

Virtual Charter School Study

External Working Group Meeting
December 13, 2013

Bryan Hassel and Gillian Locke

PUBLIC IMPACT





About Public Impact

Public Impact is a growing national research and consulting organization focused on education policy and management. Our mission is to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all children in the U.S., with a special focus on students who are not served well. We are a team of professionals from many backgrounds, including former teachers. We are researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, on-the-ground consultants, and former educators who work with leading education reformers. For more on Public Impact, please visit www.publicimpact.com.



Agenda

Key Background and Definitions

Study Findings

Recommendations


NC Survey Results

Discussion



About the Study

- Primary focus: Fully online schools
- Findings also apply to:
 - State-run virtual schools
 - Supplemental online programs
 - District consortium programs
 - Full-time blended schools.
- Study addresses authorizer practice and state accountability policy.




About The Study: Six Priority Goals

1. Examine best practices for assessing quality and establishing rigorous accountability measures.
2. Analyze input measures used in evaluating fully online schools.
3. Evaluate current outcomes-based evaluation efforts.
4. Assess types of data needed to assess quality.
5. Identify approaches used to address challenges unique to, or more prevalent for, fully online schools.
6. Pinpoint implications for discussions of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization and/or future ESEA waiver process.




Methodology

- **Literature review.** Major reports, issue briefs, policy briefs, white papers, and news articles.
- **Expert interviews.** Leaders with expertise running and overseeing virtual schools; experts on accountability in online and blended learning.
- **Technical working group meeting.** March 2013 meeting in Washington, D.C. including expert panels and small-group breakout sessions.



Key Background and Definitions: Online and Blended Learning Alternatives

- **Fully online schools.** Students' *entire* course schedules taken online; many are multidistrict; many are charter schools.
- **Supplemental online programs.** Individual online courses supplement or serve as part of full-time traditional school programs.
- **Blended learning models.** Online and face-to-face instruction combined; often mixed within individual courses.



Key Background and Definitions: Overview of Virtual Schooling in the U.S.

Fully Online Schools

- In 2012–13, 30 states and D.C.
- Served 310,000 students
- More than half attend schools operated by education management organizations (EMOs)

State-run Virtual Schools

- 27 state-run virtual schools
- ~740,000 course enrollments—over half at Florida Virtual School



Key Background and Definitions: Accountability in Virtual Schools

- **Fully online charter schools** held accountable by authorizers.
- **District-run virtual programs** typically treated like brick-and-mortar district schools.
- **State-run virtual schools** accountable to state through agencies or separate organizations.
- **External partners** (e.g., education management organizations) difficult to hold accountable.

Key Background and Definitions:

Other Key Definitions

- **Inputs.** The essential elements that comprise the development and delivery of a course or school.
- **Outputs.** The end result of a process, such as course completions.
- **Outcomes.** The measure of the knowledge, skills, and abilities that students have attained from an educational experience.

Source: Patrick, S., Edwards, D., Wicks, M., & Watson, J. (2012). Measuring quality from inputs to outcomes: Creating student learning performance metrics and quality assurance for online schools. Vienna, VA: iNACOL. Retrieved from http://www.inacol.org/research/docs/iNACOL_Quality_Metrics.pdf



Agenda

Key Background and Definitions

Study Findings

Recommendations

NC Survey Results

Discussion



Study Findings: Background

- **School accountability issues are not unique to virtual schools.**
- Accountability systems:
 - **Vary from state to state** for fully online schools;
 - **Are not strong** for supplemental providers;
 - **Typically use identical standards** for virtual and brick-and-mortar schools.
- **Strict media and public scrutiny** have generated concerns about virtual schools.



Study Findings:

Types of Accountability Measures

- **Inputs** play a significant role in quality assurance for virtual schools.
- **Outputs** can be tracked using virtual schools' significant capacity to utilize data.
- **Outcomes-based measures** are also common, especially measures of student proficiency.
- **Competency-based alternatives** to traditional measurement and accountability systems are receiving increased attention.



Study Findings:

Capacity to Collect and Analyze Student Data

- **Large amounts of student data** are captured by virtual schools, relative to traditional schools.
- **Portability of data is critical**, but state data systems may not be up to the task.



Study Findings:

Consequences of Performance

- **Consequences are limited** for virtual schools, just as they are for traditional schools.
- **Closures of low-performing schools** are no less challenging with virtual schools.
- **Performance-based funding** has been implemented for some supplemental online programs.



Study Findings:

The Role of Teachers and Other Adults

- **Teacher preparation programs** are not adequately held accountable for preparing candidates to teach online.
- **Teacher ability to reach more students** with excellence is not captured in accountability systems.
- **Requirements for adult involvement** in virtual course delivery are not clear.



Study Findings:

Additional Challenges and Opportunities

- **Lack of physical school buildings** challenges current charter authorizer monitoring practices.
- **Certain types of students** – such as highly mobile and overage, undercredited students – present special accountability challenges.
- **Student enrollment tracking issues** in virtual schools need to be addressed.
- **Year-end assessment timing** does not fit well with students who start or finish courses on different schedules.



Agenda

Key Background and Definitions

Study Findings

Recommendations

NC Survey Results

Discussion



Recommendation 1

- **Focus accountability for all schools, including virtual schools, on outcomes.**
 - **Use the best available data** to scrutinize fully online schools' performance.
 - **Use multiple measures** to evaluate student outcomes.
 - **Use ESEA reauthorization discussions** to focus on outcomes, increased frequency of measurement, and student progress based on competencies.



