ARTICLES

The Coincidence of Reform: Charter School Diversity in a Standards-Based World

Dick M. Carpenter II, PhD

ABSTRACT. Diversity was and remains a central feature of charter schools, but some question if this is possible in an environment of standards, assessment, and accountability. Using a newly created charter school typology, this article examines charter diversity, measured by new school creation, from 1994 to 2002. Results indicate the charter landscape grew more diverse throughout the 1990s rather than less.

KEYWORDS. Charter schools, standards and assessment, educational reform, isomorphism

Since the beginning of the charter school movement, curricular autonomy, innovation, and diversity have been heralded as some of its most important features.¹ For example, a discussion of the then-new Minnesota charter law

Dick M. Carpenter II is Associate Professor of educational leadership, research, and foundations, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

Address correspondence to: Dick M. Carpenter II, College of Education, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, Colorado Springs, CO 80918 (E-mail: dcarpent@uccs.edu).
described how schools would “have the freedom to develop their own cur-
riculum and agenda” to attract students with “an affinity for the school’s teaching methods, the school’s learning philosophy, or a particular sub-
ject.”

Early in the movement Tracy and Wagner described charter schools as laboratories for educational innovation, which was an idea that grew into a central feature of charter schools. And in his 1992 article “Chartering Diversity” Kolderie wrote, “Choice isn’t going to mean much if there aren’t good, new schools to choose from. The question of how to expand the range of choices is central to the design of a choice system.”

Crawford notes that in the first 11 states to pass charter school legislation, the most common motivation or purpose was to facilitate innovation. Of those 11 states, 9 had specific provisions pertaining to innovation in the classroom. Lubienski likewise notes that between 1998 and 2003, every state that passed a charter law specified innovation as an expected outcome, if not one of the most important outcomes. In fact, Lubienski notes that no other goal, including academic achievement, was mentioned more frequently or with such consistent language.

Enthusiasm for innovation and diversity was based on the (by now) well known theory that market mechanisms of choice and competition between autonomous schools encourages diverse and innovative approaches, which, in turn, increases achievement. Thus charter schools have often been cast as “laboratories” or “R & D (research and development) centers.”

Perhaps the greatest promise of charter schools is that they would break the intransigence that characterizes most traditional public school sys-
tems. Charter schools could be created by independent groups of educa-
tors, by corporations, or by universities. They could even be established by public school systems that are committed to dramatic reform. As a result, promising innovations that have been blocked by bureaucratic wrangling would find their way into practice more rapidly.

It is important to note that although innovation and diversity are commonly discussed together, Lubienski asserts they are distinct constructs. Acknowledging that several definitions of innovation exist as it relates to charter schools, Lubienski’s working definition emphasizes the “newness” of an educational practice, whether in organizational structure or curriculum. Using this definition, Lubienski finds that charter schools are embracing a variety of approaches organizationally, but in relation to curriculum, or the “R & D” function, they are falling short of the expectation articulated by enthusiasts and codified in policy.
Others do not make the hard distinction Lubienski makes between innovation and diversity, instead asserting diversity is a form of innovation. As such, charter schools may not pursue innovative curricular programs defined as new, but rather as innovative in that they often form around distinctive themes or missions to serve the needs and desires of educational consumers, thereby increasing the diversity of options available to families, something traditional public schools historically have not done. As Maranto describes, “More typically, charter schools have refined and disseminated existing practices that district schools were reluctant to use—a nice service for parents who may not care whether a program is ‘innovative’ as long as it works for their children”.

Others also emphasize the importance of diversity. For example, Sizer opined, “Of the many arguments for charter schools, one is crucial: that charters should be deliberately, thoughtfully, boldly different from existing mainline public middle and high schools.” According to Merrifield, such differences should result from a competitive market, wherein competition compels producers to specialize. Applied to education, Merrifield asserts that in a competitive market, schools would specialize in particular curricular and pedagogical approaches to meet the unique needs and demands of students and families, thereby creating greater diversity in the market. This would be particularly so compared to the current public schools’ monopoly, which weakens the incentive for neighboring schools to differentiate curricula or teaching styles.

