

Comparing Disciplinary Processes in North Carolina Charter and Traditional Public Schools

Prepared for:
Martez Hill, N.C. State Board of Education

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Executive Summary

Overview

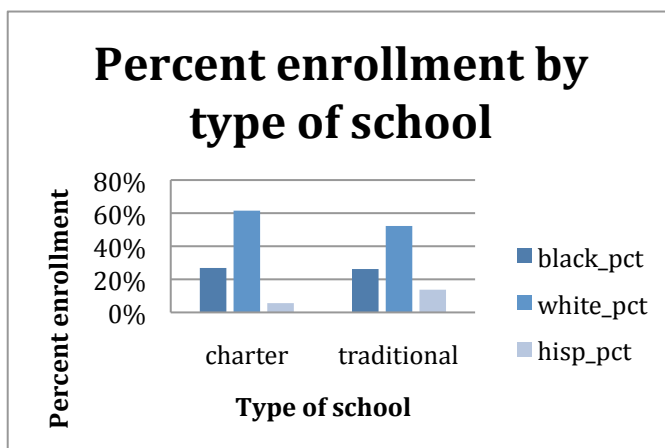
Since the lifting of North Carolina’s charter cap in 2012, the state has seen an increase in applications for upcoming academic years, from 63 schools in 2013 to 70 schools in 2014.¹ Enrollment in charter schools has also increased substantially. Specifically, charter school enrollment grew 135 percent, increasing from 12,739 students in 2000 to 30,047 students in 2012. In the same time period, enrollment in traditional public schools dropped by almost three percent. Given the growing influence of charters in the state, it is important to understand operational practices within such schools and note differences, if any, compared to traditional public schools.

While much of the academic literature has focused on analyzing academic outcomes of charter schools, research on disciplinary procedures employed by such schools is sparse. As such, Martez Hill, Executive Director of the North Carolina State Board of Education, requested some analysis on the disciplinary processes utilized by charters and whether they differ from those in traditional public schools. Additionally, he requested some descriptive summaries of the student composition in both types of schools.

Background

In North Carolina, state statutes allow for some interpretation of the amount of discretion accorded to charter schools in devising disciplinary policy. For example, while Article 27 of Chapter 115C of the General Statutes requires charter schools to adopt disciplinary procedures as set forth by the State Board Of Education, in some cases, a charter school is exempt from statutes and rules applicable to a local board of education.² Thus, an explanatory factor for variations in disciplinary processes could be the latitude received by charter schools when devising policy.

Figure 1:³



Differences in student composition could also lead to variations in processes. I utilized data from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center in order to explore student composition trends. As depicted in figure 1, charter schools in the state serve more African American students than their traditional school counterparts. This finding is aligned with research from other states which indicates that African American students are more

¹ “2013-2014 Applications.” Available at <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charterschools/applications/2013-14/>

² N.C. Gen. Stat. § 115C-238.29E(f)

³ NC School Report Card data

likely to attend racially segregated charter schools.⁴⁵ However, traditional public schools in the state also enroll almost double the Hispanic student population, compared to charter schools.

Figure 2:⁶

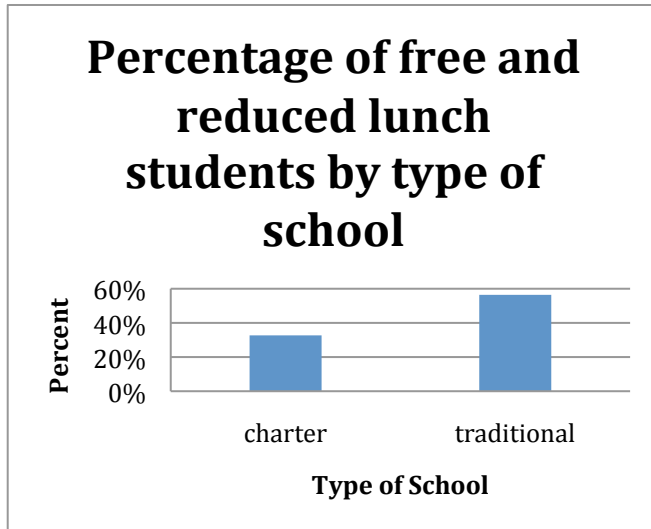


Figure 2 shows that traditional public schools in the state serve a significantly larger population of students receiving free and reduced lunch compared to charter schools. There is evidence to suggest that student composition, particularly socioeconomic status, can impact schools' processes. One study, for example, found that socioeconomic composition can influence four school-level characteristics: teacher expectations, the amount of homework that students do, the number of rigorous courses that students take, and students' feelings about safety.⁷

Policy question #1

What differences, if any, exist between disciplinary processes in North Carolina charter and traditional public schools?

Methodology #1

In order to examine processes, I read and coded student codes of conduct for all middle and high school charters in the state (n=14). I excluded elementary schools from the sample because I hypothesized that there would be more variation among middle and high school disciplinary codes. I also read and coded student codes of conduct for 4 traditional public school districts: Durham, Mecklenburg, Orange and Wake County. Using NVivo, a qualitative analysis tool, I gathered data on school policy around suspensions, expulsions and other disciplinary consequences as well as the procedure for due process.