Recommendation 2

- **Address accountability challenges related to unique student populations.**
 - **Carefully track individual student growth**, and use on-demand assessments.
 - **Develop fluid student-count procedures** that follow highly mobile students from school to school.
 - **Create rigorous but sensible accountability systems** for schools with high numbers of overage, undercredited students.

Recommendation 3

- **Improve data collection and oversight systems to better fit the delivery method and capacity of virtual schools.**
 - **Upgrade state data systems** to meet accountability challenges.
 - **Target areas for improvement and identify gaps in service** using input-based measures and surveys.
 - **Develop practices to allow levels of on-demand scrutiny** on par with those in traditional site visits.
 - **Hold boards accountable** for managing vendor relationships.
 - **Share lessons learned.**



Recommendation 4

- **Better link accountability to providers, teachers, and other adults.**
 - **Require virtual schools to disclose external partners;** link partners to student learning data.
 - **Develop new measures of effectiveness** to capitalize on available data.
 - **Tie student data to teacher preparation programs,** to hold them accountable as well.
 - **Consider threshold activity requirements for adults** in virtual schools.



Recommendation 5

- **Ramp up consequences attached to performance.**
 - **Make expansion contingent on performance.**
 - **Close persistently low-performing fully online schools.**
 - **Consider performance-based formulas** for a portion of virtual schools' funding.
 - **Encourage serving the most disadvantaged students well** in any performance-based funding system.