Yet, throughout the past decade and a half, has the expansion of the charter movement lived up to these expectations? Is it truly an innovation marked by increased diversity? As Petrilli noted, some have raised concerns that standards and accountability, which grew more or less simultaneously with charter schools, may homogenize both existing charters and new school development. Bulkley uses the term “isomorphism” to describe this dynamic where constraining pressure forces members of a population to resemble one another. Applied to charter schools, the idea is that because of the standards and assessment requirements, the types of charter schools begin to concentrate or constrict so that they look similar by way of structural arrangements, norms, curricular approach, and types of personnel. Based on an analysis in four states, Lubienski appears to reject such a notion when he asserts that charter schools are diversifying options. However, his study lacks a longitudinal component with which to gauge the waxing or waning of diversity since the inception of charter schools. As a result, it could be that charters have grown less diverse since the early 1990s, an examination Lubienski’s method does not facilitate.
Moreover, other evidence suggests a trend toward a standardization of practice. For example, Arsen and colleagues all report findings consistent with isomorphism, with a particular emphasis on “back to basics” approaches. Opfer likewise argues that the constriction described by Petrilli and Bulkley is occurring in Georgia’s charter schools. Through accountability measures that rely primarily on standards and assessments, autonomy and diversity are increasingly negated, creating environments where educators feel tied to traditional pedagogy and curriculum. If this isomorphism is a true and widespread phenomenon, two favored methods of change among reformers may work at cross-purposes, with standards and accountability eventually undermining one of the central features of choice.

But standards may not represent the only potential force of isomorphism in the charter world. The success of some models may also act to constrict diversity. As new school developers cast about for ideas and options, the promise of those existing charters exhibiting success can lead to chasing results in the development of new schools. A third force comes in the form of educational management organizations (EMOs). As EMOs continue to develop more schools, their “franchise” approach may result in a constriction of school diversity. Indeed, related research is beginning to look at the effects of EMOs on some of the distinctive characteristics of charters, such as decentralizing power and decision making. A fourth dynamic may come, somewhat ironically, from the dynamic of choice. Some evidence suggests many parents—as an “inherently conservative clientele”—view public schools as overly innovative because these schools embrace many fads and progressive reforms. These parents actively seek schools built on more traditional educational philosophies, thereby creating greater demand that new schools seek to meet.

In addition to isomorphism, the restriction of charter school diversity may also come from funding issues. As Speakman and Hassel demonstrate, substantial funding gaps exist between charter schools and traditional public schools. These egregious gaps discourage the creation of new charter schools. The [gap in] dollars reported range[s] from $4,835 to $12,565, a potentially dramatic difference to any school. Funding levels may partially predict how many new charter schools will be opened. Improving the parity between charter and district funding should spur more new school openings and create more educational options for families.
Merrifield also suggests price controls inhibit innovation and diversity.\textsuperscript{27} In traditional free markets, innovation is created by entrepreneurs who respond to the opportunity to charge comparably higher prices. Over time, those initial higher prices go down due to experience and competition, and the innovation is adopted and provided by other producers. With price controls the incentive for such innovation is lost. Applying this to charter schools, Merrifield likens price controls to the inability of charters to charge parents “tuition add-ons” that would facilitate innovation beyond what is possible using the set per pupil operating revenue from the state, thus stifling the “development of many innovative practices.”

Finally, charter laws themselves may restrict diversification. The simplest means, of course, is legislatively imposed caps on the number of charter schools allowed to operate within a state. But open admissions policies (i.e., the prohibition on selective admissions) also may impede diversification by reducing the ability to specialize.\textsuperscript{28} Prohibiting selective admissions increases the chances of mismatches between student needs and desires and a school’s ability to specialize, thereby erecting a barrier to entry into the market and reducing diversity of producers. Somewhat ironically, public magnet schools have successfully used selective admissions processes for decades.

