



PENNSYLVANIA'S  
CHARTER SCHOOLS:  
DO THEY OFFER A REAL CHOICE

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**Executive Summary**

Two broad approaches to contemporary education have come to dominate American schools: the *Traditional*, and the *Progressive*. The purpose of this study was to survey Pennsylvania's newly-formed charter schools with the aim of finding out: the extent to which various educational practices associated with those two approaches are represented in charter schools; and, if charter schools differ from comparable public schools along the Traditional/Progressive continuum.

The findings of this study show that:

- A considerable proportion of Pennsylvania's charter schools (approved so far) are located in the urban school districts of Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.
- A considerable proportion of Pennsylvania's charter schools (approved so far) are designed to serve special populations (e.g., troubled youth), or to provide specialized training (e.g., schools emphasizing computer education). Such "niche schools" do not offer genuine options to parents who may be seeking a comprehensive elementary education for their child.
- On the average, Pennsylvania's charter schools are similar to comparable public schools, and slightly more progressive in their educational practices.
- Differences between the two types of schools are especially significant on *grading*, where the practices of charter schools are considerably more progressive than their public school counterparts.
- Charter schools may provide some degree of choice to Pennsylvania's parents, but with few exceptions, they seem to offer an education that is closer to public school education, and/or generally more progressive than mainstream education. A more Traditional ("back-to-basics") education is not widely available as an option held forth by Pennsylvania's charter schools.

A better understanding of the practices reported to be in place in today's schools will help inform the current debate on educational reform, and focus the discussion of school choice by providing a framework with clear alternatives. It is hoped that this study might contribute towards that end.

## **Introduction**

American schools are facing a crisis of confidence as they find themselves embroiled in a struggle between two competing “philosophies” of education. At least since the 1960s, progressivist ideas have been a dominant feature of the educational landscape. This approach has brought with it a number of practices which have generated controversy in their implementation, and weakened the consensus necessary for a society to maintain effective schools.

Modern progressive education, as practiced in today’s schools, finds its philosophical roots in the ideas of Rousseau, Herbert Spencer, and most especially John Dewey. But while progressivist ideas gained some ground throughout the 20th century in America, their influence was largely circumscribed, that is, until the 1960s when the beginnings of a social movement were born in a massive generational conflict that pitted a new set of values against more traditional American values. The title of H. C. Lyon’s 1971 book, “*Learning to Feel, Feeling to Learn*”, reflected the emerging philosophy that was to become a major force in shaping American education during the 1970s and 80s.

More recently, Progressivist education have also been re-vitalized by the introduction of “constructivist” models of learning which emphasize the active role of the learner in building understanding and making sense of information while calling for the social construction of knowledge. The constructivist view of teachers as one who guides discovery is consistent with established progressive tenets of discovery learning. For example, in teaching mathematics, constructionists hold that rather than teach basic skills of computation, it is preferable to begin with the presenting the problem, then letting the students figure out how to do the operations.

As these progressivist ideas gained influence they became arrayed against a set of practices that had become associated with a more traditional approach to schooling in America. *Traditional education* has become associated with concepts such as: subject-centered, teaching, standards, examinations, structure, order, work discipline, memorization, mastery of subject content, order and accountability. Similar notions that have attached themselves to *progressive education* include: child-centered, emotions, activity, relevance, discovery, critical thinking, growth, and creativity.

Much of the controversy in and around today’s schools, as well as the resulting calls for school reform, emerge from the clash of these two competing approaches or philosophies of education. It is hoped that this project will help to frame the issues and inform the debate as to the nature of schools and schooling in America.

## **Traditional Schools; Progressive Schools**

Today, there is a burgeoning interest among educators, politicians, and the general public in finding alternative ways to provide schooling. This interest is manifested by a widening array of options such as: school choice, vouchers and charter schools, many of which are being put forth outside of mainstream schools. But the mainstream schools, both public and non-public, have also responded to the winds of change. In response to rapid social change, and the calls for school reform, they too, have explored and adopted various practices of schooling.