Agenda

Key Background and Definitions

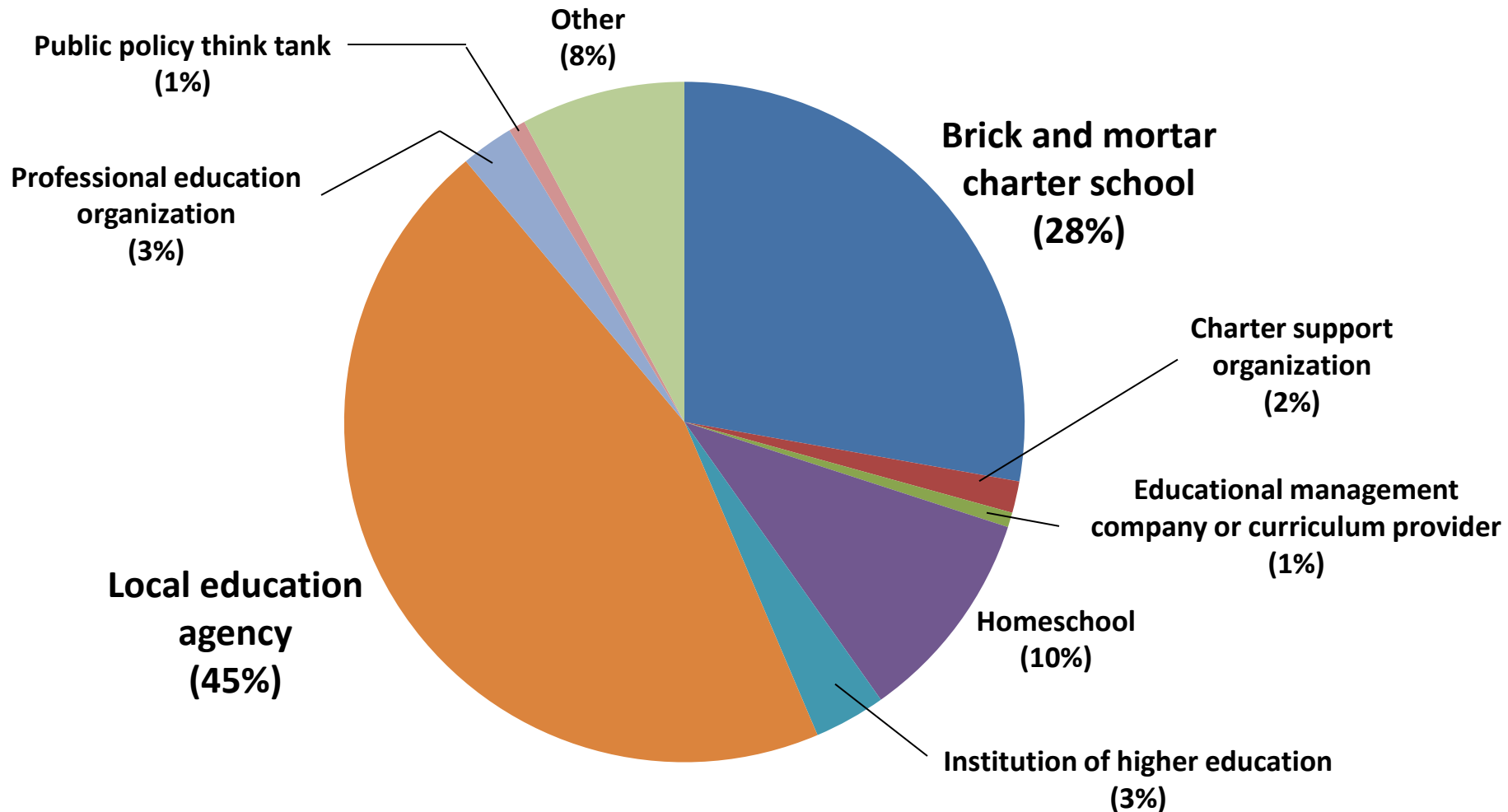
Study Findings

Recommendations

NC Survey Results

Discussion

NC Survey: Respondent Affiliation



NC Survey: Respondent Familiarity with Virtual Schools

Firsthand experience

20%

Media reports on the potential creation of virtual charter schools in NC

46%

Discussions with professional colleagues

54%

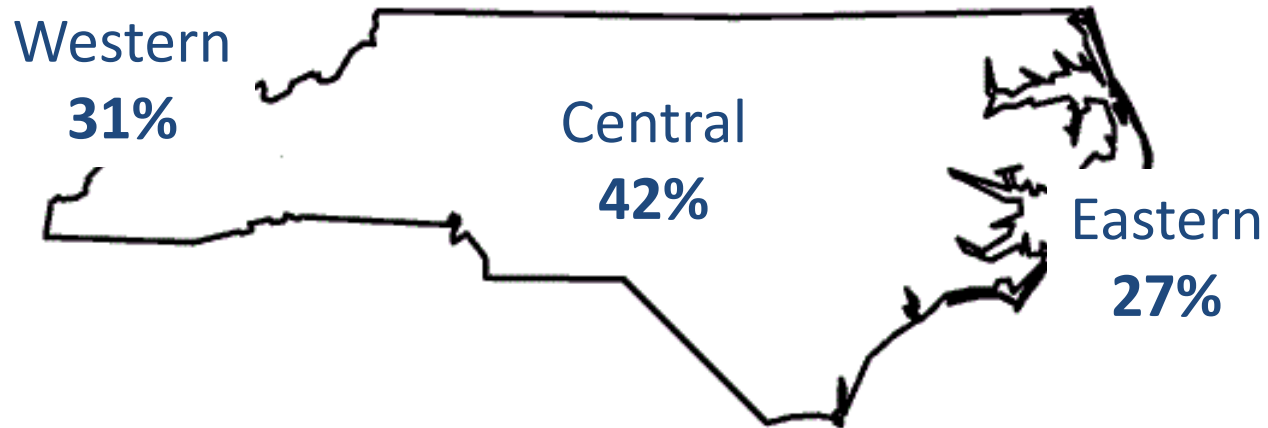
Had not heard of virtual charter schools before survey

12%

Media reports on virtual charter schools in other states

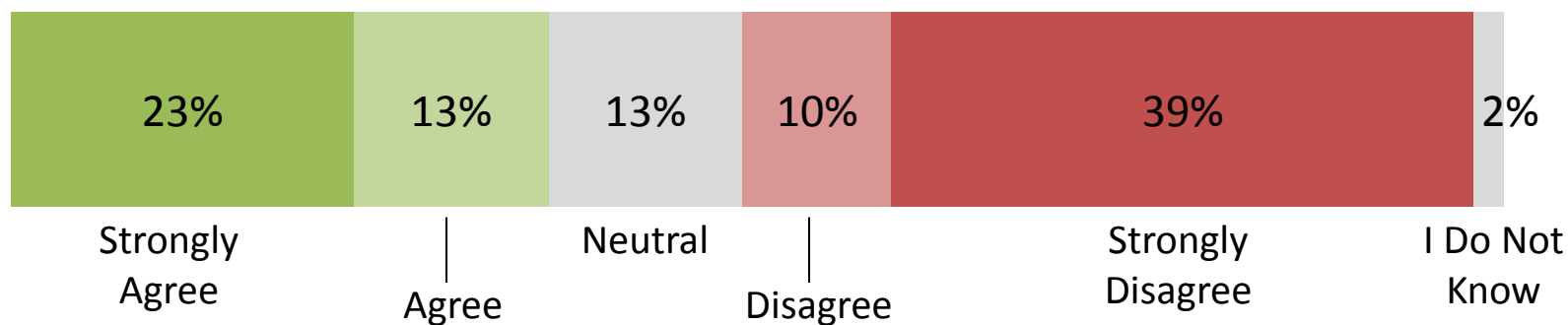
33%

NC Survey: Respondent Demographics



NC Survey: Support for Virtual Charter Schools in NC

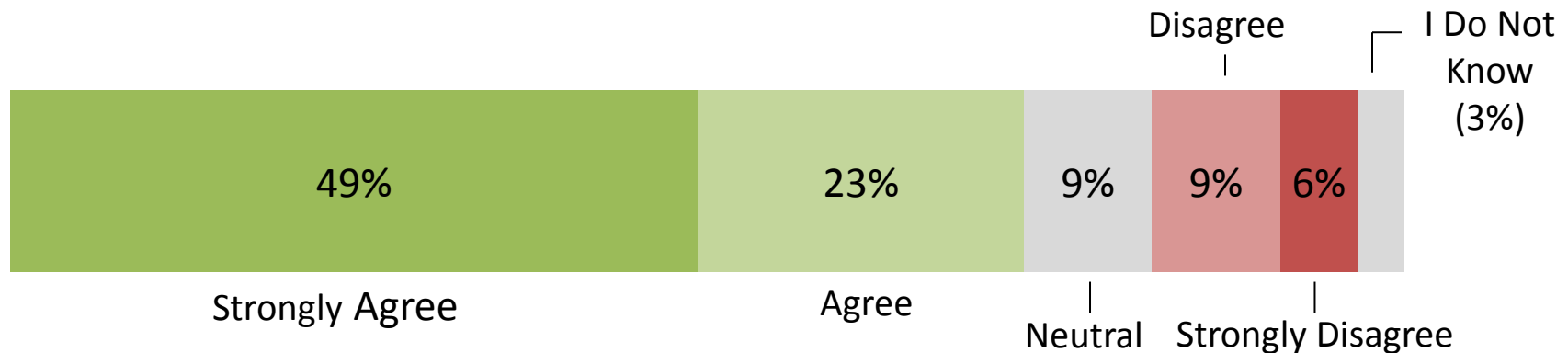
- Respondents are **split**:
A virtual charter school should open in NC.



