

Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform

*The Success of California Charter Schools
in Promoting African American Achievement*

Executive Summary

Prepared by the California
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Closing racial and economic achievement and opportunity gaps is a very important issue facing education today.

Despite the successes of the Civil Rights movement, race-based achievement and opportunity gaps still exist for African American students. These gaps are seen across a host of educational outcomes and persist despite increased focus on eliminating them in recent years. Given the invaluable role education plays in life outcomes, these racial disparities are of significant importance to the lives of African American students and to the health of our nation.

This report seeks to examine the persistence of these racial achievement gaps and how charter public schools achieve greater success with this population of students¹. *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform* provides a quantitative analysis of African American enrollment and academic performance trends in California, as well as qualitative case studies of three highly successful charter public schools. Results show that California charter public schools strongly promote African American achievement and are helping to close the persistent racial achievement gaps between African American students and those of other races. African Americans in the state enroll in charter public schools at higher rates than in traditional public schools, and those African American charter students are outperforming their peers attending traditional schools on numerous state test score measures. While sizeable gaps remain, California charter schools provide high-quality choices, and lead to better outcomes for African American students.

As an educational advocacy and policy organization, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) has a deep-rooted interest in understanding how the state's charter public schools can accelerate closing persistent achievement gaps while advancing educational innovation that improves teaching and learning for all students. We believe it is essential that every parent and all children have quality school options that are also diverse and innovative, and we are committed to ensuring the California charter school movement helps to fill this void. CCSA aims with this work to explore schools that show demonstrably strong academic performance outcomes for African American students. Because charters are intended to serve as a vanguard of innovation, we explore these effective schools' practices in detail so that both traditional public and charter public schools undertaking similar challenges can learn from them. In particular, we seek to shine a light on how these practices exist inside successful schools so we can facilitate discussion about these approaches and how to continue to improve public education. In the operational context of the full autonomy that chartering provides, these schools have created successful cultures of achievement, and made conscious choices about how to accelerate success – yet none of their practices are inherently inaccessible to traditional public schools.

While we seek to disseminate best practices, CCSA does not endorse specific curricular approaches or instructional designs, nor does it proscribe replication of

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isolated practices outside of what must be a process of integration and mission alignment that permeates the culture of an entire school. Instead, we offer this research as an exploration of what are key elements of success, and encourage schools to study and consider how these practices might inform their own design and approach. Above all, our goal is to point to the irrefutable evidence that all students can succeed at high levels and racial achievement gaps can be eliminated.

This report begins by describing national and state African American student performance trends and the persistent racial achievement gaps that exist between that population and students of other races. We then discuss the performance of African American students in California over four school years, 2006-07 to 2009-10. This analysis reveals clear areas of strength for the state's charter school movement, areas where charter public schools are achieving better results with African American students and are more likely to do so than traditional public schools. That understanding of the achievement gap and of African American performance then becomes the backdrop against

which we discuss how to better serve African American students. We researched three high-performing charter schools serving African American students particularly well to identify the best practices they implement. The report examines both what is observed as well as what school leaders and teachers say matters most for African American students. What we uncover is a very high level of congruence between what research tells us works and what these successful schools do with their student bodies. We learn that what is best for African American students is "simply good teaching" – a rigorous, relevant curriculum provided in a supportive environment of high expectations.

Given the broad autonomies charters enjoy to create innovative curricula, align operational priorities and design and conform to unique mission statements, a keen understanding of what works best is critical. We should study these centers of innovation to identify what best practices are utilized to achieve those results and glean from those lessons. This report examines those performance trends and best practices for educating African American students.



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Quantitative Research Design

The research design of this study incorporates three types of quantitative data to examine African American enrollment and performance trends in California charter public and traditional public schools from 2006-07 to 2009-2010. Actual enrollment percentages were calculated using African American and total school enrollment figures at the time of testing in the spring of 2010. The relationship between African American student enrollment and school performance was also assessed using a linear regression model to determine how that relationship differs for charter public and traditional public schools. Mean African American API scores and actual English and math proficiency rates were also analyzed. The enrollment and performance data assessed was disaggregated for seven key districts across the state as well as a number of demographic and charter-specific variables.

Building on the first annual *Portrait of the Movement* report presented by CCSA earlier this year, we also assessed schools serving African American students on CCSA's accountability framework. This framework uses a CCSA-developed tool, the Similar Students Measure (SSM), which assesses school performance while filtering out many of the non-school effects on student achievement through the use of regression-based predictive modeling, overlaid with Status and Growth based on the Academic Performance Index (API)². This three-dimensional framework establishes minimum performance expectations for charters at the time of renewal³. At the other end of the performance spectrum, the Status, Growth and SSM Framework is also used to identify "High Impact" schools for study and replication.

All enrollment and performance data comes from the publically available Academic Performance Index (API) and Adequate Yearly Progress⁴ (AYP) data files maintained

by the California Department of Education (CDE) and analyzed by CCSA. This analysis excluded schools that fall under the state's Alternative Schools and Accountability Model (ASAM)⁵.