Broadly speaking, educational practices in today's schools may be seen as clustering into two groups, depending on the approach they take to various dimensions of schooling such as: organization, management, curriculum, and instruction. The characteristics of each group are described below:

Traditional Schools: Traditionalists emphasize academic standards in schools that tend to be more authoritarian, following a curriculum that is content-based, and formed around the traditional core disciplines. Such schools tend to emphasize structure and discipline, with some traditional schools mandating school uniforms. They typically rely on grading, tracking, and grouping children by ability level for instruction by the teacher, and they tend to employ objective tests for evaluating student achievement.

*Critics of Traditional approaches* maintain that such schools impair children's development by imposing a rigid learning sequence, one which ignores the fact that children differ in the ways they learn. Moreover, they unfairly hold students to standards that are not consistent with their learning style. They see the focus on academics as being too narrow; emphasizing academic achievement, often to the detriment of other aspects of the developing child, like emotional adjustment. They also feel that traditional schools rely too much on direct instruction, and rote memorization. Finally, they feel that such schools with their teacher-oriented authoritarian instruction, tend to stifle children's natural sense of exploration and creativity.

Progressive Schools: Progressive educators believe in a child-centered approach, one that is more democratic, with the emphasis on group projects rather than individual performance for grades. They speak of a humanistic concern for the "whole child"-- hence their concern with social and emotional development, and the emerging sense of self-esteem. They advocate experiential, "discovery" learning which is led by the child, as opposed to direct instruction led by the teacher; cooperative and collaborative activities, as opposed to the competition inherent in grades and tests; and a concern with using differences in individual learning style to determine both the process and content of learning. They are concerned with developing processes like higher order thinking, and critical thinking; less concerned with the transmission of factual knowledge.

*Critics of Progressive approaches* believe that such schools, by de-emphasizing academic work, and emphasizing process over content, weaken the academic foundation necessary for a lifetime of learning. They feel the emphasis on self-esteem and children's emotional development is misplaced, often resulting in rewarding style over substance.

They see the child-oriented approach, with the teacher being relegated to a less central role, as detrimental to adult authority and discipline. A comparison of traditional and progressive schools may be found in Table 1.

**Table 1. A Comparison of Two Educational Approaches**

<b>Traditional Schools</b>	<b>Progressive Schools</b>
<i>Instruction.</i> Direct instruction class-wide instruction by the teacher.	<i>Instruction.</i> Self-directed learning in small groups; cooperative learning.
<i>Reading.</i> Reliance on a phonics approach.	<i>Reading.</i> Reliance on a whole-word approach.
<i>Mathematics.</i> Reliance on direct instruction; drill, computation skills.	<i>Mathematics.</i> Reliance on discovery and student-initiated discovery learning.
<i>Assessment.</i> Reliance on periodic testing with norm-referenced, objective tests.	<i>Assessment.</i> Reliance on portfolios which feature individual and collaborative projects.
<i>Grades</i> are assigned by comparing performance with age/grade peers.	<i>Grades</i> are downplayed in favor of teacher comments on progress.
<i>Social studies</i> promotes civics, history, the American heritage, and cross-cultural studies.	<i>Social studies</i> promotes diversity, multiculturalism; social concerns, and social responsibilities.
<i>Outcomes.</i> Emphasizes academic skills as demonstrated in the traditional core areas.	<i>Outcomes.</i> Emphasizes the whole child approach; psychological, social, and cultural aspects of child development.
<i>Curriculum:</i> More narrowly focused on academic areas.	<i>Curriculum:</i> Wide-ranging with a balance between academic and social concerns.
<i>Standards:</i> All students are expected to meet minimal competency.	<i>Standards</i> are adjusted to take into account individual differences.
<i>Teacher's role:</i> primarily as an academic instructor; authority figure.	<i>Teacher's role:</i> primarily as facilitator, counselor, and mentor.

**The School Practices Project**

School choice is based on the premise that schools may provide clear alternatives to what many see as the dominant educational pattern in American schools today. Still, the notion that there are significant differences among today's schools has not been established. Moreover, if there is a "dominant pattern" that defines mainstream American schools, that pattern is not clearly understood nor generally agreed upon, leaving alternatives sometimes more apparent than real: a source of confusion for educators, parents and the general public. Therefore, clearly defining the extant models of educational practice, and determining the prevalence of their implementation is important. This is the purpose of the *School Practices Project*.

In addition to setting the framework for debate on various school practices, the *School Practices Project* holds implications for school choice, e.g.: Are there true options available to those seeking alternatives to the current school systems? Are the various types of schools more alike or different? How valid are the assumptions made about differences among various types of schools?

