management. Some described their prior schools as very punitive and appreciated the more positive approach to discipline in their new school. "I used to get paddled but teachers here give us a second chance or give us the bad grade we deserve." Another student said, "Teachers at COSLA don't accuse us. They say, 'if you fall short, you can lift back up.'" Similarly, teachers characterized the relationships among faculty and teachers as familial. They were also laudatory about school leadership, collaboration, and the creativity associated with a flexible teaching and learning environment.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. School climate scores decreased from Year 1 to Year 2 at MAHS, yet the mean ratings were still largely positive as evidenced by the overall mean of 4.00 (compared to national norm of 3.73). The highest mean rating was obtained for the Instruction dimension, and the lowest was for the Order dimension. An examination of individual items revealed that student tardiness or absence contributed to the low score on this dimension. Notably, only 9% of respondents agreed that tardiness and absence was *not* a problem this year as compared to nearly 80% agreement last year. Another substantial decrease in scores was found for the Involvement dimension and this decrease was partly due to a perceived lack of perceived support from parents (from 100 to 27% agreement).

Although decreases in ratings were observed across years, the means still compared favorably with national averages reported for secondary schools. MAHS mean ratings were higher on each dimension and overall. In some cases, these differences were large (e.g., 4.29 versus 3.82 for Expectations) but in others more modest (3.77 versus 3.73 for Environment).

The available qualitative data point to a positive school climate. The principal strives to “create ownership” of the school by staff and students, and this theme also emerged in the teacher focus group interview. They described creating goals and expectations for MAHS with a commitment to student success and school improvement over time. They described the school environment as having a “family atmosphere” and used terms such as “intimate”, “comfortable”, “welcoming”, and “warm” to characterize their school. Students noted the high expectations set by their teachers and principal. “The teachers and principal are strict. They push us to do what we’re supposed to do.” The qualitative responses did not yield clues as to why SCI ratings decreased across years. The decreases may have been influenced by the addition of another grade level this year and having nearly twice as many students enrolled.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. The mean SCI ratings suggested a positive school climate at MASE. The overall mean rating was a 4.15 on the 5- point scale compared to the national overall norm of 3.72. In fact, only Order fell below a 4.00 mean rating. The highest mean was obtained on the Expectations dimension. While still positive, the means on each dimension were lower than those obtained in the previous year. This decline was particularly apparent for the Order dimension (from 4.70 to 3.68). The expansion of the school in terms of student

enrollment (from 147 to 252) and grade levels served (from 7th to 7th and 8th) may have influenced these results. Percentages of agreement obtained on individual items comprising the Order scale suggest that student discipline problems may adversely affect the school climate at MASE. Notably smaller percentages of respondents agreed that rules for student behavior are consistently enforced (50%), that student misbehavior does *not* interfere with learning (40%), and that teachers, parents and administrators assume joint responsibility for student discipline (60%). Almost 100 % of respondents agreed to these items in the previous year.

Despite the decline in mean scores from the initial to second year of operation, the mean ratings for MASE are higher than the national averages on each dimension, including Order. As indicated above, the overall score of 4.15 obtained for MASE can be contrasted with the overall score of 3.73 for secondary schools nationally.

The qualitative responses further suggest a positive school climate and also provide insight about the slight decline in SCI ratings from year one to two. The principal described the climate as “realistic optimism” as opposed to last year’s “total optimism.” This year they can see “the bumps in road” but are still strongly committed to the school’s program and potential. High expectations were a dominant theme that emerged from the teacher interview data. “Here everyone is accountable. Everyone gets continual feedback, is expected to get results, and works collaboratively to address weaknesses.” The teachers appreciated the school’s leadership. They respect the principal and view him as a mentor who is supportive and understands their needs. The problem with student discipline reflected in the SCI ratings was echoed in some teacher comments. Discipline was described as difficult and students were said to be “quite

smart at breaking the rules.” High expectations were a major theme in student responses. The students talked about the hard work and long hours but these comments were tempered with recognition that teachers cared and wanted them to succeed. “Teachers are different here. Here they care and you must be respectful.”

Smithson-Craighead Academy. The mean SCI ratings suggest that the school climate is average to favorable at this charter school. The overall mean rating is 3.94 with dimension scores ranging from a low of 3.23 for Order to a high of 4.25 for Expectations. There was a consistent but mostly modest decline in mean scores on six of the seven dimensions and in the overall score when compared to last year’s scores. The mean score for Instruction remained constant over time. The largest decrease in mean scores was found for Order (from 3.86 to 3.23). An inspection of the individual items comprising this scale revealed that only about 16% of respondents agreed that student misbehavior does *not* interfere with teaching.

When compared to the elementary school national SCI norms, SCA scores were largely comparable. In fact, the overall mean scores were nearly identical (3.94 for SCA versus 3.93 nationally). SCA had notably higher scores on the Expectations dimension when contrasted with the national average. On the other hand, the national average for Order was notably higher than that observed for SCA (3.50 nationally versus 3.23 for SCA). This finding is not supportive of the SCA goals for students of self-control, work before play, and obeying the teachers.

The qualitative responses shed light on some of the trends observed in the quantitative ratings. The decrease in the Order mean to a level below the national norm may be due to the school’s large population of students with behavioral problems or

other kinds of special needs. According to the teachers, as many as 75% of the students are “medicated,” yet parents do not consistently fill prescriptions or administer the medications. One teacher suggested that SCA be noted as a special education charter school due to the academic and behavioral problems of the children. The goals for student behavior have become a central focus in the school. “In April, the principal began reading the behavior rules everyday.” More positive aspects of the school climate were apparent in the interview responses as well. For example, the principal described the climate as “safe and nurturing” and characterized teachers as supportive of the program and “willing to go the extra mile” to ensure its success. She has seen improvements in student self-esteem as well as academic performance. Students felt as if their teachers treated them with respect, which was not always the case in their previous schools.

City University School of Liberal Arts. The mean ratings obtained on the SCI indicate a favorable school climate at this new charter school. This characteristic was evidenced by the overall mean rating of 4.10. The highest ratings were found for the Involvement and Instruction dimensions (both 4.29). Unanimous agreement on three of the items related to parental involvement contributed to the high mean rating on the Involvement scale. On the Instruction scale there was 100% agreement on two of the individual items: teachers design learning activities to support the curriculum and students needs, and pull out programs do *not* interfere with basic skills instruction. The lowest mean rating was scored on the Environment dimension (3.88).

The mean school climate ratings for CityU also compared favorably to the normative sample of secondary schools. CityU means were higher than the national

averages on all dimensions and in a couple of areas this difference was large. The largest difference was observed on the Involvement dimension (4.29 for CityU versus 3.63 nationally). High rates of parent involvement are not common at public secondary schools. Respondents at CityU also endorsed items on the Expectations dimension at higher rates when compared to national averages (4.20 for CityU versus 3.82 nationally). This finding was not surprising because high expectations are a defining characteristic of CityU. Students are referred to as scholars and teachers as professors.

Many of the interview responses also reflected a positive school climate. The principal stated that “the greatest accomplishment for CityU is that parents, stakeholders, etc. are buying into the school.” The principal also described teachers as involved, supportive, and committed to the school vision. Teachers concurred, saying, “all teachers support the school’s mission and educational program.” Some students praised their teachers’ high expectations for their learning and appreciated the more individual attention afforded at a smaller school. These types of comments support the quantitative results suggesting that the Involvement, Instruction, and Expectations domains are strengths at the school.

Star Academy. Star Academy had very high ratings on each dimension assessed by the SCI. These findings suggest that school climate is a strength at this charter school. The mean ratings ranged from a nearly perfect rating of 4.90 for Leadership to a low of 4.50 for Involvement. The overall score was an impressive 4.69.

