

Charter School Scores Higher

Averages in reading, math top of averages of many regular schools

by Tustin Arnole and Christopher Broderick, published July 20, 1996

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Test scores at four suburban back-to-basics charter schools released this week show higher averages in reading and math than many regular schools in their districts.

Supporters of the schools say the scores — many above the 80th percentile — result from the focus on fundamental skills. The curriculum closely resembles what basic-skills tests measure, and charters have advantages some other public schools do not have.

"Whatever curriculum it is, when you have smaller class size and more personalized attention, learning is going to improve," said Jim Griffin, director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

At the four charters, he said, students spend more time learning the basics than they do on art, music, sports and other activities.

The metro area has five "core knowledge" charters: Jefferson Academy in Arvada, with 222 students last school year; Academy Charter in Castle Rock, with 315 students; Cherry Creek Academy in Englewood, with 341 students; Academy of Charter Schools in Adams County (where test scores were not available Friday), with 470 students; and Core Knowledge Charter in Parker, with 450 students.

All five have long waiting lists for fall enrollment, and more fundamental charters are opening in Jefferson County and Littleton to help meet the demand.

The core knowledge schools are based on a curriculum from E. D. Hirsch's series of books that began with *What Your First-Grader Needs to Know*; subsequent installments address higher grade levels. Hirsch, a University of Virginia professor, is the author of the bestseller *Cultural Literacy*.

The curriculum stresses basic skills such as phonics, spelling and European and U. S. history. Critics say the core knowledge curriculum shortchanges contributions by minorities and women.

Standardized tests were taken last spring at all Colorado schools.

At Jefferson Academy, students posted high math scores in the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; first-graders scored in the 93rd percentile.

Test Scores / Back-to-Basics Charter Schools

Academy Charter, Castle Rock

*Average percentile scores
in California Test of Basic Skills*

Grade Level	Reading	Math
Third	73	76

Core Knowledge Charter, Parker

*Average percentile scores
in California Test of Basic Skills*

Grade Level	Reading	Math
Third	80	95

Sixth	73	83	Sixth	N/A	N/A
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Cherry Creek Charter, Englewood Jefferson Academy, Arvada

*Average percentile scores
in Iowa Test of Basic Skills*

*Median percentile scores
in Iowa Test of Basic Skills*

Grade Level	Reading	Math	Grade Level	Reading	Math
First	88	90	First	81	93
Second	90	96	Second	70	74
Third	83	73	Third	61	78
Fourth	N/A	N/A	Fourth	72	77
Fifth	88	81	Fifth	66	83
Sixth	82	78	Sixth	70	77

While math and reading scores from the four charters surpass scores at many regular schools, they are similar to the high scores posted at other back-to-basics public schools, such as Knight Fundamental in Denver and Dennison Fundamental School in Jefferson County.

Kevin Matter, Cherry Creek Schools coordinator of assessment and evaluation, said that the charter scores are impressive but that other academic indicators also must be considered.

"If people say, 'Gosh, look at any charter school and how well they do on a standardized test,' and that's the only measure they look at, then we don't put too much emphasis on that," Matter said.

The newest of the back-to-basics entries is Cherry Creek Academy. Plagued by administrative problems and parent squabbling since it opened in the fall, their scores have shown significant improvement.

Over the course of the school year, Cherry Creek Academy's students averaged a 41% gain in reading scores, a 55% gain in language arts and a 47% gain in math. Second- and third-graders showed the most improvement, with averages of 78% and 97%, respectively.

School administrators were out of town and unavailable for comment.

Matter said testing is usually done in the sixth week of school so students have time to catch up after summer vacation. Because of the school's late opening date in September, Cherry Creek Academy students were tested in the second week of class. That may explain why test scores at the start of last school year were abnormally low, leaving room for huge improvements, he said.

A more detailed final report along with the Iowa Test results of all other Cherry Creek schools will be released next month.