⁴ Garcia, David R. "The impact of school choice on racial segregation in charter schools." *Educational Policy* 22, no. 6 (2008): 805-829.

⁵ Booker, Kevin, Ron Zimmer, and Richard Buddin. "The effects of charter schools on school peer composition." (2005).

⁶ NC School Report Card data

⁷ Rumberger, Russell, and Gregory Palardy. "Does segregation still matter? The impact of student composition on academic achievement in high school." *The Teachers College Record* 107, no. 9 (2005): 1999-2045.

Findings

- While all 18 schools provided information on disciplinary consequences, few provided information on alternatives to out of school suspensions, detention and expulsion.
- 14 schools (10 charters and 4 traditional public school districts) provided information on due process rights for students. Generally speaking, charter handbooks provided minimal information on the rights accorded to students after a disciplinary consequence is meted out.
- With the exception of q charter school, none of the schools explicitly provided guidelines for mitigating circumstances when administering consequences. In contrast, 3 of the 4 traditional public school handbooks contained sections on mitigating circumstances.

Policy Questions #2 and #3

How does implementation differ from the stated policies in each type of school?

How do patterns of variation in stated policies and their implementation vary between charter and traditional schools?

Methodology #2 and #3

I conducted semi-structured interviews with school leaders in order to answer policy questions 2 and 3. My study sample consisted of three charter schools and three traditional public school administrators in Durham and Wake County. Interviews were transcribed and exported to NVivo.

Findings

- Traditional public school administrators possess a great deal of flexibility when administering disciplinary consequences, countering a common perception that administrator autonomy is often limited by district wide disciplinary policy.
- While none of the charter schools included in the study sample utilized PBIS, all three traditional public schools incorporated the system into their disciplinary policy, with varying levels of intensity and success.
- There was wide variation in the use of in-school suspensions among schools. The use of such an intervention was largely explained by school leaders' perceptions about the overall effectiveness of in-school suspensions as well as resource constraints.

Discussion and Recommendations

Differences in disciplinary processes between charter and traditional public schools

The use of accommodations or mitigating circumstances when administering consequences was perhaps the most significant difference in *stated* disciplinary processes between charters and traditional public schools. Only one charter school in the study sample

incorporated a section on student accommodations while three of the four traditional public school district handbooks included information on mitigating circumstances. One reason for the difference in the inclusion of accommodations could be that the student populations served by each type of school is quite different. For example, the percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunches among the charter sample was 8.71, compared to 47.4 percent across traditional public schools.

Differences in implementation between charter and traditional public schools

The use of PBIS was a major difference between charter and traditional public schools when considering the *implementation* of disciplinary processes. Specifically, none of the charters in the interview sample utilized PBIS while all the traditional public schools surveyed incorporated PBIS into their discipline system with varying levels of intensity. Traditional public schools were also more likely to implement both formal and informal alternatives to out of school suspensions and expulsions.

Patterns of variation between charters and traditional public schools

While most charters in the sample did not include information on mitigating circumstances in their respective handbooks, school leaders acknowledged the use of such circumstances when administering consequences. Conversely, three of the four school districts' handbooks provided information on the use of mitigating circumstances when assessing student behavior. It is not entirely surprising then that the traditional public school leaders interviewed utilized accommodations. As previously discussed, this pattern of variation is likely due to the differences in student composition between each type of school system. Specifically, traditional public schools in my sample enrolled significantly more economically disadvantaged students as well as African American and Hispanic students. Thus, it is possible that traditional public schools have adapted their disciplinary processes in order to accommodate the unique needs of their student population.

There was also wide variation in the use of in-school suspensions across all schools. Schools in the sample that committed resources (school space and certified instructors) to the use of ISS noted fewer chronic behavior issues among students. This finding is confirmed by broader research on the effectiveness of ISS, especially compared to out of school suspensions.⁸

Based on my findings, I propose the following recommendations:

Mental health services: Increasing funding for mental health personnel that serve students with chronic behavior problems could help mediate some of the challenges experienced by these students. Indeed, most of the administrators interviewed discussed how the lack of behavioral resources for students limits their ability to effectively manage behavior. Schools should also be encouraged to create alternative behavioral interventions for students with chronic behavior problems.

⁸ Bloomberg, N. "Effective discipline for misbehavior: In school vs. out of school suspension." *Department of Education and Human Services, Villanova University* (2004): 3.

Collaboration between charters and traditional public schools: One strategy to increase communication between the two types of school leaders is to create a type of “District-Charter Compact” in Durham. Such compacts, funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, are currently operating in cities such as Nashville and New Orleans.⁹ As part of the Compact, the school district and interested charter schools commit to the implementation of select strategies. I recommend that charter school leaders and District leaders in Durham create such a compact with a focus on two strategies: sharing best instructional practices and recruiting high quality teachers.

The use of in-school suspensions: Schools should incorporate a more formal type of ISS within their disciplinary systems. Specifically, licensed instructors should provide supervision of students in ISS and offer positive interventions including assistance with course work.

⁹ Yatsko, Sarah et al. “District-Charter Collaboration Compact: Interim Report.” Center on Reinventing Public Education. Available at <http://www.crpe.org/publications/district-charter-collaboration-compact-interim-report>