In understanding the higher performance of charter schools, critics often claim that charters serve a more socioeconomically advantaged population. We do not find this to be true among the African American population. The African American populations in charter public and traditional public schools are very similar. Average parent education levels are the same (high school graduates to some college) and free/reduced-price lunch participation is similar (63% for charters and 67% for traditional public schools, on average). Both are variables used to approximate students' socioeconomic status. Furthermore, both charter and traditional schools serving African American students have similarly high annual retention rates (94% and 92%, respectively).



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Case Study Research Design

In conducting research for this report, we examined a sample of high performing charter public schools for African American students to discover the practices, norms and policies they implement that allow them to close the achievement gap. Case study schools were selected based on their African American API score and level of proficiency in math and ELA. To qualify for the case study, schools had to have a 2009-10 African American API score of 800 or higher and their African American students' ELA and math proficiency had to be 65% or higher⁶. Each school was also predominantly African American (60% or higher) and located in an urban area. Three schools were selected from three of the larger districts in the state that also have a sizeable charter school movement: Oakland, Sacramento City, and Los Angeles Unified.

Three types of qualitative data were collected from each school: classroom observations, a teacher focus group, and a school leader(s) interview. Observation and interview protocols were developed based upon research of best practices for educating African American youth – assessing whether the practices the research says should be present were, as well as understanding what practices school staff believed were responsible for their success with African American students.



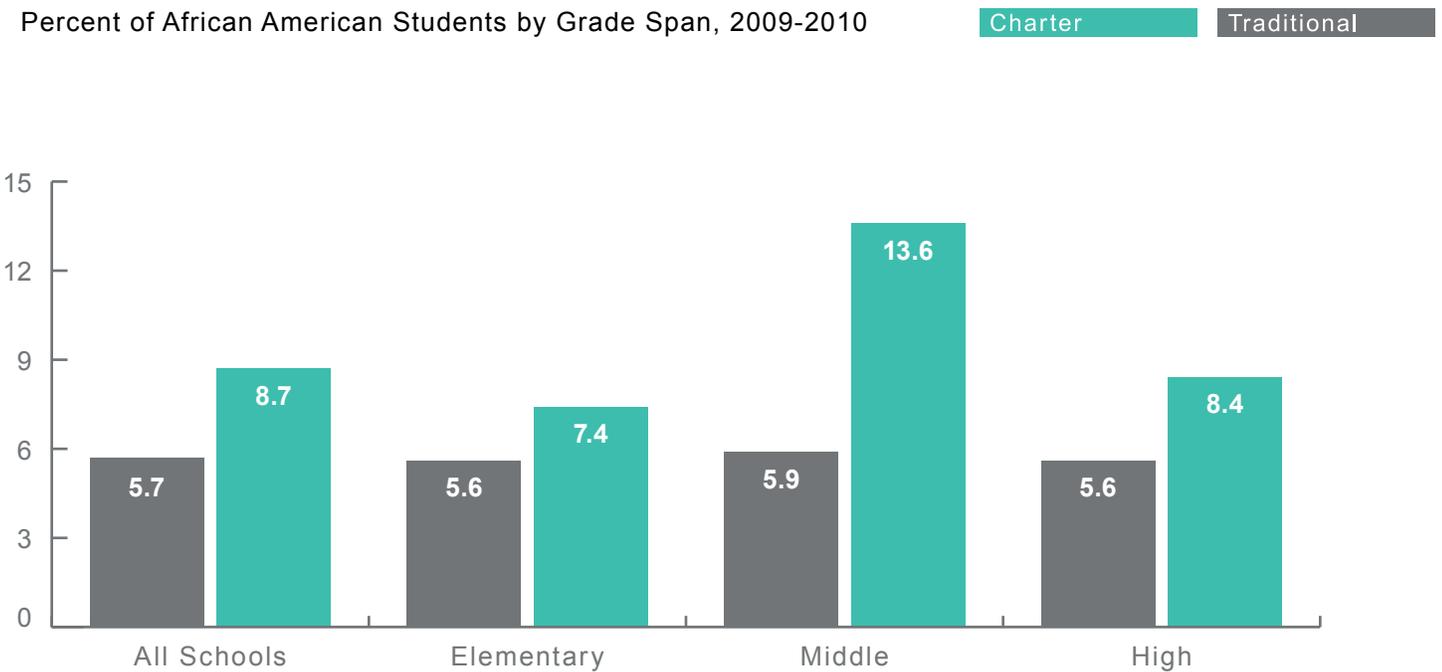
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Key Findings

Enrollment

1. African American students are enrolled in charter public schools at higher rates than traditional public schools statewide and at all grade levels.

Percent of African American Students by Grade Span, 2009-2010



2. Charters are reversing the trend of underperformance among African American students. The negative relationship between African American enrollment and school performance is three times weaker in charter public schools than in traditional public schools.