These mean ratings stand out even more when compared to national norms. Star Academy ratings were higher than the norms on each of the seven dimensions,

and many of these mean differences were large. The difference in Order scores was substantial (4.69 for Star versus 3.93 nationally). An examination of the results by individual item on the Order dimension reveals total or near total agreement on each item.

The positive school climate indicated by the SCI ratings was supported by the qualitative data. The principal cited the biggest accomplishment as a “positive school climate conducive to learning.” Teachers were described as collaborative, supportive, familial, and even “happy.” These descriptors emerged even though it was clear that teachers were working very hard. One teacher noted, that “you don’t see anyone killing time here. This is the first school where the students and the teachers are on task every minute of the day. That has a lot to do with the mission of the school.” An appreciation for the schools’ leadership was also apparent in the teachers’ responses. They indicated that they were supported and treated professionally, and contributed to major decisions about the curriculum and program. Parents were characterized as supportive and involved, especially at the beginning of the year.

Yo! Academy. SCI ratings at Yo! Academy were somewhat varied yet reflected a positive school climate overall (3.93). The highest mean rating of 4.20 was obtained for the Instruction dimension. All respondents agreed that teachers used a variety of teaching strategies, and designed learning activities to support curriculum and students’ needs. The lowest mean ratings were observed for the Involvement and Order dimensions (3.60 on both dimensions). Lower levels of agreement on items related to the active involvement of parents and community businesses in Yo! Academy contributed to the lower average rating for Involvement. On items comprising the Order

scale, more than half of the respondents indicated that tardiness or absence of students was a problem. Some respondents also indicated that student discipline was not administered consistently or appropriately.

However, the average SCI ratings for Yo! were higher than the national norms for secondary schools on all but the Involvement dimension, on which the means were virtually identical (3.60 for Yo! and 3.63 nationally). Notably, the overall mean rating of 3.93 was higher than the overall average of 3.73 nationally.

The interview responses from the principal, teachers, and students were largely favorable with respect to school climate. The principal noted that faculty “enjoy the academic freedom and flexibility for aligning the curriculum.” Faculty concurred, saying that the “unique structure of the charter school gives teachers more autonomy over what they teach because the curriculum is not dictated.” The theme of high expectations for students was also present throughout the interviews. The “students as scholars” philosophy exemplified the high expectations and contributed to the favorable school climate. A familial atmosphere of mutual caring and respect was also evident in the qualitative data. Students talked about teachers who cared about their learning, provided individual attention, and understood their needs. To shed light on the somewhat lower ratings on the Order dimension, the principal explained that student absenteeism and “dissonance” was due to the difference between their year round school calendar and that of Memphis City Schools. The teachers talked about discipline problems as minor infractions, and students noted that they felt more comfortable and safe at Yo! than at their previous schools.

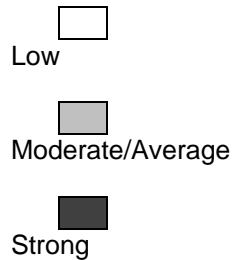
Summary findings across schools. Table 7 depicts the summary results based on SCI ratings and qualitative data collected for each of the seven charter schools. Overall, school climate is a clear strength of these charter schools. All schools were considered to be strong in school climate except SCA, which was rated as more moderate. This rating was based on the relatively low quantitative ratings on the Order dimension, which were inferior to national norms and decreased from Year 1 to Year 2, and associated qualitative responses. The interview responses confirmed this rating and suggest that student behavior and discipline problems, seemingly due in part to the highly at-risk student population enrolled, are adversely affecting school climate at this charter school.

With regard to trends across time, it should be noted that three of the four Cohort 1 schools showed decreases in SCI ratings. However, the overall mean ratings were still high in both in an absolute (above 4.00) and relative sense (higher than national norms). This trend of a gradual decrease in scores after the initial year is not necessarily surprising. As one principal so aptly argued, the staff moved from “total optimism” to “realistic optimism.”

Table 7
Summary Results for School Climate

School	Indicator	
	School Climate Ratings	Qualitative Responses
COSLA		
MAHS		
MASE		
SCA		
CityU*		
Star*		
Yo!*		

*First year schools



Question 4. To what degree and levels of quality are the goals and strategies of the charter school being implemented?

Data obtained from implementation benchmarks, the teacher questionnaire, teacher focus groups, principal interview, and classroom observations (SOM and RSCA) were used to address this evaluation question. To facilitate summarization of findings, the goals and strategies were divided into five major categories: curriculum, instruction, organization (leadership, governance), support (resources and professional development), and evaluation (accountability, assessment). See table 8 for summary findings.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. Substantial progress has been made in the achievement of benchmark goals at COSLA. The consensus of the leadership team was that all benchmarks were in the third and final phase of development. In most areas, the evidence gathered from other sources points to the achievement of these Phase III goals. However, evidence from these other sources also suggests that some benchmark indicators point more accurately to the second, intermediate phase of development. In the area of curriculum, COSLA continues to make progress in its implementation of the Success for All Program (SFA) in reading and math. According to the principal, the implementation of Science Exploration, and a fine arts program provided by the University of Memphis are in more preliminary stages of development. SOM and RSCA data indicate that instructional benchmarks may not be fully implemented. Cooperative learning, higher-order strategies, and teacher acting as a coach or facilitator were commonly observed, and these strategies are well aligned with the curricula and programs. Yet the percentage of time spent in direct instruction increased, and other student-centered strategies, most notably the use of technology, were rarely observed. In the remaining three categories of organization, support, and evaluation, notable progress was apparent and all data sources would indicate more advanced stages of goal implementation. Based on teacher perceptions, one exception to this trend may be the lack of support from state and local educational agencies.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. In contrast to last year, when the implementation of benchmark goals was in the initial phases of development, there has been notable progress toward full implementation of several goals. The consensus of the leadership team was that benchmarks and indicators related to evaluation and

assessment were in Phase III of development. The teacher questionnaire ratings pertaining to regular review of goals to evaluate progress was endorsed by over 90% of respondents. Assessment also pertains to assessing student performance, and MAHS has emphasized the development and use of various student assessments aligned with state standards.

Although the leadership team placed benchmarks and indicators related to curriculum and instruction at Phase III, data from other sources were somewhat contradictory. According to the open-ended responses from teachers and the principal, planning is still underway for adopting technology-based programs in math and science, and interdisciplinary, project-based learning. With regard to goals related to instructional strategies, SOM and RSCA data indicate that direct instruction and independent seatwork were most frequently observed and there was limited use of student-centered strategies. However, the incidence of student-centered did increase compared to the previous year.

According to the benchmark document, the implementation of goals directed at organization and support were either Phase II or approaching Phase III. Teacher responses shed some light on the implementation of benchmarks in these areas. Their responses indicated a lack of resources and support. For example, there were low levels of agreement on items pertaining to adequate resources for technology, planning time, professional development, special education, and educational materials. Low levels of endorsement were also observed on support from parents, local or state educational agencies, and other external partners. Teachers were more positive on

items pertaining to organization and leadership. Nearly all indicated that they understood the school mission and were adequately involved in school decision making.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. Improvements were made not only in achieving the strategic goals but also in the benchmark document itself. Benchmarks in the areas of curriculum, instruction, and organization were developed to better reflect essential goals and strategies at MASE. The leadership team judged most benchmark components to be in Phase II. Although the SOM and RSCA data indicated an increase in student-centered activities from the previous year, these were not consistently observed and occurred at rates lower than those reported in national samples. In contrast, technology use did increase to levels that exceeded national norms.