Of course, the influence of standards, EMOs, chasing results, funding issues, and/or idiosyncrasies of charter laws remain informed speculation. This paucity stems in large part from a shortcoming in charter research. Specifically, comparatively few researchers have sought to create a model or typology wherein charter schools would be systematically classified and sorted into different groups.\textsuperscript{29} Without a typology that describes and classifies schools by thematic or curricular approach, the systematic measurement of diversity remains limited. However, a new typology was recently developed that facilitates an examination of the diversity of charter school development over time.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{THE TYPOLOGY}

The typology used herein classifies schools into one of ten types based on the schools’ educational/curricular theme.\textsuperscript{31} This theme describes a school’s instructional focus that drives the curriculum and culture and the student population served by the school.\textsuperscript{32} These types were created through an inductive process using descriptions of all 1,200 schools obtained via school Web sites, report cards, state departments of education,
state charter school associations, and/or direct contact with the schools. Notably, these descriptions are overwhelmingly self-descriptions that schools provide to the various aforementioned sources. Therefore, not only was the typology created inductively from extant schools, but each school was assigned a type based on its own description. As reported in an earlier article in this journal, the process also underwent interrater reliability analyses using three independent raters. Using both percent agreement\textsuperscript{33} (78 percent) and Cohen’s Kappa\textsuperscript{34} ($K = .73, p = .000$) results indicated substantial reliability.\textsuperscript{35}

The types in the model also encompass pedagogical approaches used in schools. As I first discussed in an earlier article in this journal,\textsuperscript{36} educational/curricular theme and pedagogy are not mutually exclusive constructs but closely linked. For example, schools built on progressive educational themes frequently use pedagogical approaches that are holistic, hands-on, student-centered, and project-based, while schools organized around more traditional tenets tend to subscribe to more direct instruction and teacher directed learning activities.

The typology also reflects the types of students schools seek to serve. Many charter schools are open enrollment in that they are not designed to serve a particular student population based on needs. Other charters cater to particular needs of certain student groups, such as those with disabilities, traditional at-risk populations, and the like. As some authors assert, this is an important defining feature within the charter school context, particularly when attempting to measure performance differences between schools.\textsuperscript{37} Thus, as Figure 1 indicates, the two-dimensional typology allows for finer distinctions between schools and types based on theme and student population but also retains requisite research parsimony. Each of the types is briefly described in the following sections.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\caption{Charter School Typology and Point-in-time Distribution of Charter Schools.}
\begin{tabular}{lcc}
\hline
 & Open enrollment & Targeted student population \\
\hline
Traditional & 258 (22.2\%) & 8 (0.7\%) \\
Progressive & 331 (28.5\%) & 8 (0.7\%) \\
Vocational & 50 (4.3\%) & 93 (8\%) \\
General & 153 (13.2\%) & 189 (16.3\%) \\
Alternative Delivery & 69 (5.9\%) & 4 (0.3\%) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{figure}
Traditional

These schools stress high standards in academics and behavior, rigorous classes, and other earmarks of a “back-to-basics” approach. Classes tend to be teacher-centered, students are supposed to be industrious and well-behaved, and the courses full of challenging, prescriptive content. Philosophically, traditionalists tend to subscribe to an objective view of knowledge and to see the teacher’s role as classroom expert and conveyor of information.

Progressive

These schools subscribe to educational philosophies and/or practices aligned with “progressivism,” which places a premium on individual development. Learning is approached holistically and includes paying attention to students’ emotional, spiritual, physical, social, and intellectual needs. Classroom activities are often student-centered, hands-on, project-based, and cooperative in nature. Students assume ownership of tasks and accountability for their learning, and they are encouraged to work without teacher intervention or constant supervision.