Among traditional public schools, the higher the African American enrollment, the lower the school's performance in general. However, charter public schools are breaking this trend. The percent of African American students in a school is nearly three times less predictive of school achievement in charter public schools (beta = -0.758) than in traditional public schools (beta = -2.06).

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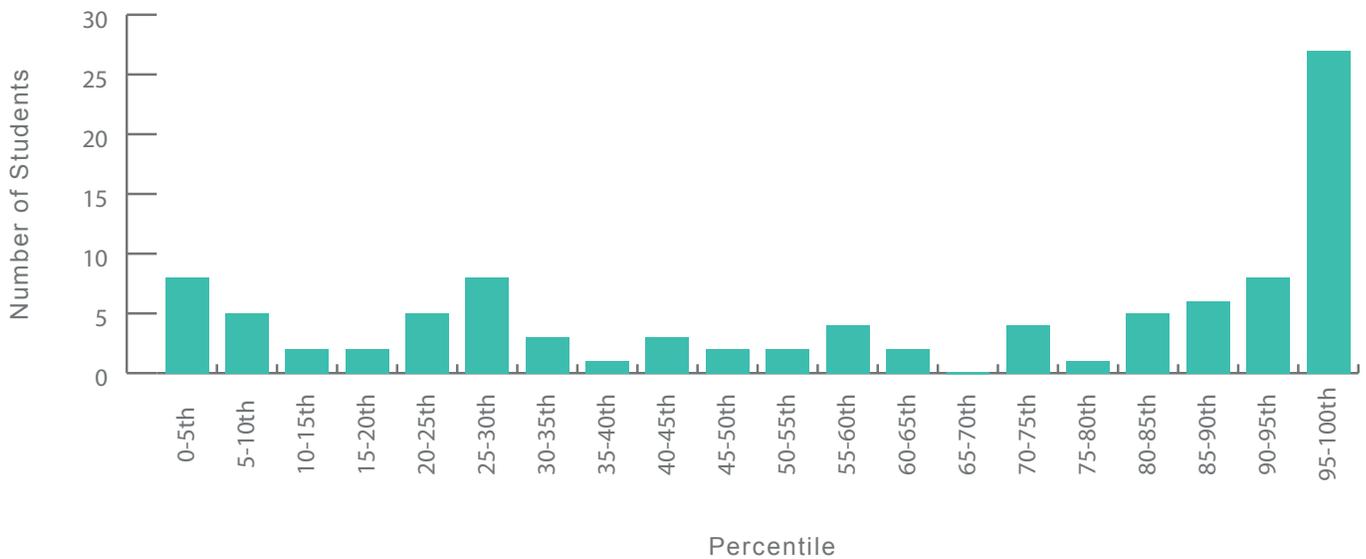
Key Findings

Test Performance

CCSA's Accountability Framework: Controlling for Student Background

3. In 2010, charter public schools serving African American students outperformed their predicted performance at about four times the rate as traditional public schools serving African American students.