The purpose of this study in the school practices series, is to determine the extent to which the educational practices associated with two models of education have been adopted by Pennsylvania's newly-emerging charter schools, and how those schools may differ, if at all, from comparable public schools.

## **The Decline of American Schools**

In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a wake up call to the nation in the form of a report entitled "*A Nation at Risk*" -- a report which documented the shocking state to which American schooling had fallen. The Commission set the stage at the onset by one key sentence: "Our society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purpose of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort necessary to attain them."

Since the appearance of that seminal report, American education has continued to drift, its decline sometimes slowed, sometimes accelerated by educational fads, trendiness, cosmetic changes, and a number of unproven and questionable initiatives which continue to come forth under the banner of school reform. A recent search of a university's library found almost 500 entries concerned with school reform. Turning to the Internet one finds several dozen national organizations which have school reform as their avowed concern, and a search of one educational database yielded over 1,400 papers on the subject published in the last decade or so.

It is obvious that school reform has come to mean many things to many people to the point where, as educational critic and reformer E.D. Hirsch has aptly noted... "many of the school 'reforms' now being advocated are the very practices which have put American education at risk." In today's climate *authentic* school reform is reactionary - that is, it seeks to re-assert those values which have traditionally formed the basis of

mainstream American education. This traditionalist reform calls for restoration -- a rededication on the part of the schools to their historic and time-honored mission of educating our youth in the academic core: English and literature, mathematics, science, civics, history, geography, the arts, and foreign languages.

At the time of *A Nation at Risk* the evidence was unmistakable: America's schools were failing. American students were learning less, and they were falling behind on achievement tests compared to those in other industrialized countries. Functional illiteracy was estimated at 13 percent of all 17-year-olds, with the rate among minority youths as high as 40 percent. Steady declines were observed in average achievement scores in a trend line spanning more than 20 years. Moreover, business and military leaders were complaining that they had to teach basic skills to ill-prepared young people now entering the work force.

In order to gauge student achievement at the national level, Congress authorized an ongoing study of student performance -- the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP is the only nationally representative test of academic progress. Known as the "nation's report card", this assessment has been given since 1969 in a variety of academic subjects to a nationally representative sample of students. This nationwide assessment further documented the depressing decline in literacy, finding, among other things, that between 1970 and 1980, 17-year-olds declined in their ability to understand written material.

The 1990 mathematics assessments found that one out of three eighth-graders could not solve two-step problems using addition and subtraction and one-step problems using multiplication and division -problems typically taught at the upper elementary school level. Moreover, 86 percent of the eight graders could not consistently solve problems involving fractions, decimals, percents and simple algebra -- topics generally introduced by the seventh grade.

As a fascinating aside to these findings, a study done by the U.S. Department of Education, found that despite this low achievement a majority of parents surveyed believed their *own* child's school was doing good job in preparing students. The report went on to comment on the paradox that while national surveys consistently find dissatisfaction with the schools, when asked about their own schools parents often express satisfaction. The authors go on to speculate that this may be due to grade inflation which gives parents a false impression of how well their child is doing. For example, they pointed out that 45 percent of the students who scored in the bottom quarter on a mathematics achievement test, reported getting mostly A's and B's in math. From the picture they are given, parents may reasonably conclude that their children are doing well in school, when in fact, they "may not be leaning the math they need in today's world."

Corroborating evidence comes from international studies, such as the 1991 study of science achievement in seventeen countries, which found US students close to the bottom of the list. Nor was the decline limited to reading, science, and math. The 1994 exam

focused on history and here too, the results are discouragingly consistent. Of those students who took the U.S. history test, only 17 percent of the 4th graders, 14 percent of the 8th graders, and 11 percent of the 12th graders reached the "proficient level" of solid academic performance.

A 1995 report issued by the *Educational Excellence Network*, reviewed the latest results from NAEP only to find that more than a decade after *The Nation at Risk*, school performance continued to be dismal. While the latest mathematics assessment had shown small improvement, the percentage of students who tested "below basic" range between 35 and 40 percent; while those meeting the "proficiency" standard ranged between 15 and 25 percent. The reading assessment showed similar poor results. While the percentage of high school seniors who were "proficient" readers fell from 37 at the previous testing in 1992 to 34; the percentage "below basic" rose from 25 to 30.