- Responses varied according to subgroup
 - 72% of respondents from LEAs disagreed or strongly disagreed.
 - 92% of homeschool-affiliated respondents agreed or strongly agreed.
 - Respondents from brick and mortar charters were mixed; 45% agreed or strongly agreed, while 35% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Approval

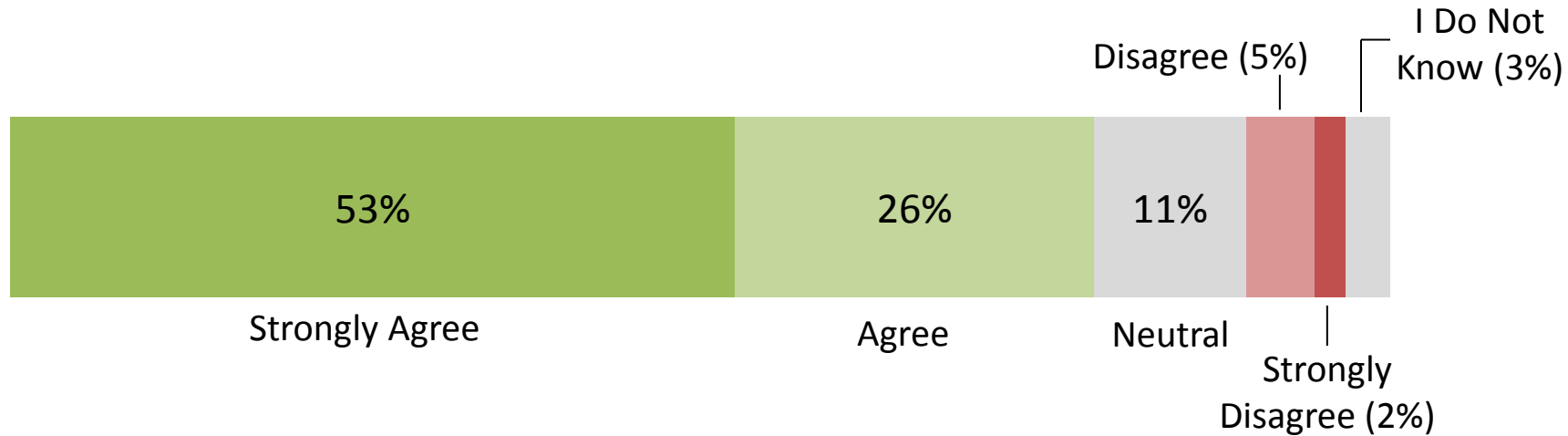
- Respondents generally **agree**: *The state should take a gradual approach to approving virtual schools.*



- Responses varied according to subgroup.
 - Over 85% of respondents from both both brick and mortar charters and LEAs agree or strongly agree.
 - Nearly 50% of homeschool-affiliated respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (note small sample size: 10% of respondents)