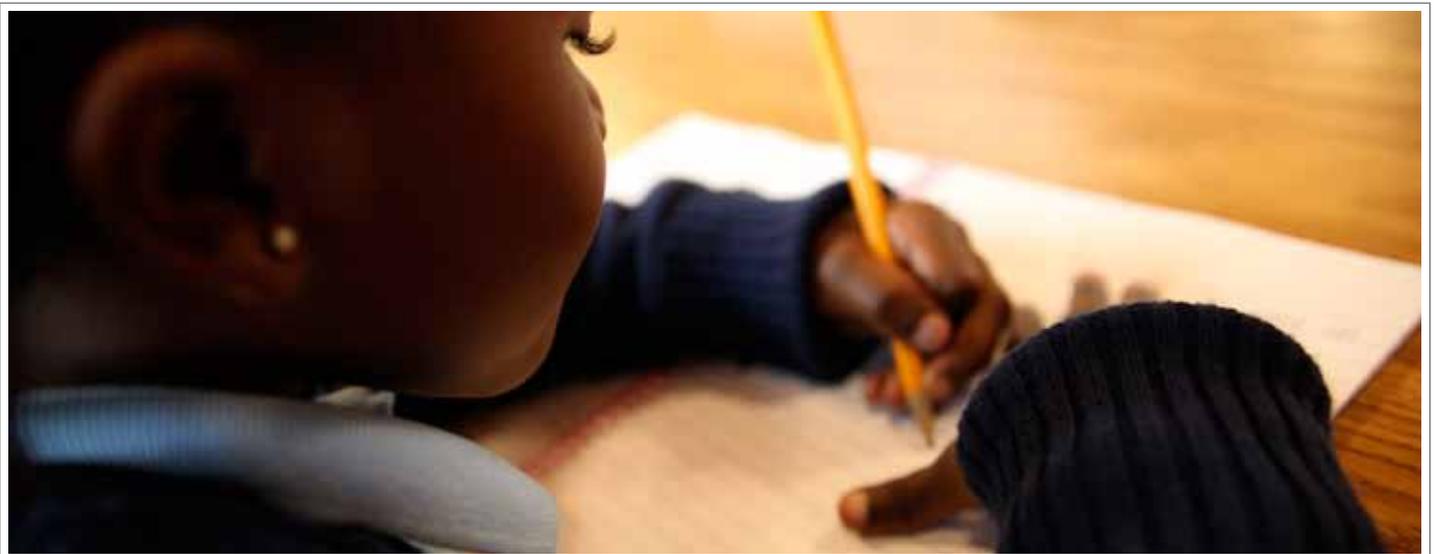
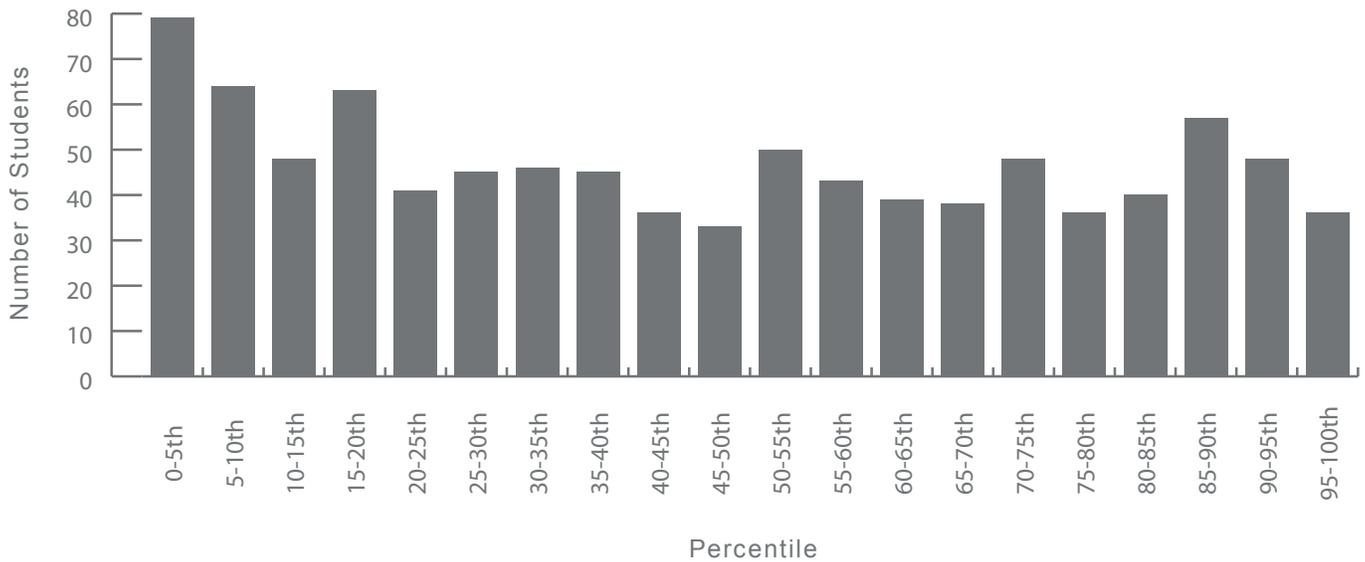
Charters with Significant African American Subgroups - Statewide Distribution on Percent Predicted API, 2010



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Traditional Schools with Significant African American Subgroups - Statewide Distribution on Percent Predicted API, 2010

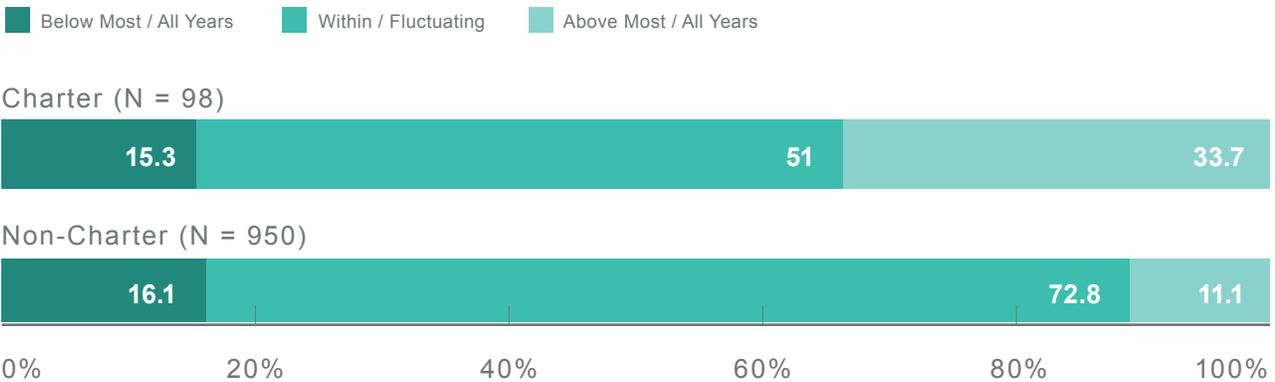


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4. Over a three-year period, charter public schools serving African American students are over three times as likely as traditional public schools to consistently outperform their predicted performance.

