

Instructional Delivery and Focus of Public Charter Schools: Results from the NAPCS National Charter School Survey, School Year 2011-2012

During the spring of 2012, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) conducted its first national public charter school survey. The survey asked public charter school leaders to respond to questions on school waitlists, curriculum, facilities and a variety of other operational elements. A primary goal of the survey was to collect information that would help to better understand the wide range of instructional strategies public charter schools use. With 6,000 autonomous charter schools operating nationwide, public charter schools are not a uniform category of public schools.

This report analyzes the survey responses to provide new details about emerging trends and differences in the instructional delivery strategies and focus of public charter schools. Top trends identified by the survey include:

- Almost three-quarters (71.8 percent) of the respondents use a combination of off-the-shelf and customized curriculum;
- Over half (57.7 percent) of respondents from charter schools that enroll students in grades 9 through 12 described their schools as having a “college-prep” instructional focus;
- Half (49.3 percent) of the respondents indicated an extended school day to increase instructional learning time;¹ and
- Nearly half (48.8 percent) of the respondents from charter schools that enroll students in grades 9 through 12 said their students take classes at local universities or colleges.

Instructional Delivery

Some public charter schools deliver instruction in non-traditional ways. Below are schools’ responses about their instructional delivery.²

Response Category	Option Selected
Extended day	752 (49.3%)
Extended year	436 (28.6%)
Year-round	129 (8.5%)
Independent study	402 (26.3%)
Multi-age classrooms	608 (39.8%)
School-to-work	178 (11.7%)
Students take classes at local universities or colleges	340 (22.3%)

¹ The fall 2012 *Mapping the Field: A Report on Expanded Time Schools in America* by the National Center on Time & Learning found that 60 percent expanded learning time schools are public charters.

² Schools were allowed to select multiple answers. The response rate for this survey question was 1,524-1,528 responses, or 27.2 percent.

Nearly half (49.3 percent) of the responding public charter schools indicated that they have an extended school day—meaning that compared to the traditional public schools in the local school district, the charter school has 30 or more minutes of additional instructional time per day.

Over a quarter of responding schools feature independent study, an extended school year, or multi-age classrooms. The 26.3 percent of responding schools that selected independent study as part of their instructional delivery define this method as an alternative to classroom instruction that provides the student with a choice of ways to learn content under the guidance of a teacher. An extended year, meaning the charter school has 10 or more additional instructional days per academic year compared to traditional public schools in the local school district,³ was selected by 28.6 percent of responding charter schools. Classrooms with two or more grade levels intentionally blended together to improve learning, which is known as multi-age classrooms, is a strategy employed by 39.8 percent of responding schools.

A smaller but notable percentage of schools indicated instructional delivery methods of students taking classes at local universities or colleges (22.3 percent), school-to-work, or year-round school. School-to-work programs (selected by 11.7 percent of responding schools) ideally include school-based learning, work-based learning, and connecting activities. School-based learning is the classroom instruction that prepares students for work, while work-based learning is the actual on-the-job experience. Connecting activities include mentoring and other initiatives that provide a link between school and work. Year-round instruction features a school year that is reorganized so that summer break is broken up and redistributed throughout the year in relatively regular intervals, and is an instructional delivery method used by 8.5 percent of responding schools.

In addition to the schools' instructional delivery, public charter schools were asked about the type of curriculum used to achieve its instructional mission. Schools were asked to select the single best statement about what type of curriculum is used.

Charter Schools Responses	1,329 (23.7%)
Off-the-shelf curriculum	69 (5.2%)
Customized curriculum	306 (23.0%)
A combination of off-the-shelf and customized curriculum	954 (71.8%)

Nearly three-quarters of the responding public charter schools (71.8 percent) use a combination of off-the-shelf and customized curriculum. Just under a quarter of schools (23.0 percent) use only a customized curriculum. A mere 5.2 percent of schools use solely an off-the-shelf curriculum. From the schools that responded to the survey, the data suggest that many public charter schools develop customized curriculum to meet the needs of their students.

³ Definitions of extended school year and extended school day were based on the National Center on Time & Learning expanded-time school database.