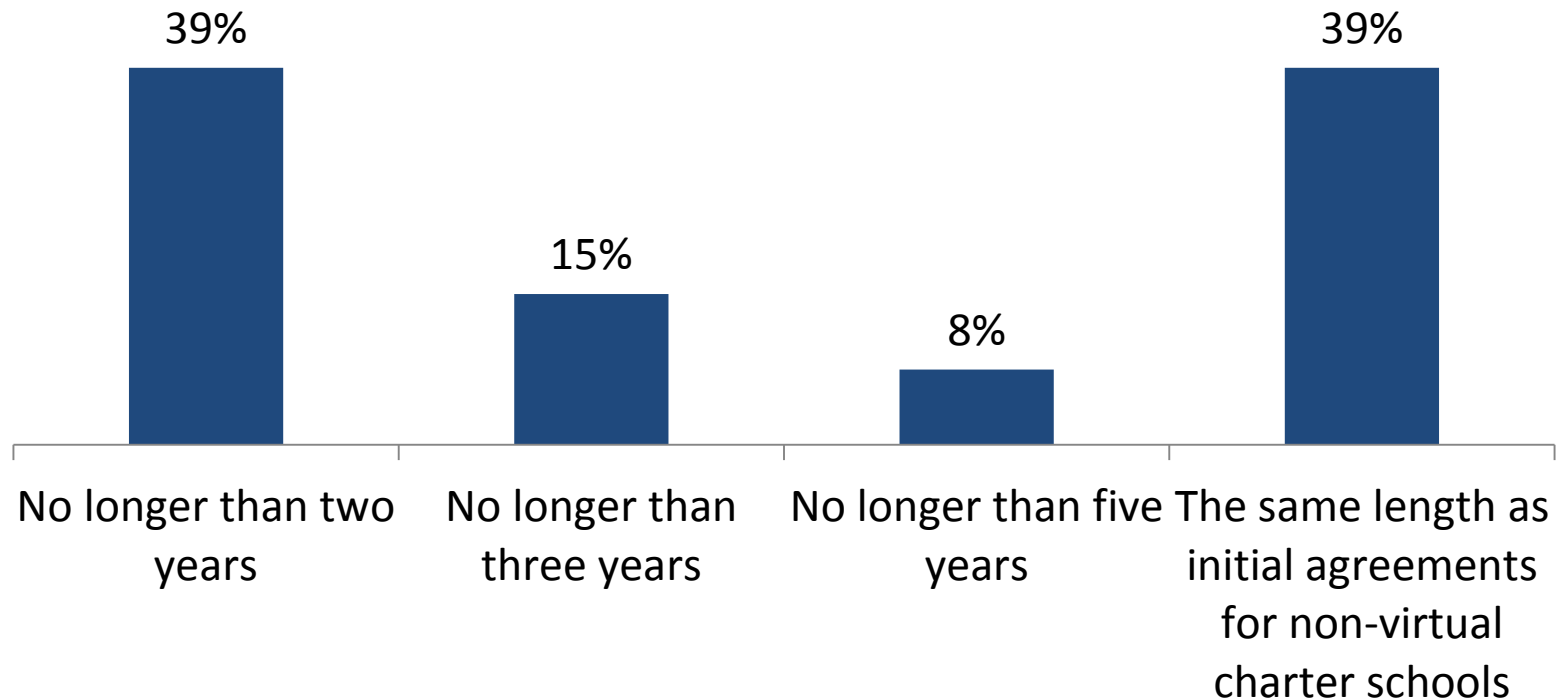
NC Survey: Virtual Charter Approval

- Most respondents, regardless of subgroup, **agree**: *The virtual charter school application should require schools to offer a percentage of live instruction to students.*



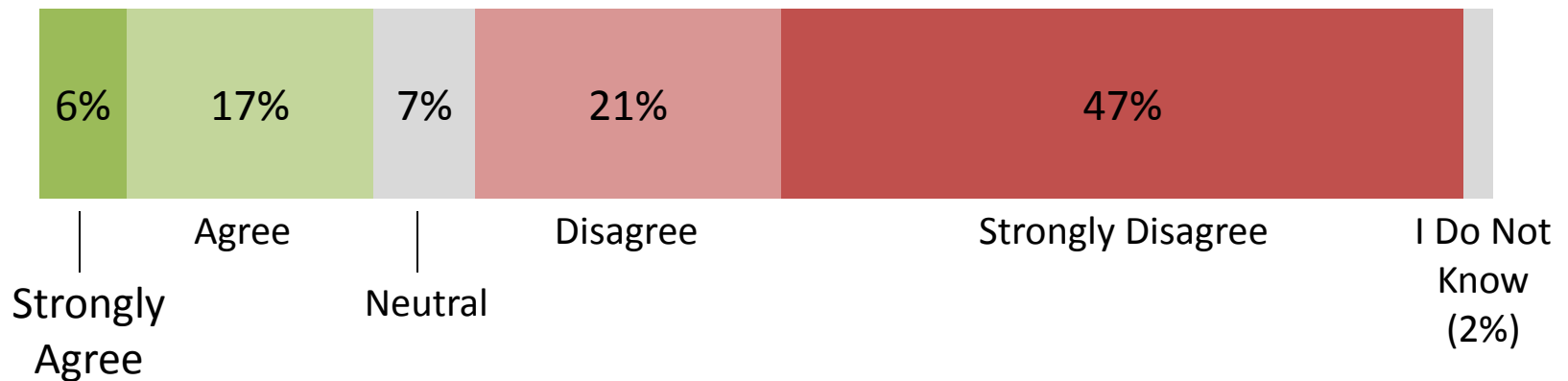
NC Survey: Virtual Charter Approval

- Respondents are **split**: *How long should the initial virtual school charter agreement last?*



NC Survey: Licensure Requirements

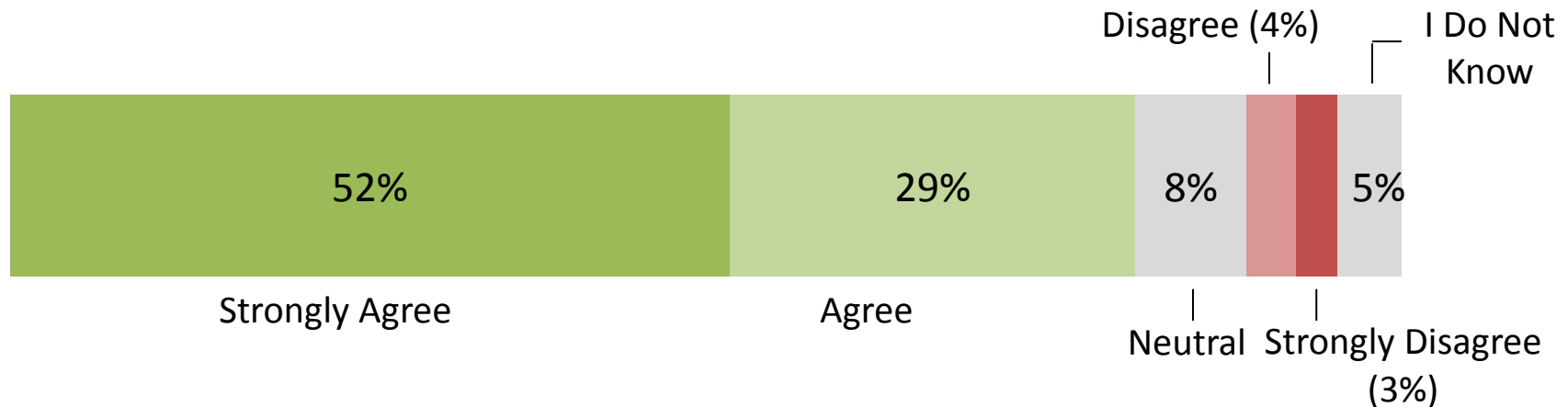
- Most respondents **disagree**: *There should be flexibility in teacher licensure requirements.*