Percent of Charter and Traditional Schools with Significant African American Student Populations in each Similar Students Measure Band, 2010



5. Charter public schools serving African American students are more likely to have high academic status and growth and less likely to have low academic status and growth than traditional public schools.

Status/Growth quadrants for 2010 (centered at statewide median)

	Charter Public Schools (4+ years old)		Traditional Public Schools	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Low Status, Low Growth	16	29.1	334	35.3
Low Status, High Growth	21	38.2	344	36.3
High Status, Low Growth	2	3.6	94	9.9
High Status, High Growth	16	29.1	175	18.5
Total with Data	55	100.0	947	100.0
Missing Data	43 ⁷		3	
Total	98		950	

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6. Charter public schools serving African American students are over three times as likely to be a “High Impact” school than traditional public schools serving African American students. They are about half as likely as their traditional public school counterparts to fall below CCSA’s Minimum Criteria for Renewal⁸.

High Impact Schools

	Charter Public Schools	Traditional Public Schools
High Impact Schools	15	47
Percent of Schools that are High Impact	15.3%	5.0%
Total with Data	98	944

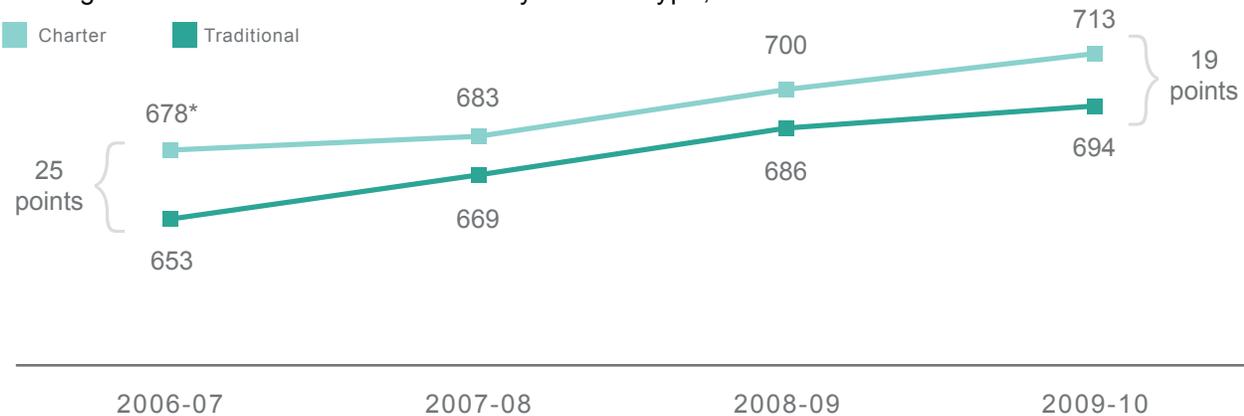
Below CCSA Minimum Criteria for Renewal

	Charter Public Schools (4+ years)	Traditional Public Schools
Number of Schools Below CCSA Minimum Criteria for Renewal	2	61
Percent of Schools Below CCSA Minimum Criteria for Renewal	3.6%	6.5%
Total with Data	55	944

Traditional Academic Measures: API and AYP Results

7. African American students have higher API achievement in charter public schools than in traditional public schools statewide, although all schools continue to have low proficiency rates for African American students.

Average African American API Scores by School Type, 2007-2010



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8. African American students in charter public schools perform better than traditional public schools in elementary and middle school. However, among high schools, the charter advantage has diminished in recent years.

9. African Americans in charter public schools outperform their traditional public school counterparts in most large urban districts.

Cumulative Change in African American API Scores by District from 2007 - 2010

	2006-2007	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	Cumulative Change
Los Angeles					
Charter	703	707	664	700	-3
Traditional	643	657	699	688	+45
Oakland					
Charter	655	694	711	730	+75
Traditional	628	635	651	671	+43
Sacramento					
Charter	660	701	739	836	+176
Traditional	669	695	698	682	+13
San Francisco					
Charter	735	664	769	750	+15
Traditional	573	566	575	605	+32
San Diego					
Charter	677	667	685	712	+45
Traditional	658	677	710	726	+68

Yellow highlighting indicates higher API scores. Charter public schools in Fresno and San Bernardino do not have enough African American students to generate a significant subgroup for API purposes.

