

Charter Schools: Proceed Deliberately, Monitor Diligently, and Learn What Can Be Scaled Up

There is much to learn from charter school success stories as well as charter school failures. Charter schools have the potential to be incubators of promising educational practices that can be replicated in mainstream schools. The key is to identify what is working that can be sustained and reproduced on a broad scale so that as many students as possible can benefit. We need to create more supportive learning environments for educators and students alike in all of our public schools. This is an essential part of fulfilling NEA's vision of a great public school for every student.

— NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Charter schools have emerged as a widespread popular public education reform since Minnesota became the first state to adopt charter school legislation in 1991. More than 1.1 million students now attend over 3,900 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia.¹



Charter school proponents believe that regular public schools are too hamstrung by bureaucracy and red tape to meet the needs of all students. The premise underlying charter schools is that in return for greater accountability for student results, charter schools are granted greater flexibility and autonomy than regular public schools. That means charters may be exempt from certain requirements such as staffing policies, mandated curriculum, or even the length of the school day or year, depending on what is specified in each state's charter schools policy.

The demographics of charter schools

Who attends charter schools? The following chart shows the percentage of different kinds of students who attend charter schools compared to regular public schools. These

figures mask large variations between and within states. For example, some charter schools have been established to serve students with particular types of disabilities.

The states with the largest number of charter schools in operation are California (618), Arizona (464), Florida (356), Ohio (315), Michigan (229), and Texas (207). The states which have no charter schools or charter school laws are Alabama, Kentucky, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia.³

Charter schools tend to be smaller than regular public schools. Some 71 percent of charter schools have enrollments of fewer than 300 students, while only 31 percent of regular public schools are that small. Because some charter schools serve high proportions of low-income and minority students, there is a perception that charter schools are strictly an urban phenomenon. But that's not the case: only half (52 percent) of charter are located in urban areas.

Who teaches in charter schools? Some 30 percent of charter school teachers are racial or ethnic minorities, compared to 17 percent who teach in regular public schools. Charter school teachers tend to be slightly younger than their counterparts in mainstream schools, but not by as much as the stereotype of the "young and idealistic" charter school teacher might suggest. The average age of charter school teachers is 38; for regular public school teachers the figure is 43.

While there is a relatively small gap in age between charter and regular public school teachers, there is a much wider one in terms of classroom experience. Charter school teachers are far less experienced, with 43 percent having taught for three years or less, compared to the 18 percent of regular public school teachers with that level of experience. Charter school teachers earn lower salaries than their regular school counterparts (\$37,000 versus \$44,500).⁴

Percentage of students attending (figures rounded) ²						
	Black	Hispanic	Native American Alaska Natives	Free/reduced Lunch	IEPs	ELLs
Charter schools	31	22	2	49	11	12
Regular schools	17	19	1	42	13	11

IEPs: Students with Individualized Education Programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
ELLs: Students who are English Language Learners

Creating and funding charter schools

There are two types of charter schools: startup and conversion. Startup charter schools are newly created schools. Their founders and operators may be based in the community, or they may be managed by for-profit management organizations (such as Edison and White Hat) or nonprofit charter management organizations (such as Green Dot and Knowledge Is Power Program—Kipp).

Conversion schools, by contrast, are regular public schools which apply for and secure charter status. Sometimes existing public schools seek to convert to charter status on their own initiative, perhaps because they believe a different educational approach can result in better outcomes for their students. Other public schools converting to charter status are those that consistently land on federal or state “needs improvement” watch lists. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandates restructuring for schools failing to meet their AYP targets for five consecutive years, and one of the restructuring options is converting and “reconstituting” the school as a charter school.

With bipartisan support, the federal government has sought to increase the number of charter schools by providing funding assistance for charter school startup (developing the proposed charter) and school building expenses. The difficulty of obtaining public funding for these expenses is often cited as a major barrier to groups desiring to create charter schools. Charter school operational funding varies by state but charters generally get less state funding than is allocated to regular public schools. However, some charter schools receive substantial private resources from foundations, private companies, and wealthy individuals which can lead to their spending more money per pupil than surrounding regular public schools.

State policies and accountability

State charter laws vary widely on issues such as the number and types of agencies which may authorize charter schools, whether there is a cap or limit on the number of charter schools permitted to operate in the state, and which district policies charter schools may be exempt from. Although some charter advocacy groups insist that the best state charter school laws are those that result in large numbers of charter schools and grant the most autonomy to them, research shows that states where charters have grown more slowly appear to have more favorable results.