- Degree of disagreement varied according to subgroup.
 - 88% of respondents from LEAs disagree or strongly disagree
 - 51% of respondents from brick and mortar charters disagree or strongly disagree

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Oversight

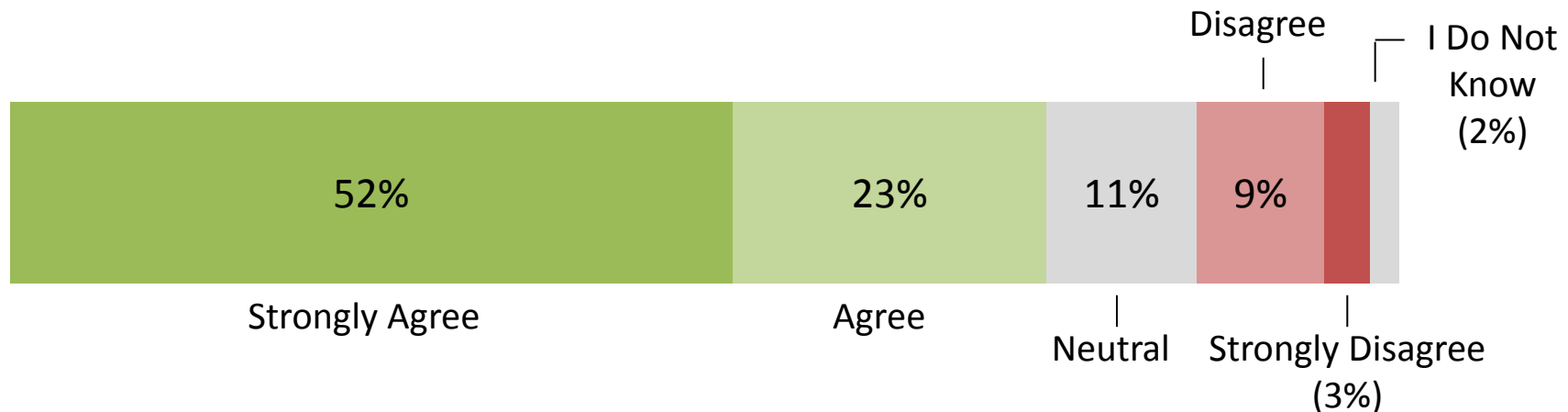
- Most respondents, regardless of subgroup, **agree**:
The virtual charter school review / renewal process should contain the same core elements as the process for brick and mortar schools.



- This is consistent with most authorizer practices in other states – virtual and brick and mortar schools are held to identical standards.

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Oversight

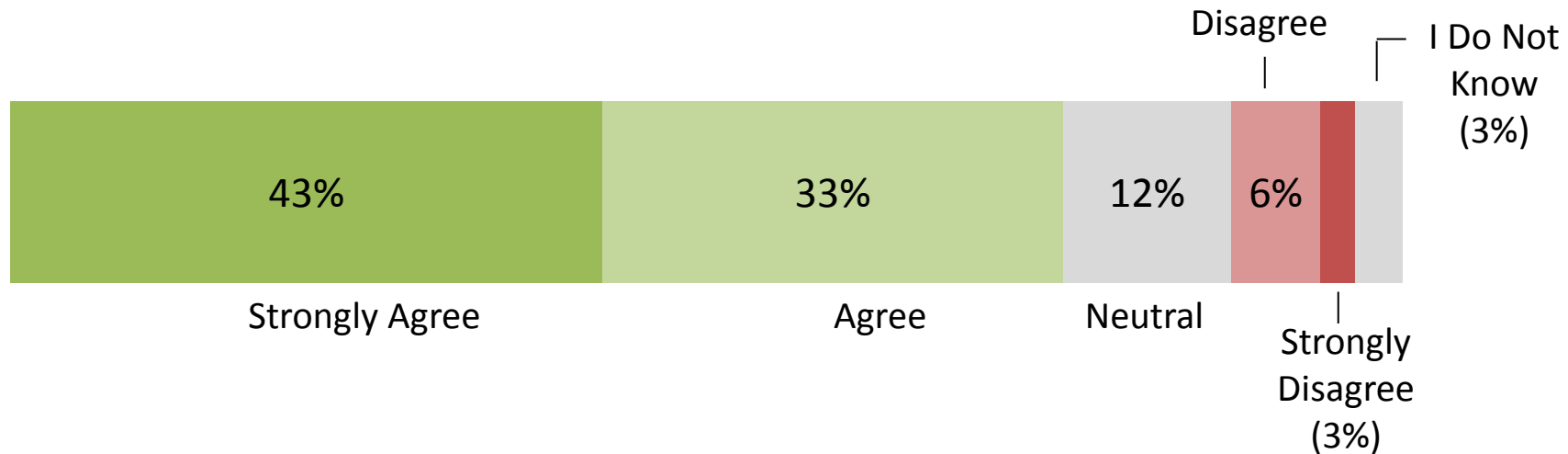
- Most respondents, regardless of subgroup, **agree**: *Student enrollment should be capped at a new virtual charter until the school establishes a strong academic record.*



- Respondents may be urging caution in light of the unique potential of virtual charter schools to grow.