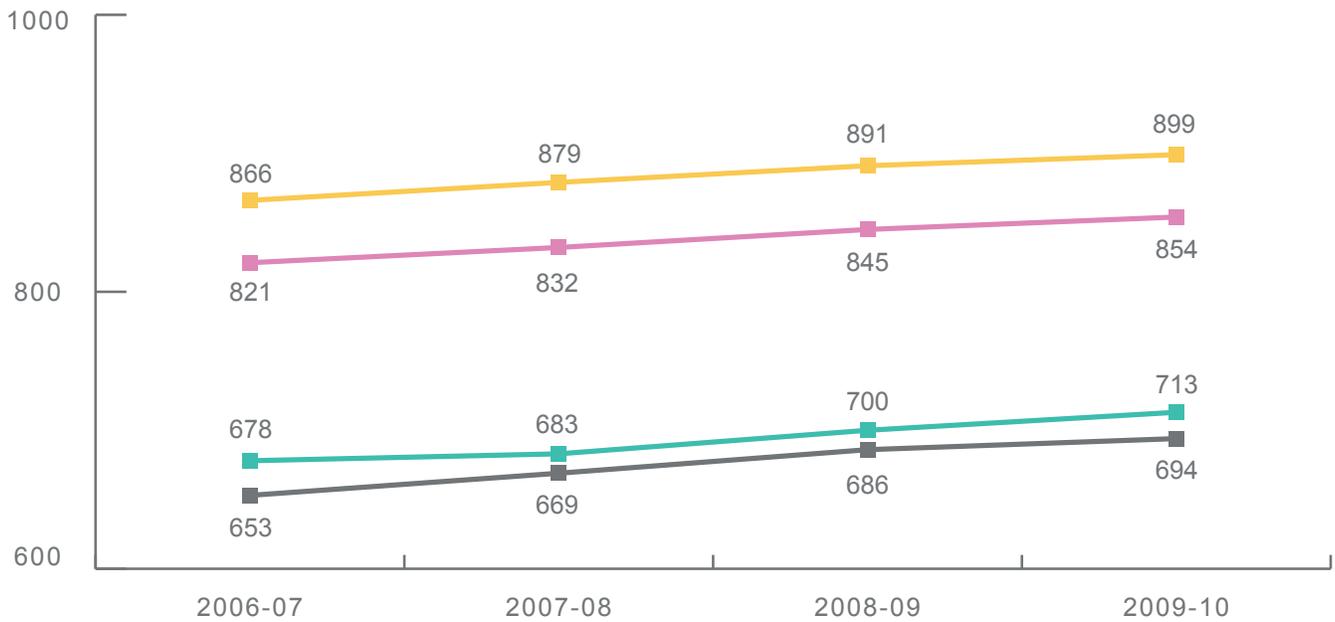
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10. Charter public schools are having more success than traditional public schools at closing the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites and Asians, although big gaps persist across all school types.

API Achievement Gap in CA, 2007 - 2010

■ Asian API, all schools
 ■ White API, all schools
 ■ Charter African American API
 ■ Traditional African American API



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11. The most successful charter public schools serving African American students well tend to be part of a network or Charter Management Organization (CMO), and are older, classroom based or start-up schools.

African American Percentages and Performance by Charter Types

	% African American Students	African American ELA Proficiency	African American Math Proficiency
All Traditional Public Schools	8.68	43.43	40.86
Classroom Based	10.84	44.24	42.73
Non-Classroom-Based	3.07	34.46	21.97
Start-Up	9.50	43.70	40.79
Conversion	6.34	41.75	40.98
Autonomous	10.26	43.83	41.26
Semi-Autonomous	5.29	39.04	40.96
Not Autonomous	4.54	43.35	41.07
CMO	11.77	44.82	42.69
Networked	10.74	49.35	47.10
Freestanding	6.46	40.40	37.54
Young	10.68	40.01	37.45
Mature	7.29	46.95	44.38

Yellow highlighting indicates higher numbers.

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12. Few schools have demonstrated that they are highly effective educators of African Americans; however charters are much more likely to be in this group. While charters make up only 9% of schools statewide, they represent 39% of highly effective schools for African American students.

Number of Schools Effectively Serving African American Students

	Statewide	African American API 800+	African American ELA Proficiency 65%+	African American Math Proficiency 65%+	Meets All Three
Total	8765	101	596	577	18
Charter	761	20	55	48	7
Traditional	8004	81	541	529	11
% of Schools that are Charter	8.7%	19.8%	9.2%	8.3%	38.9%



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With near perfect precision, these successful schools were implementing most of the strategies discussed in scholarly literature as effective for African American students. While each one of the case study schools implemented best practices with their own style, they held a number of essential practices in common.

1. A clear mission statement focused on academic achievement and developing students

Each of the case study schools has a clear mission statement focused on academic achievement and developing scholars.

2. Knowing, understanding and catering to students' diverse needs

These educators consistently emphasized high expectations as a central element African American students need to excel. They also expressed the importance of understanding where students come from, their environment and the things they go through. "Call and response" techniques, music, and movement were seen in some form at each school. Course materials and content incorporated diverse voices and cultures. Classes in these successful schools were interactive and engaging. Teachers explicitly connected content to the "big picture" and reiterated the usefulness of what was learned and the importance of education to students' lives. Student voice and autonomy were encouraged.