Other exceptions to the leadership's Phase II designation for benchmarks were observed for indicators related to curriculum. The leadership team judged the integration of subject areas at 9th grade, the elimination of remedial classes, and teachers' use of a variety of resources to augment the texts to be in the initial Phase I stage of development.

The only other indicator at Phase I pertained to common planning time, categorized by the leadership team as an organizational benchmark. Teacher responses suggest that lack of other resources, not planning time, may hamper progress toward full implementation of benchmarks related to support or organization. Whereas the large majority of teachers agreed that they were given sufficient planning time, there were lower levels of agreement about the adequacy of resources available for faculty and staff, professional development, and in particular, special education.

Because there were no benchmarks specifically pertaining to evaluation, it is more difficult to track progress in this area. However, nearly all teachers agreed that goals were reviewed regularly to evaluate progress. The revision of the benchmarks themselves is indicative of progress in this area, and the leadership team might consider adding benchmarks related to evaluation, assessment, and accountability in the next version of the document.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. The majority of benchmarks are in the initial stages of implementation. The inclusion of new benchmarks, the introduction of new programs and strategies, and the hiring of new faculty account for the Phase I designation for many of these benchmarks. Two of the benchmark indicators were considered to be in Phase III. The first was the adoption of the Reading Success curriculum as a proven and scientifically-based program, and its alignment with state standards and assessment of student needs. The principal describes this program as a success, evidenced by improvements in student reading performance and motivation. The teachers also describe this program as successful for phonics instruction or in the lowest grade levels, but not as effective for reading comprehension or in higher grade levels. They also noted improvements in students' reading skills and motivation. The other areas of curriculum are not fully implemented, and teachers agree that there is a lack of continuity because curriculum varies by individual teacher. This inconsistency may be why other benchmarks related to curriculum, including those pertaining to Reading Success, were considered to be Phase I or II.

The second benchmark indicator deemed to be in Phase III was related to organization. More specifically, the indicator states that the leadership team functions as

the instructional leaders with the instructional staff, and that instructional staff have complete knowledge of the program and can articulate program needs. The teacher questionnaire data do not entirely support the achievement of this benchmark as it relates to shared decision-making. That is, only 20% of respondents agreed that teachers are adequately involved in school decision-making. On the other hand, nearly all teachers agreed that they had a thorough understanding of the school's mission. A very similar benchmark indicator related to the leadership team was found under the support criterion, and was rated to be in Phase II. This suggests that the administrative team and staff meet regularly to discuss the needs of the school. It may be that the team meets regularly, but that teachers are not actively involved in the decision-making. As already noted, the consensus of the leadership team was that the remaining benchmarks in other categories were at the first stage of implementation, and data available from additional sources support this self-assessment.

City University School of the Liberal Arts. The benchmark document indicates that all criteria were in the third and final phase of development. This is surprising given that CityU has completed only one year of operation. Part of the explanation for why they seemed to have made such quick progress rests with the benchmarks themselves. Some of the indicators are difficult to measure or objectively assess. For example, the indicator for Phase III under external support and assistance states that "all decisions made by personnel at CityU are in the best interest of our scholars and programs." The evidence for this indicator includes list of recommendations and feedback from the president, professors, parents, and scholars. Thus, some benchmark indicators might be revised and better aligned with more objective evidence and written with more

distinct gradations across Phases, culminating in more challenging long-term goals. In fact, the indicator related to measurable goals and benchmarks specifies that the benchmark document will be updated on a regular basis. Although this benchmark indicator might be better addressed at an earlier phase, it should facilitate progress in evaluation and program improvement.

Other benchmark indicators were easier to evaluate and could be informed by additional sources to help determine whether goals and strategies described in the benchmark document have been achieved at more advanced levels. The indicator for the instructional benchmark specifies the use of challenging, research-based teaching strategies for the majority of the instructional day in all core classes. Higher-level feedback and questioning were observed at rates comparable to the national sample, but the use of student-centered strategies, such as technology use or project-based learning, was not observed. Direct instruction was used the majority of the time. In terms of curriculum, the principal contends that the curriculum programs are fully implemented and aligned with state standards. In contrast, teachers suggested a need to improve the curriculum.

Teacher survey responses illustrate goal achievement as it relates to organization and support. Three-fourths of the teachers did agree that they were adequately involved in school decision-making, and commented that they were “actively involved in the day-to-day running of the school.” Survey responses indicated a lack of support from the state and external partners as well as inadequate resources for educational materials, technology, and special education. Evidence for parental support was reflected in high ratings on related questionnaire items and positive comments from

teacher and principal interviews. In general, while several benchmarks do appear deserving of the Phase III ratings awarded by the leadership team, others appear to be at more developing levels. A more conservative orientation in future evaluations should be beneficial in establishing true attainments and areas of need.

Star Academy. The consensus of the leadership team is that the implementation of goals and strategies are in Phases II and III of development. Indicators for the curriculum benchmarks were designated as Phase III, fully implemented, and aligned with state standards. The specific program identified for math and reading was McMillan McGraw Hill that entails integration across content areas and project-based learning. Though the principal judges the curriculum as fully implemented and successful, teachers seemed more ambivalent. Comments from the focus group suggest that progress in curriculum implementation still needs to be made in order to be better aligned with TCAP.

In the area of instruction, we would expect to see the strategies emphasized in the curriculum during classroom observations. Project-based learning was occasionally observed but interdisciplinary learning was rarely observed. Other student-centered and higher-order strategies were more commonly employed.

The indicators for benchmarks related to organization and support were considered to be in Phase II, and survey data support this ranking. Teachers were very positive about the resources, support from most sources, and their involvement in decision-making. The exception was low levels of agreement to the item about assistance from external partners. Goals related to evaluation could be improved by revising the document to include benchmarks related to evaluation, assessment, and

accountability as well as more benchmarks in the category of support. All teachers did agree that goals were regularly reviewed to evaluate progress.

Yo! Academy. Given that Yo! Academy is in its first year of operation, it is not surprising that most benchmark indicators were considered to be in the initial phase of development. The exceptions were goals pertaining to curriculum, instruction, and one area of support, which were designated as Phase II. However, the benchmark document was not very specific about what curricula or instructional strategies were targeted. The document identifies an “art infused, integrated curriculum” only under the Phase III indicator. The principal also describes the goals of integrating arts into the general curriculum and adopting specialty art classes. The teachers commented that there was no specific instructional model, but interdisciplinary “programs” or themes were implemented. SOM and RSCA data reflected little use of subject area integration and no project-based learning, which would be expected given the curricular focus. More traditional pedagogical strategies were most frequently observed.

The benchmark for support, also judged to be at Phase II, was indicated by a common understanding and knowledge of the mission and goals of the school. The large majority of teachers agreed that they had a thorough understanding of the school's mission and supported the school's educational program. Evidence for initial stages of development for other goals and benchmarks were also reflected in teacher questionnaire responses. There were low levels of agreement on several items related to support and organization. Organization, especially leadership, was not favorably viewed by all teachers. Less than half of the teachers agreed that they were adequately involved in decision-making. In their open-ended responses, they further described a

lack of leadership and the “nepotism” that hampered effective decision-making and organization. As was the case with the other charter schools in their first year of operation, progress toward achieving goals related to evaluation might begin with improvement of the benchmark document itself.