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Oversight

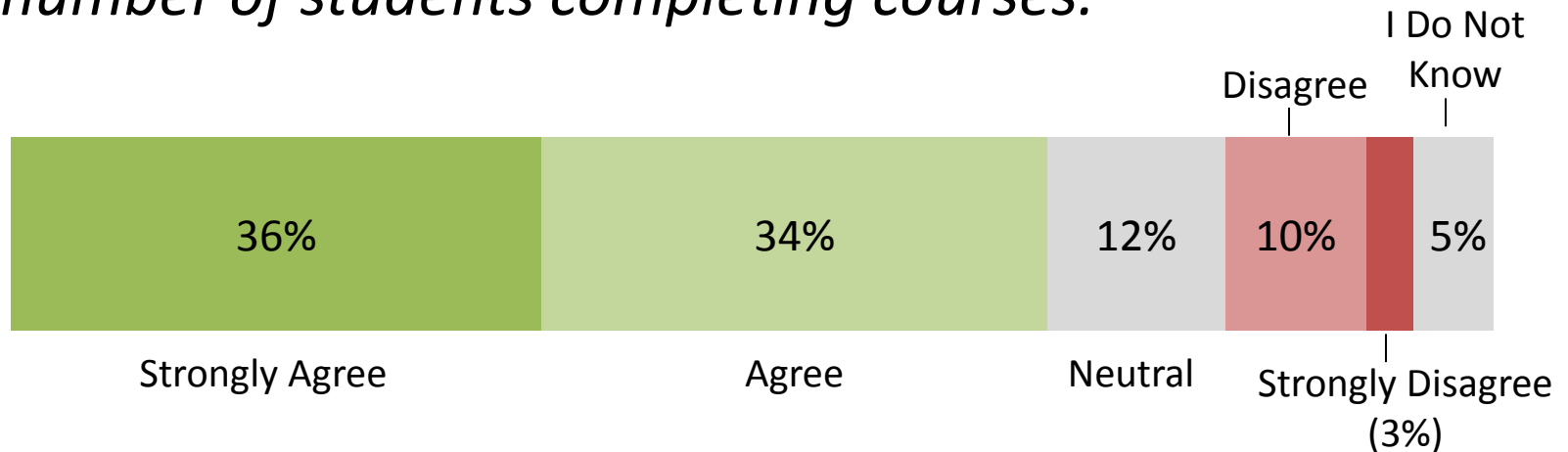
- Most respondents **agree**:
The state should create a specific student-to-teacher ratio for virtual charter schools.



- Concerns about the degree and quality of virtual teacher-student interactions also surfaced in national research.

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Funding

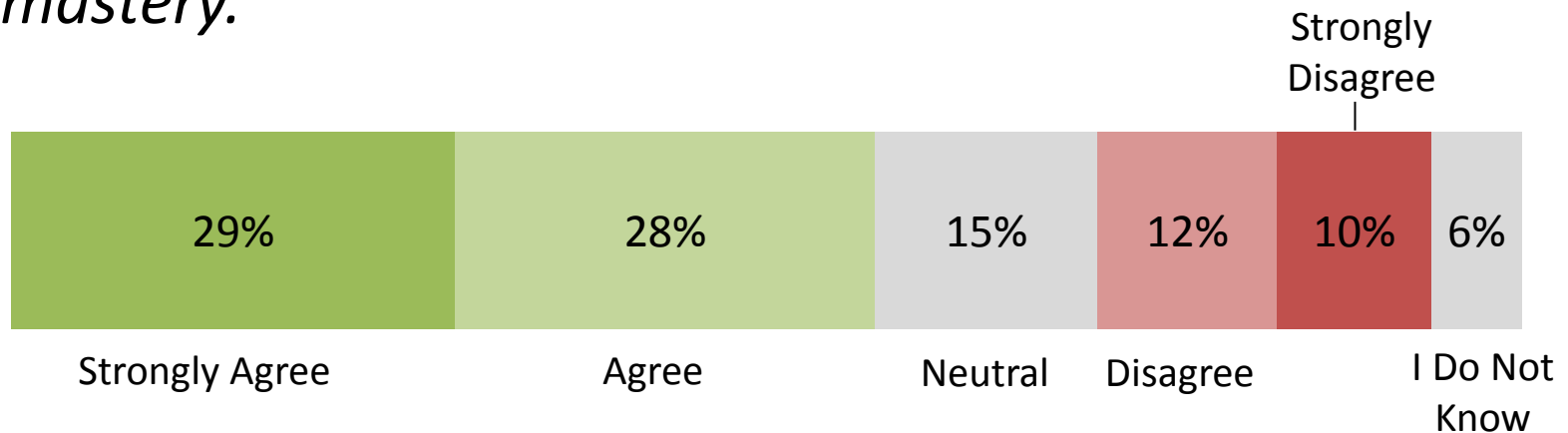
- Most respondents **agree**:
Funding for virtual charter schools should depend on the number of students completing courses.



- Experts warn that such a system could encourage perverse incentives to advance students who have not truly mastered the course content.