3. A standards-based curriculum focused on critical thinking skills

Academic rigor was the hallmark of these schools and classes. Each case study school had a standards-based culture that focused on lesson planning and quality

instruction. Classes were not marked by basic skills instruction, but rather activities that stimulate high-order thinking and creativity. While these schools utilized direct instruction, students were highly encouraged to ask questions and engage in discussion. Students were provided with many opportunities to showcase their talents and did so freely. Learning often culminated in synthesizing projects or activities. Academic attainment was celebrated and students congratulated each other for being smart. Academics took precedence over everything.

4. Results-focused instructional practices

The school leader and teachers set goals for instruction for the year and monitored progress over the school year through data use to make sure those goals were being met. Instructors sought to fine tune their instruction according to students' needs, differentiating instruction and providing intervention. Vocabulary development was woven into many activities across all disciplines. Teachers took their time to explain concepts to students. Continual feedback was given to students and parents.

5. Curricular and instructional decisions are based on data

These schools engage in deep data analysis and make use of that data to direct their program. Each required some form of a weekly planning process that utilized weekly assessments, analysis of data, and plans for improvement. School leaders and teachers examined student performance to make decisions about student groupings, re-teaching, program allocation, remediation and professional development.

6. Explicitly teaching test taking strategies

In these schools, there was no arguing about whether or

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not testing is the best way to assess student knowledge. Living within the reality of testing accountability, schools specifically prepared students for the test-taking process. These schools also incorporated the CST into their school culture. They held pep rallies and celebrated CST performance.

7. School leader serves as instructional leader

Teachers saw the school leader as an instructional leader, always advising teachers and sharing best practices. The school leaders were all former teachers. These school leaders spent a lot of time in classrooms and walking the school grounds.

8. A strong school culture is explicitly built and re-enforced at the start of each school year

Strong school culture was clearly evident in these schools. High expectations abounded and translated into celebrations of student success and a strong sense of pride, pride about academic excellence. In addition to all the work taking place at these schools, there was also a lot of warmth, care and friendly interaction. Teachers displayed a positive attitude to and about students and vocalized their care for students' well-being beyond academics.

9. Parents are included as full partners in students' education

The parents were seen by the teachers and school leaders as partners in the students' education. Each school discussed unifying around the child's education and best interests as the strategy they used to engage with their parents and families.

10. All members of the school are held accountable

In addition to the many ways students and parents were held accountable, these school leaders and teachers had high standards of accountability for themselves as well.

11. Structures are intentionally put into place to help achieve the mission of the school

These educators carefully crafted their schools and thought strategically about every policy they implemented and norm they instituted. The academic schedule was designed to allow for teacher preparation and collaboration. English Language Arts and math were given more time and frontloaded to the morning. Instructional time was highly guarded. Schools had requirements for grade promotion and graduation; they did not practice social promotion. Students were expected to respect teachers and behavior systems of rewards and consequences were in place to ensure that happened. Uniforms were required at each school and that policy was enforced. These effective schools had longer school days and school years. There was regular school-to-home communication. Also, students were provided numerous extracurricular opportunities to help ensure whole-child development.

What We Did Not See

Among the many best practices we observed, it is important to note what we did not see:

- Militaristic discipline: These effective schools were not ones of militaristic, hard discipline or cultures of command and control.
- Teaching to the test: Teachers implemented a standards-based curriculum and students and parents were taught about what the California Standards Test (CST) is and

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why it is important. However, they did not “teach to the test” or engage in “drill and kill” test-prep strategies.

Testing was not the focus of the curriculum.

- Superficial celebrations of culture: While these schools are implementing culturally relevant pedagogy and confirming research-based practices, they did not invest heavily in cultural celebrations or other external displays of culture – a “heroes and holidays” approach to culture making.

We witnessed three distinct schools that have not collaborated with each other implementing very similar practices and getting similarly impressive results with their African American students. The practices implemented at these successful case study schools confirm the research on culturally relevant pedagogy which promotes best practices for educating African American youth. That is why it is essential that theoretical ideas be translated into tangible practices that educators can understand and implement. This report sought to do just that – detail the practices that create an effective educational experience for African American students and how that is implemented in the innovative construct of California charter public schools. We encourage all public schools – traditional and charter – seeking to accelerate achievement to explore more deeply how their own cultures, practices and missions align with these successful schools to best address their unique challenges.

Charter public schools have at their disposal the freedom to build their curriculum and instructional practices, which positions them uniquely to take full advantage of what works best on behalf of their students. As charter public schools constitute themselves at an unprecedented rate with the express purpose of creating mission-

driven schools designed to close the achievement gap and positively impact African American success, understanding what works and why and in which contexts becomes particularly urgent for parents, educators and policymakers alike.