Instructional Focus

The survey asked public charter schools to select their instructional focus from a list of 44 options, including a write-in option (See Appendix B for the survey question, response rates and methodology). Schools were allowed to select more than one category. From the schools' responses to this question, the top ten categories by response percentage⁴ are:

1. College-prep (40.5%)
2. Core Knowledge (33.9%)
3. Child-centered (29.5%)
4. Project-based (28.9%)
5. Arts (28.0%)
6. Community Service (27.9%)
7. Inquiry-based (25.8%)
8. Technology (22.5%)
9. Math-science or STEM⁵ (21.3%)
10. Service Learning (19.1%)

Charter Schools: The Focus on College-Prep

As the list above indicates, two out of five public charter schools (40.5 percent) that responded to the survey have a college-prep instructional focus. The term “college-prep” may generate images of a particular type of school: students in uniforms, college and university banners hanging in hallways, a “no excuses” mantra. But a deeper look at the survey data revealed wide variation in how charter schools go about implementing the focus of preparing students for college. Charter schools use service-learning, project-based instruction, community service, arts, technology, and STEM, among a variety of other instructional methods, to prepare students for college.

Of the public charter schools that responded “college-prep,”⁶ here are the top focus areas by percentage that schools also selected:

1. Math-science or STEM (34.8%)
2. Community Service (33.9%)
3. Arts (33.4%)
4. Core Knowledge (31.5%)
5. Advanced Placement (25.4%) (tie)

⁴ Not all schools responded to all questions. Questions covering these topics had a response rate between 23.8 percent and 27.2 percent. See appendix B for the full question and response rates.

⁵ This percentage is the combination of schools that selected math-science or STEM as their instruction focus. Responses were added together and de-duplicated if a school selected both options. Response rate for schools as math-science was 1,334 or 23.8 percent. Response rate for schools as STEM was 1,523 or 27.2 percent.

⁶ Response rate for the “college-prep” survey item was 1,523 or 27.2 percent.

5. Project-based (25.4%) (tie)
6. Inquiry-based (23.6%)
7. Technology (23.0%)
8. Child-centered (20.5%)
9. Service learning (19.7%)
10. Back-to-basics (19.2%)

Nearly one-third of “college-prep” public charter schools focus on math-science or STEM (34.8 percent), community service (33.9 percent), or the arts (33.4 percent) to achieve college readiness. Advanced Placement courses (25.4 percent) and project-based learning (25.4 percent) were offered by one-quarter of college-prep focused schools.

The survey data reflect the reality that even though many public charter schools may focus on strategies that prepare students for college, they are not a homogenous set of schools.

Charter Schools: Emerging Instructional Focus Themes, A Deeper Look

While the responses from public charter schools indicate that a large portion of schools have a college-prep focus, a closer inspection of the list of 44 options was conducted to see if the individual categories sorted into any additional themes. Factor analysis—a statistical method used to describe variability among related variables—was applied to the larger instructional focus themes to examine patterns in relationships between the list of variables. Since charter schools could respond to more than one category, factor analyses enabled the grouping of which instructional focus areas “hang together” into broader categories. Both confirmatory and exploratory strategies⁷ were used in this process.

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute report, [*Playing to Type? Mapping the Charter School Landscape*](#) (Carpenter, 2006), was used to identify an initial list of areas of instructional focus to include in our survey. Additional categories were added to the list based on NAPCS’ work collecting information about charter schools nationwide. Since the resulting list was largely based on the 2006 Fordham list, factor analysis was used to confirm whether the areas of instructional focus from the NAPCS survey group into the categories identified in the Fordham report (traditional, progressive, and vocational). Findings showed that the categories did generally fall into those three categories, but further analyses indicated that there were likely more underlying categories than the three identified by Fordham.

As a result of the confirmatory factor analysis, an exploratory factor analysis was then conducted to see if the main categories could be further refined to explain the instructional focus areas that charter schools employ. The exploratory analysis resulted in nine categories:

⁷ Both exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis are used to understand variance of measured variables that is believed to be attributable to a factor. The goal of exploratory factor analysis is to identify factors based on data and to maximize the amount of variance explained. By contrast, confirmatory factor analysis evaluates hypotheses and requires the researcher to hypothesize, in advance, the number of factors, whether or not these factors are correlated, and which items/measures reflect which factors.