Vocational

These schools seek to equip students with practical, career-related skills that will help them transition from school to work. Students participate in apprenticeship and on-the-job training designed to provide work experience, job-specific skills, and marketable credentials.

General

Schools in this category, including “conversion” schools that were previously operated by a district, are essentially indistinguishable from neighborhood public schools. It is important to note that conversion schools were not automatically placed in this category based on their conversion status. A conversion school that subscribed to educational progressivism would have been placed in that category, for example.

Alternative Delivery

This category includes schools that provide most instruction outside of traditional school buildings or classrooms, such as “virtual” charter schools. Often, individual learning plans are crafted for each student, who
typically study at home. Teachers guide and/or monitor progress from afar as students work independently or under their parents’ tutelage.

**Open Enrollment**

These schools do not target specific student populations for admission. That is, they are not designed explicitly to serve students with specific needs, such as those with disabilities, dropouts, and so forth. Instead, they serve any population of students within the grade levels they offer, typically on a first-come or lottery basis.

**Targeted Student Population**

These schools serve students with specific needs or attributes. Many of these youngsters have not enjoyed success in the mainstream educational environment due to risk factors, disabilities, or (ironically) giftedness. The school’s overriding mission typically has more to do with serving a particular type of student than with employing any particular curriculum or pedagogy.

Using this typology, this article analyzes nearly 1,200 charter schools that opened throughout a 10-year period to examine the diversity of charter schools, particularly any evident trends in either the expansion or constriction of charter types over time. As results indicate, the diversity of charter schools throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s actually expanded rather than contracted. Yet, it remains to be seen whether the increased accountability requirements resulting from No Child Left Behind create the isomorphism discussed above.

**METHODS**

This research is guided by the following question: Is there evidence of an expansion or contraction of charter school diversity from 1994 to 2002?

**Sample**

The analysis includes a sample of 1,182 charter schools in Arizona ($n = 353$), California ($n = 342$), Florida ($n = 125$), Michigan ($n = 196$), and Texas ($n = 166$). These were the same schools used to develop the typology. While the goal was to include all of the charters in each state, data were not available for all schools. However, this sample represents greater than 87 percent of the schools operating in 2001–2002 in these
five states. It also represents 52 percent of all charter schools operating nationwide during the 2001–2002 school year. Therefore, although 38 states had charter laws during that school year, the majority of operating schools were in the five states included in this study. Indeed, the average number of schools operating in the states not included in this sample was 26; the average number of schools operating in the states in this sample was 271. Thus, using schools from the top five states represented an efficient method of building a robust and broad sample of schools operating in 2001–2002.

The 2001–2002 school year was chosen for several reasons, some of which were related to the use of these data for other longitudinal research unassociated with this article. However, specific to this iteration, the 2001–2002 school year was an important demarcation as it represented the final year of data prior to the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Due to the latter’s increased emphasis on standardized testing, limiting data only to those prior to 2001–2002 facilitates an examination of the study’s question without the effects of NCLB and lays the foundation for subsequent research testing the potential effects of NCLB on charter diversity in a pre-post model. Therefore, the years covered in this examination begin just shortly after the advent of state standards and end with the signing of NCLB. Specifically, the oldest schools in this sample opened in 1993–1994, and the newest opened during the 2001–2002 school year.

Data

The data in this study include the frequencies of the 10 types represented by the 1,182 schools and the year each school opened. To create the first data, a table of all charter schools from the 2001–2002 school year in each state was constructed using the Common Core of Data. From that list, each school received a type/code based on self-reported descriptions available through school Web sites, school accountability reports, state departments of education Web sites, statewide charter school agencies, and/or direct correspondence with schools. This produced a list of nearly 40 initial types. Consistent with standard inductive coding and data reduction procedures, these initial types were grouped or aggregated into the two-dimensional typology described previously and each school was then assigned its type using the final model.