Summary findings across schools. Table 8 provides the summary ratings for the level of implementation of goals and strategies in five broad areas. Most schools were rated as moderate on their implementation of goals and strategies in the category of curriculum. COSLA seems to have made the most progress in this category. Not unexpectedly, two of the newest charter schools (CityU and Yo!) were in very initial stages of curriculum implementation. Although some school leadership teams considered themselves to have made more progress in the implementation of benchmarks related to instruction, the data did not consistently support this designation. Again, all charter schools in their first year of operation were rated as “beginning” this area. SCA was also rated as “beginning” in the implementation of instructional goals due to contradictory evidence from the teachers, suggesting low levels of implementation and inconsistency across classrooms.

Most charter schools were rated to be lower in the implementation of support goals. This rating was partially based on the school’s own designations and teacher questionnaire data suggesting a lack of support and resources in these schools. COSLA and Star were both rated as strong in this category, whereas CityU received a moderate rating. The achievement of organizational goals was evaluated to be moderate in all but one school (Yo!). Finally, there was more variation in the ratings for the implementation of goals and strategies related to evaluation. COSLA and MAHS,

both second year schools, were considered to be strong in this category, whereas MASE and STAR received moderate ratings. The weak rating of the three other charter schools (two of them new) was partially due to lack of benchmarks in this area or the need to improve the benchmark document to identify and facilitate evaluation.

Table 8
Summary Ratings for Implementation of Goals and Strategies

School	Indicator				
	Curriculum	Instruction	Support	Organization	Evaluation
COSLA	Strong	Moderate	Strong	Moderate	Strong
MAHS	Moderate	Moderate	Beginning	Moderate	Strong
MASE	Moderate	Moderate	Beginning	Moderate	Moderate
SCA	Moderate	Beginning	Beginning	Moderate	Beginning
CityU*	Beginning	Beginning	Moderate	Moderate	Beginning
Star*	Moderate	Beginning	Strong	Moderate	Moderate
Yo!*	Beginning	Beginning	Beginning	Beginning	Beginning

*First year schools

-  Beginning
-  Moderate
-  Strong

Question 5. What are teacher reactions to and experiences in the charter school? What are the adequacy and quality of professional development and resources?

The Charter School Teacher Questionnaire (CSTQ) and teacher focus group data were used to address teachers' reactions to and experiences in the charter school,

including their responses targeting professional development and resources. The responses were organized into four categories. The first category (Program/Mission) encompassed two broad areas: teachers' understanding of the mission and support of the educational program, and their perceptions that the program would result in successful student outcomes. The second category was professional development. The third category, resources, included whether teachers had adequate planning time, educational materials, technology, and a sufficient number of faculty and staff. The fourth and final category was support from the community, parents, and state and local educational agencies. See table 9 for summary findings.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. COSLA teachers were unanimously positive in their ratings of indicators related to the school's program and mission and their professional development. There was 100% agreement on items pertaining to these areas, and on most items there was an increase in percentages of agreement from the previous year. Teacher open-ended responses confirmed this finding. The only suggestion related to professional development was that new teacher orientation could be improved. Perceptions about the adequacy of resources were largely favorable and showed little change from the previous year. The only resource perceived to be inadequate was the ability to address the needs of children with special needs. In contrast to the ratings obtained in the previous year, a substantially higher percentage of teachers considered this problematic. There were no teacher comments that shed light on this trend. Perceptions of support from parents and external partners were evidenced by unanimous agreement with associated questionnaire items. Open-ended comments were also laudatory regarding parent support. Teacher perceptions of

support from the State Department and local educational agency or school district were more mixed. Although only half of the teachers agreed that they received effective support from these agencies, this percentage does represent an increase from the previous year.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. The data reflected overwhelming teacher support for the school's mission, educational programs, and beliefs that the program is linked to positive student outcomes. The ratings were consistently high across years. In contrast, positive ratings declined on the item pertaining to professional development, but the majority of respondents still agreed that professional development was adequate. One teacher commented that more staff development was needed. Teacher ratings further indicated the need for more resources for planning time, educational materials, technology, and special education. These perceptions were less favorable than in the previous year. The largest decline, from 100 to 55 percent agreement, was observed for the availability of educational materials. Many of these needs were addressed in the open-ended comments, including the need for their own building and facilities. There were also notably less favorable perceptions of support from local and state educational agencies, external partners, and parents. For example, no teachers agreed that they received effective assistance from the local educational agencies; they tended to be neutral in their ratings of this item. Even though there was near unanimous agreement that parents had substantial opportunities to participate in their children's education, few agreed that that they were active participants. The open-ended comments regarding support were sparse and somewhat mixed.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. Teachers clearly support the mission and educational program of MASE. This enthusiasm for the mission and school was apparent not only in the questionnaire ratings but also in teacher interview responses. Even though more than half of teachers agreed that they had received adequate professional development, this was a decrease from nearly 90% in the previous year. The open-ended comments indicated that the long work hours made it difficult to engage in professional development opportunities during the academic year. The findings with respect to resources were mixed. Positive perceptions were indicated in the areas of planning time, educational materials, and technology. On the item concerning sufficiency of planning time, the percentage of respondents indicating agreement increased from 0 to 80 percent. In contrast, low and declining levels of agreement were observed for having a sufficient number of faculty and staff and adequately addressing requirements of special needs students. Teacher open-ended responses revealed that there was no specialist to work with special needs children and teacher turnover has been problematic because the number of staff is so small. More generally, the lack of support personnel and the insufficient number of administrators were noted. Teachers' perceptions of support were also mixed. Support from parents and external partners was considered stronger than support from state and local education agencies. The percentage of teachers who agreed that they received effective assistance from the state did increase, whereas it remained constant for school district support.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. The teacher questionnaire ratings reflected understanding of the mission, support for the program, and belief that the program

promotes student success. Even though there were high ratings on the item pertaining to professional development, the teacher focus group data suggested that professional development was inadequate at SCA. Teachers talked about the need for professional development related to behavior management due to discipline problems in their school. They contended that they were left “on their own” to find training, and it was not readily available from the district. High and increasing levels of agreement were observed for three areas of support--planning time, educational materials, and technology. Low and declining levels of support were shown for having a sufficient number of faculty and staff and addressing the requirement of special needs students. Problems with the behavior of special needs students and discipline were recurring themes in teachers’ open-ended comments. Perceptions of support were unfavorable in nearly all areas, including the assistance from the state and local educational agencies and the active participation of parents. There was more perceived support from external partners but this area still showed a substantial drop from the previous year.

City University School of Liberal Arts. In the category of support for the program and mission, teachers’ reactions were very favorable. They concurred that they had a thorough understanding of the school’s mission, supported the educational program, and were confident that the program was linked to positive student outcomes. A pattern of mixed results was evident in the remaining categories. Although three-quarters of the teachers agreed that they received adequate professional development, the teacher focus group data indicated that it was all provided in-house or was more informal in nature. They were planning external professional development sessions, but had not received any training from the school district. Teachers suggested networking with

other teachers by establishing a consortium with other charter schools. Whereas there were high levels of agreement on items related to having adequate planning time and sufficient faculty and staff, there was less agreement that resources related to technology, educational materials, and special education were available. Teacher comments suggested that some educational and technological resources were provided later in the academic term. Two areas of support were perceived as strong -- effective assistance from the local educational agency and active parental involvement and support. Rates of agreement were lower on two items reflecting effective assistance from external partners and from the State Department of Education. However, the teacher focus group data indicated that community support was "excellent", suggesting some variation in perceptions of support among different types of external partners (e.g., community groups versus businesses).

Star Academy. There was unanimous agreement on all items indicative of understanding the school's mission, supporting the school's educational program, and believing in the positive impact of the program on various student outcomes. Much of the open-ended data also reflected these themes. With respect to professional development, all teachers agreed that it was adequate to implement the educational program. In the focus group, teachers described a variety of professional development opportunities and the tone was positive. There were also high ratings observed across all categories of resources and support, with the exception of effective assistance from external partners. However, the open-ended comments were somewhat contradictory in these areas. Teachers identified community, business support, and quality parental involvement as areas in need of improvement. A recurring complaint was the lack of

support and resources from the school district. In addition, the teachers argued that there was a need for more space to accommodate their growing school.