1. Career-Based
2. Child-Centered
3. Cultural
4. Inquiry-Based
5. Military
6. Project-Based
7. STEM
8. Traditional
9. Vocational

In essence, of the three categories identified in the Fordham report, it was the progressive category that separated out through our analyses into multiple categories. The table below describes the individual responses that sorted into the nine main categories, as well as the number and percentage of charter schools from the survey that have the highest association with the categories. Even though charter schools could select more than one response, charter schools were assigned to only one category through the factor analysis.

As noted above, 40.5 percent of charter schools reported that at least one of their instructional focuses was college-prep. The schools that responded with college-prep also selected other categories, such as project-based, STEM, and community service. Through the exploratory factor analyses, college-prep did not emerge as one of the overarching themes in the instructional focus of charter schools. Rather, it appears that the other categories may better define schools that responded as college-prep. College-prep was nested within the traditional category. The table below shows that the project-based category was associated with the most charter schools that responded to the survey (42.1 percent), with inquiry-based following with the second highest number of charter schools (14.1 percent).

Given that the factor analyses were exploratory, these data should be used to promote additional research on the instructional strategies that charter schools use, as well as encourage new research on the impact of these varying strategies on student performance.

Instructional Focus Categories	Charter Schools with Largest Association to Instruction Focus Category
<i>Career-Based</i>	
Business	Prelaw
Career-Based	Teacher Preparation
Entrepreneurship	Technical
76 (5.0%)	
<i>Child-Centered</i>	
Child-Centered	Multiple Intelligence
Montessori	
87 (5.7%)	
<i>Cultural</i>	
Bilingual	International
Dual Language Immersion	Multicultural
Ethnocentric	
131 (8.6%)	
<i>Inquiry-Based</i>	
Constructivist	Problem-Based
Environmental	Reggio Emilia
Experiential	Social Justice
Inquiry-Based	Waldorf
Paideia	
214 (14.1%)	
<i>Military</i>	
Military	ROTC
16 (1.1%)	
<i>Project-Based</i>	
Community Service	Project-Based
Expeditionary	Service Learning
639 (42.1%)	
<i>STEM</i>	
Math-Science	Technology
STEM	
144 (9.5%)	
<i>Traditional</i>	
Advanced Placement	College Prep
Arts	Core Knowledge
Athletics	International
Back-to-Basics	Baccalaureate
116 (7.6%)	
<i>Vocational</i>	
Construction	Vocational
School-to-Work	
95 (6.3%)	
n = 1,518 (27.1% response rate)	

Conclusion

The responses to our first national survey demonstrate that public charter schools are a varied bunch. Whether through a customized curriculum or extended learning time, public charter schools are innovating to meet their students' needs. Charter schools use their autonomy to select instructional focuses that run the gamut: from career-based to vocational and from traditional to project-based learning.

As our deeper analyses show, there is no one "label" that adequately covers a school's instructional methods. While this survey provides a national picture of respondents' categorizations of their instructional strategies for the first time, there is still more investigation to be done.

Based on the many approaches that schools use to implement a "college-prep" instructional focus, we asked charter school leaders tell us in their own words how they use different instructional methods to achieve their school's mission. For example, [The Intergenerational School](#) in Cleveland, Ohio, pairs students with adult and senior citizen mentors to let the generations learn from each other, while the [Paulo Freire Freedom School](#), a charter middle school in Tucson, Arizona, adopted project-based learning to impart knowledge through experiences that are authentic and engaging. These are just two of the many innovative approaches that public charter schools use to make a difference in the lives of children.

To get a fuller picture of instructional practices across the charter school movement, NAPCS will be combining [data on instructional strategies](#) from our national survey with on the ground stories of what's happening in schools to show how public charter schools are providing great learning environments for students. Our next national survey, as well as school case studies on school practices, will help shed more light on the way that schools achieve their educational mission.