The year each school opened facilitated the examination of expansion or contraction in school types over time. The primary sources for these data included either state-level data sources, available through state
departments of education or statewide charter school agencies (i.e., Texas Resource Center for Charter Schools, California Charter Schools Association, etc.), or the Center for Education Reform charter school directory.

**Analysis**

The analysis includes a cross-tabulation of charter school types by year of school origin. The percentages of school types in Table 1 are reported within years to measure the distribution of schools across the types for each year: Expansion will result in greater diversity of distribution and contraction in a restricted distribution. Admittedly, this is a rather simple analysis. However, the few nominal data analysis techniques available, such as the chi-square test, Cochran Q test, and contingency coefficients are designed for time-independent frequency analysis of data. According to Anklesaria, the lack of a suitable time-series methodology for nominal data has discouraged researchers from gathering such data, which in turn has deemphasized the need for appropriate analytical tools. Thus, a more sophisticated analysis was not possible. Nevertheless, the descriptive statistics herein still facilitate the ability to see clear trends and patterns in the diversity of charter school development over time.

**RESULTS**

The following discussion presents the data in two ways. First, the distribution of schools in the typology is considered without the element of time. This provides a “point in time” look at the diversity of all charter schools regardless of their age. The second analysis examines new school development over time. In so doing, it demonstrates trends in annual new school development throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s.

When the data are examined regardless of their age, the distribution of charters appears concentrated in four types. As Figure 1 indicates, half of the charter schools in the sample fall within two categories: schools with general enrollment populations that subscribe either to traditional or progressive foci. Of those, more organize around progressive tenets than traditional. Very few of traditional or progressive schools cater specifically to the needs of targeted student populations. Vocational schools, however, appear organized more often to serve targeted student populations. Nevertheless, vocational schools of all types represent little more than 12 percent of the sample.
### TABLE 1. Cross-tabulation of school types by year of origin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/Open Enrollment</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>19.7</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional/Targeted Student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive/Open Enrollment</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive/Targeted Student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational/Open Enrollment</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational/Targeted Student</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population Count</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General/Open Enrollment</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>46.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General/Targeted Student Population</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>16.5</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Delivery/Open Enrollment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>.9</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative Delivery/Targeted</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Population</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within years</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The categories with the second greatest percentage of charter schools are those that do not identify themselves by a particular theme or curricular focus. Instead, these schools tend to self-identify as standards-based or emphasize structural differences, such as size or length of school year. Of note is the greater percentage of those that cater to targeted student populations (16.3 percent). At little more than 6 percent of the sample, schools that utilize alternative delivery represent a rather small group. Of those, few cater to targeted student populations. Therefore, examined all together in 2001–2002, the distribution of charter schools does not appear exceptionally diverse, particularly when two of the types account for half of the schools in the sample.

Examining school types over time yields a different story. In fact, looking at new school development from 1993/1994–2001/2002 indicates a general growth in diversity. The simplest indicator is the percentage distribution in 1993/1994 compared to the early 2000s. If constriction were present, one would expect more diversity in the distribution of percentages in early years as compared to later. Yet, it is quite the opposite.

As Table 1 indicates, early schools tended to be among the progressive, general, and alternative delivery types. Moreover, in early years, numbers for the latter two were accounted for by preexisting situations, such as conversion schools and those involved in home study. The diversity or innovation in early years manifested itself primarily in the progressive type.

In subsequent years, other types began to see greater percentages of the new school development, particularly among the traditional/open enrollment, general/targeted student population, and vocational types. Indeed, of those with large percentages in 1993/1994, only the progressive type maintained a generally consistent pattern of new school development. The general/open enrollment and alternative delivery/open enrollment types saw decreasing percentages over time, which is logical given that preexisting situations accounted for the early numbers.