Yo! Academy. Teacher questionnaire ratings indicated positive teacher reactions in only the support for the mission and educational program category. On one component of this category, the program's impact on student achievement was viewed more equivocally, with a little more than half of teachers endorsing this item. Teachers were more positive with respect to the program's impact on students' state assessment outcomes and encouraging high expectations for their work. A high regard for students and expectations for their success was confirmed in teachers' open-ended comments. Less than 60% of teachers indicated that they received adequate professional development to support the educational program. Teachers described professional development opportunities as "pretty general" and not covering new information. The only resource that most teachers agreed to be sufficient was planning time. The other types of resources did not receive strong endorsements. Focus group responses revealed that laptop computers were "withdrawn" midyear and problems with instruction and textbook selection ensued. Others teacher said there were not enough textbooks, calculators, or overhead projectors. The lack of resources more generally was also addressed. Less than half of teachers agreed that assistance from any source was effective. The lowest ratings were obtained for the item concerning whether effective assistance was received by the local educational agency. However, in the focus group, community and parental support was favorably evaluated. Some open-ended comments pointed to the lack of support from school leadership and argued that it was inconsistent and unfair due to favoritism toward particular individuals or departments.

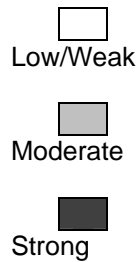
Summary findings across schools. The summary ratings indicate that teachers' reactions were very positive with respect to the school mission or educational program (see Table 9). All charter schools were rated as strong in this category. There was more variation in the ratings for the professional development category. Teachers' questionnaire ratings and open-ended comments both supported the strong rating for COSLA and Star. The moderate ratings for four of the charter schools (MAHS, MASE, SCA and CityU) were based on the contradiction in findings between questionnaire ratings and open-ended comments. Yo! was the only school rated as weak in this category due to relatively low ratings and associated teacher comments.

With respect to resources, COSLA was the only charter school to receive a strong rating in this category due to consistently high ratings across the four rating scale items targeting resources and favorable open-ended responses. Low ratings on resource items and less positive teacher comments accounted for weak ratings for MAHS and Yo!. The remaining charter schools were considered as moderate in this category due to inconsistent ratings on items comprising the support categories. No charter school was considered to be strong in the category of support. Moderate ratings (COSLA, MASE, CityU, and Star) resulted from high ratings on some questionnaire items but low ratings on others, or from conflicting trends noted in the open-ended data. Low ratings (MAHS, SCA, and Yo!) were based on the lower mean ratings across most support items augmented by less favorable open-ended comments.

Table 9
Summary Ratings for Teachers' Reactions

School	Indicator			
	Program/ mission	Professional development	Resources	Support
COSLA	Strong	Strong	Strong	Moderate
MAHS	Strong	Moderate	Low/Weak	Low/Weak
MASE	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
SCA	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Low/Weak
CityU*	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Star*	Strong	Strong	Moderate	Moderate
Yo!*	Strong	Low/Weak	Low/Weak	Low/Weak

*First year schools



Question 6. What are parent (caregiver) reactions to and experiences with the charter school?

To address this final evaluation question, we relied primarily on quantitative and qualitative data collected on the parent questionnaire. It should be noted, however, that the return rate for parent questionnaires was relatively low, as normally occurs in schools serving low socioeconomic areas; thus the sample data may not be generalizable to the parent populations at the respective schools. By dividing the number of students enrolled by the number of parent respondents, we estimated that the response rates were 58% at COSLA, 48% at MAHS, 69% at MASE, 53% at SCA,

9% at CityU, 53% at Star, and 18% at Yo!. Clearly, the response rates at CityU ($n=11$) and Yo! ($n=24$) were extremely low, but further reflect the added difficulty of engaging parents of high school students in school-based activities. The questionnaire results were augmented by interview, benchmark, and observation data. For ease of expression, we refer to “parents,” but our use of this term also encompasses caregivers and guardians. The findings are organized into two categories: parent satisfaction and parent involvement.

Circles of Success Learning Academy. Parent questionnaire data indicated continued satisfaction on nearly all indicators. These high rates of agreement were consistent across years. The only item that received a low rating concerned the adequacy of transportation services. On the open-ended questions, parent comments were overwhelmingly laudatory, confirming the rating scale data. They were particularly impressed with the principal’s vision and leadership and the teachers’ high expectations and caring for their children as individuals. They further appreciated the low student-to-teacher ratio and the positive, nurturing school climate. In terms of improvements, the suggestions pertained primarily to resources, especially the facilities. They wanted COSLA to have its own building and resources such as a physical education program, musical instruments, uniforms, technology, and the availability of more nutritious foods.

Information gathered from various data sources all point to a high level of parent involvement as COSLA. Teachers unanimously agreed with the questionnaire item stating that parents were active partners with the school. In open-ended comments, teachers cited this involvement as one of the most successful aspects of their charter school. Parents are “required” to volunteer 20 hours of their time to the school.

Teachers commented that most fulfill this requirement and even exceed it. The benchmark data further indicates that 90 percent of parents have logged a minimum of 20 volunteer hours. Although SOM data revealed parent or community involvement in learning activities rarely occurred, this finding may not be contradictory. That is, SOM only records strategy usage that is observed within the given classroom or its immediate vicinity. Parent involvement elsewhere in the school, such as on the grounds, the auditorium, or a parent room, would not be noted.

Memphis Academy of Health Sciences. Consistently high ratings on nearly all questionnaire items indicate high levels of parent satisfaction at MAHS. When compared to the ratings observed in the previous year, the percentages of agreement were similarly favorable, which is impressive since nearly twice as many parents responded in the second year (86 versus 48). Some decreases in percentages of agreement were observed on items related to whether the physical surroundings were attractive and well maintained, yet the large majority of parents still endorsed these items. Only about 50% of parents agreed that transportation services are adequate, but this was still an increase from the previous year. Parents' open-ended comments supported the high rates of satisfaction. When asked about the school's strengths, most parents cited the academically challenging curriculum, the small student-to-teacher ratios, high expectations of students, principal leadership, and teacher quality. In response to suggestions for improvement, the most frequently occurring response was the need for their own school building that would provide more space to facilitate the adoption of physical education, sports, science labs, and performing arts. Parents

also thought that communication, discipline, and attitudes of some teachers could be improved.

In contrast, the evidence suggests that parental involvement was not as high as parents satisfaction. Questionnaire data reveals a sharp decline in the percentage of teachers who agree that parents are active participants in the school (from 86 percent in the first year to 36 percent in the second). One teacher said that the participation of parents in the areas of academics and discipline needed improvement. Parental involvement was not specifically addressed in the principal or teacher focus groups, but students did mention that parents assisted with fund-raising efforts, communicated with the principal, and “helped out at school.” According to the benchmark document, parental involvement is at Phase II with indicators that emphasize support of school mission and goals as well as regularly held and well-attended parent meetings. More active parent involvement was indicated in the next phase of development. Parent or community involvement was not observed in or within the vicinity of the visited classrooms during SOM observations.