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Funding

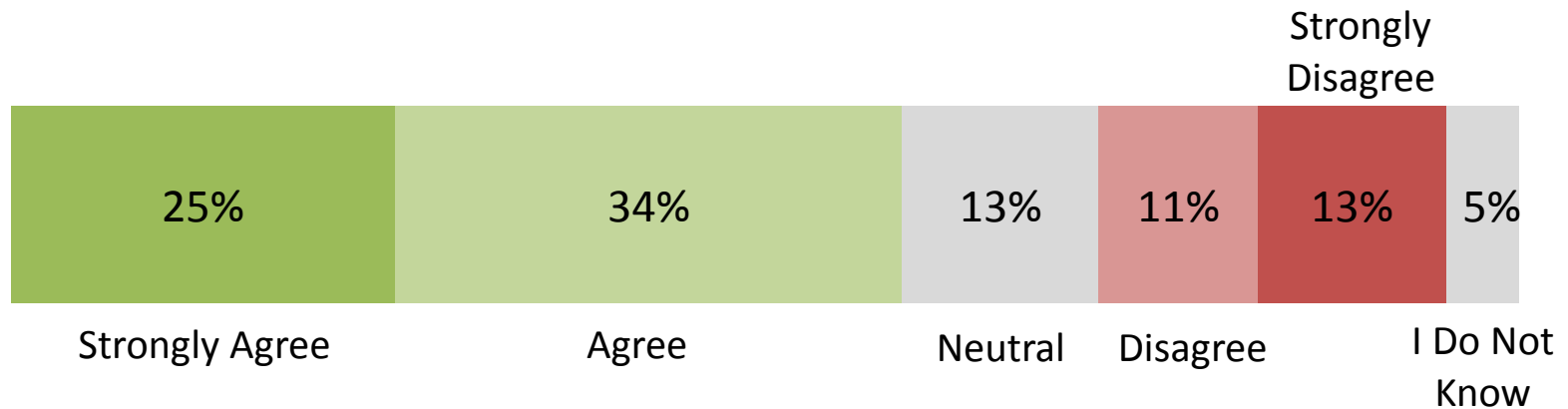
- A slight majority of respondents **agree**:
Funding for virtual charter schools should be based on mastery.



- Similar to a funding system based on course completion, this could also create the perverse incentive to assign passing grades to students who have not fully mastered the content.

NC Survey: Virtual Charter Funding

- Slight majority of respondents **agree**:
Funding for virtual charter schools should be based on ADM as with other public and charter schools.



- Respondents were split concerning:
 - Funding based on a percentage of ADM
 - ADM-based funding with the opportunity to earn more



NC Survey: Policy Implications

- **Approval**
 - Use the same rigorous criteria as for brick and mortar
 - Scrutinize governance to ensure arm's length relationship between board members and EMO
 - Set reasonable initial charter term length
 - Insist on strong track record for any EMO partner
 - Require applicants to specify target population, methods for outreach to and education of target population



NC Survey: Policy Implications

- **Oversight**
 - Use the same standards for all schools
 - Consider enrollment limits and performance-based funding until school establishes academic track record
 - Consider threshold requirements for adult interaction
 - Monitor actual student demographics vs. stated target population



NC Survey: Policy Implications

- **Oversight**

- Track individual student growth
- Create on-demand assessments to support individual student growth measures
- Create rigorous but sensible accountability systems for schools with high numbers of overage, undercredited students.



NC Survey: Policy Implications

- **Funding**

- Experts maintain that virtual schools need adequate funding to deliver quality instruction.
- Funding based on ADM can be problematic
 - Single-count days not representative of potentially fluid student population
 - Can incentivize schools to not serve highly mobile students well



NC Survey: Policy Implications

- **Funding**

- Performance –based funding is a potential accountability tool, if thoughtfully designed to avoid perverse incentives.
- Consider using the virtual charter school sector to pioneer performance-based funding practices
- Consider using funding to reward schools that serve the most challenging student populations well.



Agenda

Key Background and Definitions

Study Findings

Recommendations

NC Survey Results

Discussion



Discussion: Approval

1. What kinds of questions would SBE need to ask to scrutinize governance arrangements?
2. What is a “reasonable” initial term length? Will a shorter initial charter term allow SBE to gauge quality?
3. What constitutes a “strong” track record for an EMO? What information will you need to fully assess an EMO’s track record?
4. What should SBE look for when reviewing target population and methods for outreach and education?



Discussion: Oversight

1. How low should enrollment stay in the early years of a virtual school's charter? Should it be capped at all?
2. How should SBE determine appropriate levels of adult interaction? How could SBE monitor them?
3. What systems would charter schools and SBE need to track individual student growth? What would it take to create on-demand assessments to support this?
4. What would an alternative accountability system look like for schools with difficult-to-serve student populations?



Discussion: Funding

1. Should virtual charter schools receive the same funding as brick and mortar charters?
2. If SBE wanted to use an ADM-based funding system, how could it address problems with single-count days?
3. If SBE wanted to use a performance-based funding model, what performance criteria should determine funding?
4. How could SBE use funding to incentivize virtual charter schools that serve challenging students well?



Discussion: Wrap-Up

1. What is missing from the policy implications presented?
2. What are barriers to the policy implications presented? How can they be addressed?
3. How do these policy implications comport with existing policies for brick and mortar charter schools?



Public Impact Contact Information

Bryan Hassel
Co-Director

Bryan_Hassel@publicimpact.com

Gillian Locke
Consultant

Gillian_Locke@publicimpact.com