Overall, a review of available test data continues to show American education has made no significant improvement since *A Nation at Risk*, suggesting that the response of the education establishment to the crisis has not been very effective. Growing public impatience is seen in grass-roots movements demanding a return to basics in our schools, and in the surge of interest in vouchers, charter schools, and home-schooling, all of which reflect dissatisfaction on the part of a public who are feeling short-changed by the schools and are increasingly turning outside of the education establishment for answers

### **Why Charter Schools?**

By the late 1980s the calls for school reform began to reach a crescendo, so much so that political leaders began to respond with proposals designed to widen the choice available to parents. Along with home-schooling, two more conventional methods gained considerable interest. Vouchers, were proposed whereby parents would get back a percentage of their taxes, which could then be applied towards their children education in any given school of their choice. Vouchers have become quite controversial as proponents see them as providing the possibility of educational choice, while opponents feel they would lead to the demise of the public schools system.

The other alternative, advanced by reformers during this period, was charter schools. In general, charter schools were seen as being organized by citizens who wished to offer an alternative type of education; such schools, once granted proper approval, would qualify for taxpayers funds based on some funding formula. The first charter schools began to appear in 1991, and currently, more than 30 states have laws allowing for the creation of charter public schools. As of September 1999, there were 1,681 charter schools across the nation.

In Pennsylvania, Act 22 of 1997, allowed for the creation of charter schools, to provide parents with expanded choices within the public school system. Individuals or groups seeking to establish a charter school would have to apply to the local school board of the district in which the school would be located. Once the application was approved

by the local school district, the school would be granted a charter. Such charter schools would be funded by taxpayer dollars that support students who are residents of the local school district.

### **A Survey of Pennsylvania's Charter Schools**

Placing the practices found in Table 1 along a traditional/progressive continuum provided the framework for a survey form which could be used to profile a given school. This *School Practices Survey* was sent to school directors and principals asking where, in their opinions, *their* schools might fall along the ten dimensions.

A list of charter schools, obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, identified 47 active charter schools. Of those 47, 17 were clearly identified as middle schools and/or high schools; and thus eliminated from this study (which was concerned only with primary/elementary schools).

This left a total of 30 charter schools against which a similar group of public schools were selected for comparison (Table 2).

**Table 2 Approved Charter Schools with Elementary Grades**

<b>Charter School</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Grades</b>	<b>Mission</b>
Manchester Academic CS	Pittsburgh	K-7	General education
Thurgood Marshall Academy CS	Pittsburgh	K-9	General education
Urban League of Pittsburgh CS	Pittsburgh	K-4	General education
Mosaica Academy CS	Bensalem	K-7	General education.
Centre Learning Community CS	State College	5-7	General education.
Nittany Valley CS	State College	1-8	General education.
Sylvan Heights Science CS	Harrisburg	K-2	General education
Sylvan Heights CS	Harrisburg	K-2	General education.
Chester CS	Chester	K-6	General education.
Archway CS of Chester	Chester	K-6	General education.
Village CS of Chester-Upland	Chester	PreK-9	General education.
GEGAC Community CS	Erie	K-5	General education.
Math, Civics and Science CS	Philadelphia	1-12	General education
Renaissance Advantage CS	Philadelphia	K-5	General education
World Communications CS	Philadelphia	6-10	General education
Philadelphia Academy CS	Philadelphia	K-8	General education.
Alliance CS	Philadelphia	K-3	Specialized - science and math.
Christopher Columbus CS	Philadelphia	K-3	Specialized - language; computers
Eugenio Maria de Hostos CS	Philadelphia	K-8	Specialized - bilingual/bicultural
Songhai Empire CS	Philadelphia	6-8	Specialized - African centered
West Oak Lane	Philadelphia	K-4	Specialized - science; computers
Young Scholars CS	Philadelphia	6	Specialized - math; technology
Family CS	Philadelphia	K-2	Specialized - social service
Germantown Settlement CS	Philadelphia	5-7	Specialized - business; law
Imani Education Center CS	Philadelphia	K-8	Specialized - African heritage
Laboratory CS	Philadelphia	K-6	Specialized - international language
Renaissance CS	Philadelphia	6-8	Specialized - science; fine art
Philadelphia Harrambee Inst. CS	Philadelphia	1-8	Specialized - science; technology
Universal Institute CS	Philadelphia	K-3	Specialized - science and math
La academia: The Partnership CS	Lancaster	6-9	Specialized - linguistic differences.
Chester County Family Academy	West Chester	K-2	Specialized - low income students