This report has unearthed a wealth of insight into the performance, needs, and possibilities of African American students. *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform* adds to this body of scholarly research, confirming the belief that African American students can achieve at high levels and deserve an education that helps them do so and adds detail to best practices for effectively educating African American students.

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Policy and Practice Implications

Practice Implications

The commonalities among the case study schools we profiled and confirmed in scholarly research illuminate best practices all schools can implement to effectively educate African American students, if given the freedom to do so. These findings imply the effectiveness of particular practices and policies.

- Create an environment of high expectations.
- Implement a direct-instruction, rigorous, standards-based curriculum.
- Practice data-driven decision-making.
- Institute time and processes for regular teacher collaboration.
- Practice culturally relevant pedagogy.
- Engage students through high levels of interaction, relevant course materials, and allowing student voice and autonomy.
- Implement a parent education and volunteer program.
- Hold all constituents accountable for fulfilling their roles and responsibilities.
- Ensure mission alignment in which the school’s mission drives schools’ practices and operational platforms.

Policy Implications

In addition to illuminating best practices for educating African American students, the results of this research also hold policy considerations that communities, educators, and public policy makers may wish to consider when attempting to craft effective strategies for success in closing racial achievement gaps.

The results being achieved by California charter public schools should encourage further support of charter public school development.

- Replicate High Impact charters aggressively
- Address charter growth strategically (placing charters where African American needs are highest).
- Create exchange networks of practice between high and low performing charter public and traditional public schools (creating learning communities that exchange knowledge and practices to accelerate performance).
- Embrace charter public school accountability to ensure that only the schools that are effectively educating students persist.
- Document and disseminate whole structures of success for replication (not isolated practices).

There are also policy considerations relevant to all schools, of all types. These policies relate to key elements of schooling practices that are needed in order to make up for the educational debt African American students currently suffer from (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Policies that impact the educational experience of African American students can help to eliminate racial achievement gaps and increase student achievement.

- Institute a longer school day and school year.
- Reduce class and school size.
- Hold teachers accountable for student progress and provide the needed access to data required to implement real-time improvement plans.
- Instruct school leaders and teachers on best practices and provide the operational context for them to be able to implement fully.

All the practices highlighted in this report can and do exist in the traditional and charter public school sectors. The good news is that there are a number of adaptations

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to the ways traditional public schools operate that can be leveraged to accelerate African American academic achievement as well, and which charter public schools are already uniquely positioned to address directly.

As a reform movement established with the express purpose to accelerate achievement where underachievement persists, closing achievement and opportunity gaps for all students is central to our mission. Building on our current success bridging the attainment gap for African American students, the California charter schools movement seeks to further accelerate that success for all students and assist the broader educational community in doing the same. Be it for African American, or other disenfranchised students, it is our charge to utilize chartering innovation to investigate what works and disseminate best practices broadly. Using operational and governance freedoms to their best advantage, charter public schools will continue to pursue educational success for all students and demonstrate that high achievement is indeed possible, replicable and sustainable, at scale for students that have for too long languished at the mercy of low expectations and an underlying, corrosive belief that

excellence is not possible. It is. Public schools – charter and traditional – across this state demonstrate that truth daily. It is essential that educators and policy makers focus on what works and bring attention to implementing best practices broadly.



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Endnotes

- ¹ Charter schools are public schools. They are tuition-free and open to any student who wishes to attend. Charter schools allow parents, organizations, or community groups to restore, reinvent, and reenergize our public school system. Charter schools are designed, tailored, and governed by each local community, rather than by a central bureaucracy.
- ² The Academic Performance Index (API) is a numeric score ranging from 200 to 1,000 that summarizes a school's performance on California's standardized tests. It is used for school accountability purposes.
- ³ In exchange for the greater operational flexibility granted to charter schools, charter public schools are subject to even higher levels of accountability than traditional public schools. Schools are granted a five-year "charter," which details their individual mission, educational program and methods of assessment. Schools are held accountable to their authorizer (the entity granting the charter), as the authorizer may choose to renew a school's charter based on its record of success. The authorizer may also choose to deny a charter's renewal in which case the charter school would close.
- ⁴ Adequate Yearly Progress or AYP is the requirement under the No Child Left Behind legislation for schools and districts to show annual improvement towards Federal goals in a number of areas. These range from teachers' qualifications to students' test scores. Failure to make AYP can lead to a series of measures including allowing students to transfer to other schools to appointing a new school principal and other punitive measures.
- ⁵ The Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) provides school-level accountability for alternative schools serving highly mobile and at-risk students.
- ⁶ Sixty-five percent is greater than one but less than two standard deviations above the mean proficiency performance for African American students in the state for both ELA and math.
- ⁷ Charters that are less than four years old do not have sufficient API growth data to be included.
- ⁸ Traditional public schools are also assessed on these metrics to provide context and a full picture of performance across schools.