Memphis Academy of Science and Engineering. Parents were very satisfied with the educational program at MASE. They were also satisfied with the school leadership, safety, discipline, and their own treatment in terms of being respected and encouraged to stay involved with the school. High rates of endorsement for these areas were consistent across years. There was some decline in the percentages of parents who agreed that they were regularly informed about their child’s progress and that teachers were readily available. They did not believe that transportation services were adequate in either year. Most parents cited the challenging curriculum, leadership, and teachers

as strengths of the school. Other themes included the high expectations for students, school safety, and discipline. In reference to areas in need of improvement, most responses centered on transportation and parking problems, the lack of communication between parents and teachers, school hours, and the need for extracurricular activities.

Evidence from other sources suggests moderate rates of parental involvement. Almost three-fourths (70%) of teachers agree that parents are active partners with the school, but this figure represents a decline from almost 90% agreement in the previous year. There was also no evidence of parent involvement in the classroom (a rarity in high schools) based on SOM data. There were no benchmarks specific to parental involvement. According to both principal and teacher interview responses, parents have remained very involved in the school and, in fact, are more involved than they were last year. Students also described parent involvement as volunteers and counselors. Part of the explanation for their involvement appears to be the required hours of time specified in their contract agreement. Also, parent involvement in high schools compared to lower levels is more likely to be “behind the scenes” (e.g., fundraising, helping with special events) than in the classrooms or everyday instructional activities.

Smithson-Craighead Academy. The questionnaire findings show that levels of parent satisfaction have remained consistently high across items and years. The percentages of agreement ranged from low of 72% on the desirability of charter versus regular schools to a high of 90% on whether they were treated respectfully and whether the curriculum was appropriate. Nearly all percentages of agreement were well above 80%. The only notable decrease in scores was observed for the item on whether parents regularly receive information on their child’s progress. The dominant theme to

emerge from parent comments about the school's strengths was their appreciation of the teachers. Other strengths noted were smaller class sizes, quality curricula, and an atmosphere of caring and concern for students. Responses to areas in need of improvement were varied. Many parents said "nothing" needed improvement. Others suggested more discipline, parent participation, and parent teacher conferences. It was not entirely clear whether the call for more parent participation referred to themselves or to other parents.

As noted by the parents themselves, levels of parental involvement could be improved at SCA. The benchmark document indicates that the goal for community and parent involvement is in its initial phase. The teacher questionnaire data indicated only 20% agreement that parents were active partners with the school. However, some community or parent participation was observed during classroom observations, but the principal's interview responses suggested that community members were more likely than parents to participate in school activities. She stated that parental involvement "started out with a bang, then fizzled," perhaps due to transportation problems. She further described future plans to increase involvement, including hiring a full-time after-school director dedicated to increasing parent participation. During the teacher focus group, one participant stated that parents do not feel comfortable coming to school due to difficulties at home. Students vaguely referenced parent participation by saying they "sometimes come to help with things" and "they tutor and stuff like that."

City University School of Liberal Arts. As previously noted, CityU had an extremely low response rate, but the parents that did respond were very satisfied. There was unanimous agreement on several items, and 80-90 percent agreement on

others. The only two items with low agreement rates concerned the attractiveness of classrooms and hallways, and the adequacy of transportation services. In open-ended comments, parents cited the challenging academic program and the small class sizes that afforded individual student attention as strengths. The only recurring topics in parent suggestions for school improvement were to include extracurricular activities and strive for less teacher turnover.

The evidence for parent involvement is somewhat contradictory, but on the whole suggests high levels of involvement, especially for a high school. The benchmark for parental involvement was rated as being at the third and final phase of development. SOM data did not indicate any community or parental participation during classroom observations, but such is not frequent in secondary education. The principal stated that there was a “slight decrease in parent” involvement from the first to the second semester due to fewer workshops offered. However, he still characterized parents as involved and supportive, partly due to their contractual obligation to attend at least four parent conferences annually. Teachers provided evidence to support parent involvement. Three-fourths of teachers agreed that parents were active partners with the school. In their focus group, teachers described parent involvement as strong though “not 100 percent.” Interviewed students commented that parents volunteered for a variety of activities and came to simply visit.

Star Academy. Rating scale data indicated very high levels of satisfaction on all parent questionnaire items. The percentages of agreement ranged from 87% agreement for transportation adequacy to 100% agreement on several items. Parent open-ended comments were also very positive. Among the numerous strengths noted

were a challenging curriculum, low student-to-teacher ratios, teacher dedication, principal leadership, parental involvement, and a safe, welcoming atmosphere. Parents identified very few areas in need of improvement. The only recurring suggestion was to add more grade levels at Star.

There is also evidence for moderate levels of parental involvement. The benchmark data places parental support and involvement at Phase II, specifying that about three-quarters of parents are volunteering and participating at the school. Ratings on the teacher questionnaire showed about 70% agreement with the item that parents are active partners with the school. The principal describes efforts to involve and inform parents but does not address the success of these efforts. Teachers, on the other hand, stated that parent participation “fizzled out” toward the end of the year. Yet they still consider parental attendance at programs as “good” and say that parental involvement at Star is much better than it was at their previous schools. Because students receive a grade for parental involvement, they may define it more broadly to include academic help. Several students commented that their parents helped them with their homework and to prepare for tests. SOM data indicated that parent or community involvement in the classroom was rarely observed.

Yo! Academy. Very high rates of parental satisfaction were observed for Yo! Academy. The only item not as strongly endorsed was whether classrooms and hallways were attractive (67% agreement). The percentages of agreement for the remaining items ranged from 83 to 100 percent. The qualitative parent data supported these high ratings. Parents appreciated the low student-to-teacher ratios, the strong curriculum, teacher dedication, and a climate of high expectations for students. In

reference to areas in need of improvement, most parents suggested more parent involvement and communication, and more activities and classes.

The leadership team considered the benchmark targeting parent and community involvement to be in Phase I, and other data confirm this designation. The SOM findings, like those for many secondary schools, did not reveal any parent or community participation in the classrooms. Teacher questionnaire data revealed that only 44% of respondents agreed that parents were active partners with the school. In the focus group, however, teachers said that parents were supportive and attended PTA meetings. They estimated that about 25% of the parents attended the last meeting. Teachers further described their efforts to inform and involve parents in school activities.

The principal noted that more parental support was needed. She experienced some success promoting their involvement by scheduling parent meetings in conjunction with student performances. Students also said that parents could be more active in the school and suggested a parent-teacher support group.

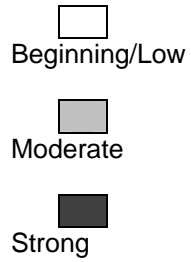
Summary findings across schools. Parent satisfaction was quite strong in all charter schools (See Table 10). Clearly, the parents had very positive reactions to these schools. Both parent rating scale data and their open-ended responses supported these findings. Ratings in the category of involvement were more varied. COSLA and CityU were considered to be strong in this category because all or most data sources confirmed more advanced levels of involvement and rates of participation. The fact that both of these schools have parent contracts requiring their participation most likely accounts for these high levels of involvement. The moderate ratings for MASE and Star signaled contradictory evidence across data sources. The lower ratings

for MAHS, SCA, and Yo! resulted from consistently low indicators of parent participation and benchmarks suggesting achievement of this goal at more preliminary stages.

Table 10
Summary Results for Parental Satisfaction and Involvement

School	Satisfaction	Involvement
COSLA	Strong	Strong
MAHS	Strong	Beginning/Low
MASE	Strong	Moderate
SCA	Strong	Beginning/Low
CityU*	Strong	Strong
Star*	Strong	Moderate
Yo!*	Strong	Beginning/Low

*First year school



Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions by Evaluation Question

The present study used a variety of data sources to address the evaluation questions guiding the second-year evaluation of Tennessee charter schools. The first cohort of four schools was initiated in the 2003-04 school year and has completed its second year of operation. The second cohort of three schools began operating in the 2004-05 school year and has completed its first year.