Yet, despite the growth in diversity, some types saw little development over time, specifically the traditional, progressive, and alternative delivery types targeting certain student populations. Indeed, new school development for targeted student populations occurred overwhelmingly in the general and vocational categories. Thus, even during a growth of diversity in new school development, trends in that growth were evident. However, pertinent to the issue at hand, constriction in school type over time was not present.
DISCUSSION

For those who fear, or perhaps speculate about the homogenization of or isomorphism among charter schools, these results appear generally to assuage such concerns. New school development since 1993/1994 has demonstrated greater diversity over time rather than less. And even though the point-in-time examination indicated a concentration of schools among several types, the aggregation of subtypes in the typology’s creation masks diversity within the types.

As reported in the description of the typology’s creation, several of the types include up to 24 subtypes. For example, the progressive type includes subtypes ranging from ethnocentric to Montessori to environmentally focused charters. And the targeted student population type includes schools designed for special education students, those at risk of dropping out, and gifted students. Unfortunately, the small sample sizes related to these different subtypes prohibit any meaningful analysis over time. Nevertheless, the various subtypes present among this sample further highlight greater not less diversity among charter schools in a “point-in-time” examination.

Worth noting among these data are the types that tend to attract the greater new school development over time—traditional/open enrollment, general/targeted student population, and vocational types. These appear to cater to the needs or desires of populations disaffected by the standard public school offering. Traditional/open enrollment charters include many “back-to-basics” type schools popular among ideologically or educationally conservative families dissatisfied with neighborhood public school curricula or teaching practices.

Moreover, general/targeted student population and vocational types serve the needs of student populations who have not found success with standard school curricula or methods or who seek content not always offered in neighborhood public schools, such as vocational training. Thus, new charter school development arguably appears to respond more to market demands than incentives discussed previously, which comports with Maranto’s assertion of charters refining and disseminating extant practices out of favor in mainstream public schools.

This also aligns, in part, with Merrifield’s discussion of specialization in markets. That is, as the educational market opened and more charter schools formed, new schools tended to develop around themes (basics and vocational) marginalized by the existing providers (traditional public schools) or around the specialized needs of students (targeted student
populations). In so doing, these charter schools filled a market niche of unrequited demand. What is less evident, however, is the level of innovation (defined as “newness”) that often accompanies markets, which seems to support Lubienski’s conclusions about greater diversity without greater innovation. As such, it appears charters may be meeting one expectation (diversity) shared by early proponents and charter legislation but less so the expectation of “R and D centers” or educational “laboratories.”

None of these conclusions are, of course, normative. Not addressed are questions of whether charters should be expected to be diverse and innovative or if it is even desirable for them to be so. Yet, not to expect or desire those things contradicts one of the purposes and functions of markets, of which school choice is obviously one manifestation, and makes charter schools, or any choice school for that matter, seem rather pointless. Moreover, absent any diversity or innovation, existing schools sense no compulsion to examine critically and seek to refine and improve their own practices. This is not to say that to the extent charter schools designed around traditional themes are notably successful all mainstream public schools should conform accordingly. Or because vocational schools may realize success with a certain student population all public high schools should implement (or reimplement) vocational programs. Rather, as Merrifield suggests, a diverse and open educational marketplace would relieve mainstream public schools of the burden of “comprehensiveness” and facilitate specialization and refinement of practice.

Of course, the conclusions about diversity in this article are set in a pre–NCLB world; trends in charter school diversity since 2002 may begin to look different. Even more stringent accountability measures could provide greater incentives for new school creation around curricular foci more aligned with state assessments. Further data collection will be invaluable in discerning the veracity of this speculation. Other research that could illuminate this line of inquiry includes how schools change as a result of incentives, particularly those schools that opened earlier in the 1990s. This study considered only new school development. It could be even more revealing to compare the initial practices of a school to its curricula and procedures later on, say in the early 2000s.