Appendix A: Survey Design

NAPCS contracted with Abt SRBI to administer an online survey of public charter schools nationwide. Survey invitations were sent by email to charter school leaders.⁸ Three follow-up emails were sent, along with a mailed letter asking school leaders to complete the survey. As an incentive to complete the survey, we held a lottery for two \$2,500 awards.

Appendix B:

What are your school's instructional focuses? Please check all that apply:

Response Category	Response Rate	Option Selected
Advanced Placement (AP)	1,335 (23.8%)	191 (14.3%)
Arts	1,523 (27.2%)	427 (28.0%)
Athletics	1,333 (23.8%)	151 (11.3%)
Back-to-basics	1,333 (23.8%)	299 (22.4%)
Bilingual	1,523 (27.2%)	118 (7.8%)
Business	1,334 (23.8%)	54 (4.1%)
Career-based	1,335 (23.8%)	167 (12.5%)
Child-centered	1,333 (23.8%)	394 (29.6%)
College prep	1,523 (27.2%)	616 (40.5%)
Community service	1,334 (23.8%)	372 (27.9%)
Construction	1,334 (23.8%)	17 (1.3%)
Constructivist	1,333 (23.8%)	165 (12.4%)
Core Knowledge	1,335 (23.8%)	452 (33.9%)
Dual language immersion	1,523 (27.2%)	75 (4.9%)
Entrepreneurship	1,335 (23.8%)	73 (5.5%)
Environmental	1,523 (27.2%)	195 (12.8%)
Ethnocentric	1,334 (23.8%)	18 (1.4%)
Expeditionary	1,335 (23.8%)	48 (3.6%)
Experiential	1,335 (23.8%)	190 (14.2%)
Inquiry-based	1,333 (23.8%)	344 (25.8%)
International Baccalaureate (IB)	1,334 (23.8%)	23 (1.7%)
International/global	1,333 (23.8%)	36 (2.7%)

⁸ NAPCS maintains a database of more records than there are charter schools, as there are states where charter schools may have multiple campuses but the state considers the multiple campuses one charter school entity. As a result, we sent emails to 5,864 emails, but we considered only 5,607 of the records true charter schools.

Response Category	Response Rate	Option Selected
Math-science	1,334 (23.8%)	225 (16.9%)
Military	1,333 (23.8%)	11 (0.8%)
Montessori	1,523 (27.2%)	65 (4.3%)
Multicultural	1,336 (23.8%)	176 (13.2%)
Multiple intelligence	1,333 (23.8%)	201 (15.1%)
Paideia	1,334 (23.8%)	12 (0.9%)
Pre-law	1,334 (23.8%)	5 (0.4%)
Problem-based	1,333 (23.8%)	169 (12.7%)
Progressive	1,333 (23.8%)	116 (8.7%)
Project-based	1,334 (23.8%)	389 (28.9%)
Reggio Emilia approach	1,333 (23.8%)	13 (1.0%)
ROTC	1,333 (23.8%)	10 (0.8%)
School-to-work	1,333 (23.8%)	99 (7.4%)
Service learning	1,333 (23.8%)	254 (19.1%)
Social justice	1,333 (23.8%)	89 (6.7%)
STEM	1,523 (27.2%)	167 (11.0%)
Teacher prep (for students)	1,333 (23.8%)	27 (2.0%)
Technical	1,333 (23.8%)	35 (2.6%)
Technology	1,340 (23.9%)	302 (22.5%)
Vocational	1,523 (27.2%)	94 (6.2%)
Waldorf	1,336 (23.8%)	7 (0.5%)
Other	1,523 (27.2%)	278 (18.3%)
Character Education [#]	1,523 (27.2%)	19 (1.2%)
Classical [#]	1,523 (27.2%)	9 (0.6%)
Direct Instruction [#]	1,523 (27.2%)	8 (0.5%)
Leadership [#]	1,523 (27.2%)	10 (0.7%)

[#]Note: If more than roughly 10 respondents wrote in the same response for "Other," we included the responses as categories in this table.