In response to the evaluation question that focused on instructional strategies, we found that traditional, direct instruction remained the dominant pedagogical practice across all charter schools. The rates were comparable to national norms in many cases, but still reflect limited success by the schools to implement the more motivating and progressive pedagogy described in benchmarks and instructional plans, or to take advantage of some of the unique conditions afforded by their charter status. That is, advantages of the charter schools cited by respondent groups and schools were smaller class sizes and more challenging instruction and curriculum. One might expect therefore to observe more student-centered, higher-order strategies implemented in these types of instructional environments. This expectation was reinforced by the schools' own benchmarks in the areas of curriculum and instruction that comprised their school improvement plans. Although there were notable increases in these types of strategies for some second cohort schools, the rates were still low to moderate overall. RSCA data revealed that even when student-centered activities and technology usage was observed, their level of application was typically limited. Given the positive first-year achievement results (Ross et al., 2005), however, the traditional teaching methods

used appear to have been successful initially, but may not sustain positive effects as teaching staffs (perhaps with less talented presenters/lecturers than the original teachers) are expanded.

The next evaluation question addressed school climate in the charter schools. As was reported last year, the findings reveal school climate to be a definite strength of these charter schools. Based on both quantitative and qualitative data, all but one (SCA) of the seven charter schools were rated as having a strong school climate. Further, on nearly all dimensions, the SCI ratings obtained for the charter schools were higher than national norms. Even though the results compared favorably to national norms, the decrease in SCI scores for three of the four schools in their second year of operation was noteworthy and should be monitored. Consistent decreases in scores were observed for the Order dimension in particular. Responses to indicators of Order were also less positive for Yo!, a second cohort school. It appears that student discipline problems, absenteeism, and inconsistent rule enforcement may be adversely impacting climate at these schools. Nevertheless, Order represents only one of seven dimensions of school climate. Overall, the evidence points to a very favorable climate in the charter schools.

Another question addressed the degree and level of quality with which the goals and strategies of the charter school were implemented. Although there was variation in the extent to which the goals and strategies were implemented, some patterns were detected. Not unexpectedly, the levels of benchmark implementation were more advanced among schools in their second year of operation compared to schools in their first year. However, the levels of implementation across most indicators were either the

first or second phase of development for all schools and years. Individual differences among schools notwithstanding, implementation tended to be moderate to strong in the areas of curriculum, organization, and evaluation. Implementation was weaker in the instruction and support areas. Yet another trend was for the school leadership teams to overestimate the extent of progress they had made in the implementation of benchmark goals and strategies. Given that schools are in their initial years of operation, we would not expect all goals and strategies to be fully implemented. In many cases, this tendency to overestimate progress signals a need to revise the benchmark document and become more comfortable with formative evaluation as a means for accurately assessing status and guiding improvement planning.

In response to the question addressing teacher reactions and experiences with charter schools, we found that teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the school's mission and program, but were less enthusiastic about available resources and support. Among first cohort schools, teacher ratings were lower in the areas of resources and support than they had been in the previous year. Responses in all but one (Star) of the seven schools suggested deficiencies in meeting the requirements of special needs students. It may be reasonably argued that this limitation is also related to organization or support, but it was often coupled with the perception of not having sufficient faculty and staff. In a smaller number of schools, resources (e.g., educational materials, technology) were perceived to be insufficient. In general, teachers were less likely to agree that they received adequate assistance from state and local educational agencies, and in some cases external partners. Evidence for adequate professional development was moderate to strong in all but one school (Yo!).

The final evaluation question focused on parent reactions to the charter school, and they were very favorable. Parent satisfaction is another definite strength of the charter schools. The areas for which they expressed less satisfaction were often those related to the physical building, facilities, surroundings, transportation, and lack of additional extracurricular activities such as sports programs. These limitations are more difficult for schools to address because they require substantial resources. In contrast to the uniformly high rates of parental satisfaction, levels of parental involvement were more modest and varied across schools. In some schools, parent involvement was considered to be parent support or communication rather than active, consistent participation in the educational program and more academically-related activities. Surprisingly, the level and extent of parent participation did not seem to differ depending on whether the school was in its first or second year of operation. The distribution of strong, moderate, and weak ratings was similar for first and second cohort schools.

These conclusions should be tempered with the recognition of the limitations associated with the evaluation data. Small sample sizes and low response rates diminish the generalizability of findings. However, across the two years, the SOM results tended to be fairly consistent, and showed some progress for schools in targeted areas (e.g., classroom technology usage at MASE). When making comparisons between years for the first cohort schools, the fact that there were different groups of respondents may have contributed to the changing trends across time. Finally, we based some results on the benchmark documents, which varied in quality and were prepared by the leadership team, not the evaluators. Every effort was made to base the findings on multiple data sources.

Recommendations

Based on the overall findings, the following recommendations apply to the charter schools as a group and not necessarily to individual schools. Due to a consistent pattern of findings across years, the recommendations are similar to those presented in the first year report. The recommendations specific to each school can be found in the individual school reports.

First, charter schools could more closely align instructional practices with their school improvement plans and incorporate more research-based practices linked with student achievement outcomes. Many of the research-based practices call for the implementation of more student-centered strategies that entail higher-order thinking and technology integration. That is not to say that direct instruction has no place in classrooms, but rather a better balance among a variety of effective pedagogical practices might be achieved. The small classroom environment, viewed as a strength of charter schools in this study, would seem to be especially conducive for striking this balance.

Second, even though school climate was a clear strength of the charter schools, order and discipline could be improved at some schools. School leadership teams may want to re-evaluate policies related to student conduct, discipline procedures, and attendance policies. Benchmark indicators targeting order might be developed to better formalize strategies to improve this dimension of climate. The findings on lack of resources to address the requirements of special needs students may have negatively impacted perceptions of order. Perhaps, better addressing the needs of these students would also improve school climate as it relates to an orderly environment. Another

strategy might include a closer partnership with parents in supporting appropriate behaviors and rules of conduct.

Third, benchmark documents need to be modified to better align with objective indicators and available data. Some improvement in attaining benchmarks was noted among first cohort schools, and the leadership teams should be applauded for their efforts. Benchmark documents are intended to be a dynamic tool used for school improvement. Planning, evaluation, and ultimately improvement can be facilitated by a sound, ambitious, and long-range benchmark document. Results from this report, independent classroom observations, and student outcome data exemplify some of the evidence that might be provided to document goal attainment.

Fourth, schools should make improvements in meeting the requirements of special needs students. As noted earlier, not meeting the needs of these students may contribute to the less orderly climate characterizing some schools. Additional resources might be earmarked to hire extra staff and faculty with expertise in special education. Policies and procedures related to addressing these needs might be developed or reviewed.

Efforts to continue developing supportive, collaborative relationship with the school district and external partners should continue. The data indicate some progress in this area but the educational reform literature clearly emphasizes the importance to the sustainability of school change of having close connections to the parent school district. Strategies include having more open channels of communication and holding meetings to clarify policies, procedures, and available resources. Furthermore, representatives of charter schools should continue to seek the support and assistance

of various external partners. Publicity and notices in the form of newsletters, invitations to school functions, and community events might be used in conjunction with direct requests for assistance to promote more involvement from businesses, community groups, colleges, and parents.

The final recommendation is to increase active parent involvement or participation. Schools that had the highest levels of parent involvement also had formal contracts of agreement with parents specifying the minimum number of hours of participation required. Furthermore, the definition and types of parental involvement might be reconsidered. In some school improvement plans, involvement translates into support for and understanding of the mission and educational program. In others, it specifies more active participation in parent organizations, school activities, and the provision of academic support for students. Both are necessary and important, and both might be included on benchmark documents that identify more specific strategies used to encourage involvement coupled with more objective evidence to indicate their effectiveness.