Other measures of diversity not present herein could also shed further light on trends in charter school diversity. Specifically, this study considered curricular type or theme, but other measures could include structural characteristics, school setting, and so forth, similar to Lubienski. Of course, there would inevitably be a certain amount of colinearity between type, structure, setting, and other variables, but to the degree that it is
possible to assess discrete characteristics, additional measures of diversity would enrich the examination of the questions herein.

The value of such research is that it contributes answers to important questions we sometimes ask and occasionally opine about but too rarely examine in a systematic fashion. For example, how complementary are the various educational reform efforts? Are there unintended consequences of different reform vehicles at work where one undermines the effectiveness of another? Given the number of reforms currently in play, the import of such questions should not be underestimated.

For example, a National Center for Education Statistics Web site collects and lists the various school reform efforts across the states (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform). As Table 2 indicates, current reform efforts are numerous, including standards and assessment, public and private choice, accountability, teacher quality, K–16 (or workforce) alignment, and various funding models. Moreover, some reform efforts are present in every state, while others are not, and even reform vehicles current in every state vary in quality and substance. Of course, this only references state-level reforms. Absent is any discussion of local-level attempts. Therefore, the effort in this article is one small contribution in what should and hopefully will be a more concerted and sophisticated examination of the interactions of reform efforts, a line of inquiry that may have significant implications for student learning and educational policymaking.

**CONCLUSION**

In a September 24, 1997, speech to the AFL-CIO annual convention, president Clinton stated, “I have sought to provide more options to parents in public school through public school choice and allowing teachers to organize new charter schools within public school districts. But I also know we need national standards.” His mention of “more options” mirrored statements in other speeches he made, such as “more choices” and “schools that fit the mission needed by the children in the area,” and references to standards were scattered throughout the same and other speeches. For Clinton and other elected officials who supported the co-creation of charter schools and standards, there appeared to be little or no fear of decreased diversity (i.e., “more options”) through setting standards about what students would know and be able to do. Results from this study indicate they had no reason to be.
TABLE 2. State-level reform and number of states with specified reform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Reform</th>
<th>Number of states with specified reform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School report cards</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School report cards include performance data disaggregated by:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English proficiency</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school report cards have graduation/dropout rates disaggregated by race, income, LEP, and/or special education</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State uses student-identification system</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide standards and assessments</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State assigns ratings to all schools based on:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate yearly progress</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional state-developed criteria</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State provides assistance to low-performing schools</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State provides rewards to high-performing or improving schools</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State sanctions low-performing schools</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanction types:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School closure</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstitution</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconstituting as a charter school</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permitting student transfers</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning school over to private management</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withholding funds</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion contingent on performance on statewide exams</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation contingent on statewide exit or end-of-course exams</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exit or end-of-course exams based on state 10th grade standards or higher</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State requires remediation for students failing promotion, exit, or end-of-course exams</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Align high school standards with college and workplace expectations</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Align high school graduation requirements with college and workplace expectations</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school assessments used for college admissions or placement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold high schools accountable for graduating students who are college and work ready</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State requires minimum degree/coursework in the subject area taught for beginning-teacher license</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All high school teachers</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All middle school teachers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
However, NCLB represented a significant turning point in standards, assessment, and accountability. Prior to the passage of the bill, state standards and assessments developed unevenly across the country, where some states had little to no statewide accountability mechanisms, and some led the way with high-stakes systems. The NCLB mandates of content standards, state assessments in every grade spanning three through ten, AYP, public reporting requirements, penalties for poor performance, and the like substantively increased the intensity of standards reform and arguably could alter trends in new charter school creation. Thus, extending this research past 2002 will be an important next step in testing the predictions of isomorphism resulting from standards and accountability and contributing to the larger discussion of the interactions and unintended consequences of multiple reform efforts.

NOTES


7. Lubienski, “Innovation in Education Markets.”


10. Tracy, “Charter Schools.”


43. Maranto, “The Perfect is the Enemy of the Good.”

44. Merrifield, “Specialization in a Competitive Education Industry.”