A list of comparable Public Schools was collated from the Pennsylvania State Department of Education’s listings using counties and zip codes of the charter schools as selection criteria. Since it was anticipated that the newly-formed charter schools might be more likely to respond to the survey than their public school counterparts, it was decided to initially sample twice as many public schools (n=60) for the comparison group.

Therefore, a total of 90 surveys were initially mailed out. Within a three-week period 45 surveys had been returned. Follow-up letters yielded an additional 14 for a total of 59 surveys; a return rate of 65 %.



A closer examination of the set of practices which comprise the Total Score finds that both charter schools and public schools show similar patterns with the most significant differences found in *Grading*. The charter schools adopt more progressive methods of grading, downplaying letter grades, and relying instead on teacher feedback and comments on progress; while public schools remain somewhat more traditional in awarding letter grades used in comparison with classmates. Figure 2 shows the pattern of practices in both types of school.

**Figure 2**

Overall, the results suggest that, although the charter schools approved so far tend to be slightly more progressive than their public school counterparts, there is really not much differences in the practices reportedly in place in both types of schools.

These results should be interpreted with caution given the limitations inherent in survey research. Of course, such data represent *opinions* as about the practices extant in the schools, and do not necessarily reflect *actual* practices. On the other hand, a certain validity may be given to those opinions since they are those of the principal, an educational leader with a key role in determining the quality and type of education being delivered in today's schools.

### **Pennsylvania's Charter Schools in Context**

The practice that has been adopted in Pennsylvania is to have applications for charters reviewed by the local school district. Naturally, when using a funding formula that involves taxpayer money, there is a danger that political considerations might sometimes be injected into the approval process. It would not be unreasonable to suppose that some local school boards may see a charter school as a rival to their own system. Other states have taken different approaches including: having the applications be reviewed by Universities, or directly by the State's Department of Education. The possibility for decisions influenced by a conflict of interest is thus lessened.

Perhaps recognizing that potential exists and that there might be genuine differences of opinion as to the merits of an application, the state has more recently set up an appeals process for those who wish to have a decision of the local school board re-considered.

It may well be that the high proportion of specialized ("niche") schools that have been approved attests to the notion that such schools are less likely to offer direct competition to the local public schools. These type of charter schools are clearly *not* designed to offer a comprehensive mainstream school with perhaps a different set of educational practices, from a sister public school.

### **What We've Learned about School Practices So Far**

When the results from the study of charter schools are placed in the context of the findings so far in the School Practices series, a picture begins to emerge of the anatomy of today's mainstream American schools.

Previous studies examined public schools, catholic, and other private schools, both religious and secular. While there were occasional differences between the various types of schools, on the whole, the schools were much more alike than different. A

frequent response from principals was regret that their schools were not more progressive, and several resolved to move further in that direction. A handful of schools, many of them private schools, are found at either end of the spectrum (very progressive, or quite traditional in orientation), and these show some consistency in adopting practices in line with their educational philosophy.

But for the most part, today's schools (especially public and catholic schools) lack philosophical consistency, adopting a rather eclectic mix of traditional and progressive practices. Sometime these contradictory approaches cause confusion, and they seem to produce schools designed by committees, with something for everyone, but satisfying no one.

What's happening in the schools reflects the wider gulf between the overwhelming majority of parents and the educational establishment. National polls consistently find parents favoring a more traditional "back-to-basics" education for their children. Professional educators, on the other hand, seem committed in varying degrees to the dominant progressive philosophy. They represent what the respected educational reformer, E. D. Hirsch has called an "impregnable fortress -- an interlocking directorate of schools, teacher's colleges, and state departments of education, along with teacher's unions and philanthropic foundations all of which subscribe to educational orthodoxy".

Given this context, genuine options for parents remain very limited, and many schools put forth as alternatives often are found to be more apparent than real in those essential practices which define mainstream American education today.

### **About the Author**

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