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Appendix A

School Observation Measure (SOM) Data Summary

National Norms for Elementary Schools

Number of School Observation Visits for

N = 688

Note: One school observation visit equals approximately 10 individual classroom visits.

The extent to which each of the following was used or present in the school...	Percent None	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
<i>Instructional Orientation</i>					
Direct instruction (lecture)	3.0	10.4	23.7	34.8	28.1
Team teaching	49.8	32.3	11.9	5.6	0.4
Cooperative/collaborative learning	38.1	41.8	13.1	5.2	1.9
Individual tutoring (teacher, peer, aide, adult volunteer)	44.6	31.8	16.1	5.2	2.2
<i>Classroom Organization</i>					
Ability groups	36.3	22.5	15.7	12.7	12.7
Multi-age grouping	70.1	15.7	7.5	4.1	2.6
Work centers (for individuals or groups)	27.3	27.7	26.2	15.4	3.4
<i>Instructional Strategies</i>					
Higher-level instructional feedback (written or verbal) to enhance student learning	28.0	36.2	26.5	7.1	2.2
Integration of subject areas (interdisciplinary/thematic units)	58.3	30.7	7.6	3.0	0.4
Project-based learning	75.4	15.8	5.0	3.8	0.0
Use of higher-level questioning strategies	19.5	32.7	32.0	12.4	3.4
Teacher acting as a coach/facilitator	7.1	20.2	28.5	34.5	9.7
Parent/community involvement in learning activities	75.3	18.4	6.0	0.4	0.0
<i>Student Activities</i>					
Independent seatwork (self-paced worksheets, individual assignments)	4.1	13.7	39.6	31.1	11.5
Experiential, hands-on learning	30.5	36.4	24.9	6.3	1.9
Systematic individual instruction (differential assignments geared to individual needs)	64.9	26.5	5.6	2.2	0.7
Sustained writing/composition (self-selected or teacher-generated topics)	56.0	32.8	7.8	2.2	1.1
Sustained reading	43.3	31.9	18.5	4.1	2.2
Independent inquiry/research on the part of students	82.8	13.1	2.6	1.5	0.0
Student discussion	46.0	24.5	16.6	9.1	3.8

School Observation Measure (SOM) Data Summary, continued

National Norms for Elementary Schools

The extent to which each of the following was used or present in the school...	Percent None	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
<i>Technology Use</i>					
Computer for instructional delivery (e.g. CAI, drill & practice)	35.2	37.1	20.6	6.7	0.4
Technology as a learning tool or resource (e.g., Internet research, spreadsheet or database creation, multi-media, CD Rom, Laser disk)	49.6	29.9	16.4	3.4	0.7
<i>Assessment</i>					
Performance assessment strategies	66.4	16.4	9.9	5.7	1.5
Student self-assessment (portfolios, individual record books)	72.9	18.7	5.7	2.7	0.0

<i>Summary Items</i>					
High academically focused class time	0.4	1.5	17.1	38.3	42.8
High level of student attention/interest/engagement	0.4	3.0	20.1	48.3	28.3

Rubric for SOM Scoring

- (0) None:** Strategy was never observed.
- (1) Rarely:** Observed in only one or two classes. Receives isolated use and/or little time in classes. Clearly not a prevalent/emphasized component of teaching and learning across classes.
- (2) Occasionally:** Observed in some classes. Receives minimal or modest time or emphasis in classes. Not a prevalent/emphasized component of teaching and learning across classes.
- (3) Frequently:** Observed in many but not all classes. Receives substantive time or emphasis in classes. A prevalent component of teaching and learning across classes.
- (4) Extensively:** Observed in most or all classes. Receives substantive time and/or emphasis in classes. A highly prevalent component of teaching and learning across classes.

Appendix A, continued

School Observation Measure (SOM) Data Summary

National Norms for Secondary Schools

Number of School Observation Visits for

N = 370

Note: One school observation visit equals approximately 10 individual classroom visits.

The extent to which each of the following was used or present in the school...	Percent None	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
<i>Instructional Orientation</i>					
Direct instruction (lecture)	1.6	8.7	19.0	44.0	26.6
Team teaching	64.1	30.3	5.4	0.3	0.0
Cooperative/collaborative learning	35.7	36.5	23.2	4.4	0.3
Individual tutoring (teacher, peer, aide, adult volunteer)	76.5	17.8	1.9	3.0	0.8
<i>Classroom Organization</i>					
Ability groups	40.1	29.8	13.3	7.3	9.5
Multi-age grouping	53.7	10.6	8.9	17.1	9.8
Work centers (for individuals or groups)	69.4	23.0	7.3	0.3	0.0
<i>Instructional Strategies</i>					
Higher-level instructional feedback (written or verbal) to enhance student learning	25.1	24.9	25.7	18.1	6.2
Integration of subject areas (interdisciplinary/thematic units)	66.1	21.7	8.9	1.4	1.9
Project-based learning	51.1	35.1	10.6	2.4	0.8
Use of higher-level questioning strategies	19.2	29.0	32.8	17.1	1.9
Teacher acting as a coach/facilitator	3.8	16.3	27.9	28.5	23.6
Parent/community involvement in learning activities	93.0	6.0	1.1	0.0	0.0
<i>Student Activities</i>					
Independent seatwork (self-paced worksheets, individual assignments)	1.1	9.8	26.0	39.6	23.6
Experiential, hands-on learning	44.0	36.4	14.7	4.6	0.3
Systematic individual instruction (differential assignments geared to individual needs)	76.1	20.9	2.7	0.3	0.0
Sustained writing/composition (self-selected or teacher-generated topics)	54.5	33.2	10.4	1.6	0.3
Sustained reading	52.5	36.0	10.7	0.8	0.0
Independent inquiry/research on the part of students	67.7	24.5	7.1	0.8	0.0
Student discussion	65.7	17.2	8.7	4.6	3.8

School Observation Measure (SOM) Data Summary, continued

National Norms for Secondary Schools

The extent to which each of the following was used or present in the school...	Percent None	Percent Rarely	Percent Occasionally	Percent Frequently	Percent Extensively
<i>Technology Use</i>					
Computer for instructional delivery (e.g. CAI, drill & practice)	49.6	40.1	8.1	2.2	0.0
Technology as a learning tool or resource (e.g., Internet research, spreadsheet or database creation, multi-media, CD Rom, Laser disk)	45.5	37.9	11.9	4.6	0.0
<i>Assessment</i>					
Performance assessment strategies	59.2	26.3	11.8	2.7	0.0
Student self-assessment (portfolios, individual record books)	77.7	17.1	4.1	1.1	0.0

<i>Summary Items</i>					
High academically focused class time	0.0	1.6	23.4	59.4	15.5
High level of student attention/interest/engagement	0.0	3.3	42.0	46.9	7.9

Rubric for SOM Scoring

- (0) None:** Strategy was never observed.
- (1) Rarely:** Observed in only one or two classes. Receives isolated use and/or little time in classes. Clearly not a prevalent/emphasized component of teaching and learning across classes.
- (2) Occasionally:** Observed in some classes. Receives minimal or modest time or emphasis in classes. Not a prevalent/emphasized component of teaching and learning across classes.
- (3) Frequently:** Observed in many but not all classes. Receives substantive time or emphasis in classes. A prevalent component of teaching and learning across classes.
- (4) Extensively:** Observed in most or all classes. Receives substantive time and/or emphasis in classes. A highly prevalent component of teaching and learning across classes.