Expert charter school researcher Gary Miron notes, “...we have seen from our research and state evaluations that permissive laws and states with large numbers of charter

schools are often less likely to have positive outcomes.”⁵ Several states which have the largest number or have permitted the most rapid growth in their charter schools—including Ohio, Michigan, and Arizona—have experienced major and widely reported problems with financial accountability, student learning, or both.

- Ohio, heavily influenced by the lobbying of for-profit national education management organization (EMO) franchises, permitted rapid expansion of its charter schools with little oversight. For example, a national for-profit franchise, White Hat, which holds subcontracts to manage some charter schools in Ohio, paid \$55,000 each year to charter school board members while teacher salaries averaged less than \$35,000 per year at most of its schools. Meanwhile, only 2 of the 31 schools it manages in the state made adequate yearly progress for 2006–2007, the same number as the previous year.
- Michigan, which fostered rapid growth of charters and offered little oversight, at one point had more than 75 percent of its charter schools operated by for-profit EMOs, along with poor student performance and little academic or financial accountability in many of its charters.
- In Arizona, lax oversight, poor vetting of charter applicants, and state-encouraged rapid growth in its charter schools coincided with deliberately inflated enrollment (to attract more state money) and millions of tax dollars poorly tracked or misspent. State audits in 2005 and 2006 raised enough red flags that the state asked its 350 charter school companies for a plan that would outline how they would correct the problems.⁶

Connecticut, by contrast, which capped the number of charters at 24, has engaged in more thorough and effective oversight and has seen relatively good student learning and fewer mismanagement problems with its charter schools.

Comparing student achievement

Do charter school students achieve better than their peers in regular public schools? Not surprisingly, student achievement and improvement trends vary widely among charter schools. However, the bulk of the research suggests that charter school students perform no better on standardized tests, and sometimes worse, than their counterparts in regular public schools.

Researchers Helen Ladd and Robert Bifulco found, for example, that “students make considerably smaller achievement gains in charter schools than they would have in public schools.” Christopher and Sara Lubienski, researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Cham-

paign, looked at the issue of math achievement and found that “charter schools scored lower than non-charter public schools in fourth grade and no better in eighth grade.” And Henry Braun and colleagues at the Educational Testing Service found that after controlling for student demographics, student test scores in reading and math in charter schools were lower, on average, than those for students in regular public schools.⁷

The most widely cited study appearing to point in the opposite direction, by Carolyn Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff, has been vigorously challenged on methodological grounds by JoyDeep Roy, Lawrence Mishel, and Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute.⁸

NEA’s policy on charter schools

State laws and regulations governing charter schools vary widely. From a national perspective, NEA’s policy statement and resolution sets forth broad parameters and minimum criteria by which to evaluate state charter laws. For example:

- A charter should be granted only if the proposed school intends to offer an educational experience that is qualitatively different from what is available in traditional public schools.
- Local school boards should have the authority to grant or deny charter applications; the process should be open to the public, and applicants should have the right to appeal to a state agency decisions to deny or revoke a charter.
- Charter school funding should not disproportionately divert resources from traditional public schools.
- Charter schools should be monitored on a continuing basis and should be subject to modification or closure if children or the public interest is at risk.
- Private schools should not be allowed to convert to public charter schools, and private for-profit entities should not be eligible to receive a charter.
- Charter schools should be subject to the same public sector labor relations statutes as traditional public schools, and charter school employees should have the same collective bargaining rights as their counterparts in traditional public schools.⁹

Concerns and future directions

Inadequate accountability: Too many poor quality and financially unaccountable charter schools are being authorized, inadequately monitored, and renewed without rigorous review. “I think a lot of us in Detroit thought charter schools were the panacea, but it hasn’t turned out that way. We’re all

disappointed. Their achievement rates haven’t been good,” lamented one Detroit education leader.¹⁰ Many mistakes can be avoided when charter school authorizers vet applicants thoroughly prior to acting on their applications. However, experience has shown that the welcome voluntary efforts of quality conscious charter advocates to strengthen charter school authorizer performance¹¹ cannot be substituted for the need of a much more vigorous oversight role in most states.

Charter schools are held to the same adequate yearly progress requirements under NCLB as regular public schools. NEA believes that accountability for charters as well as regular schools should, at a minimum, include measures of progress that assess student learning over time and recognize improvement on all points of the achievement scale.

Insufficient learning from the charter school experience:

Applying lessons learned from innovation and from what works in charter schools to help create great public schools for all students was a major justification offered when charter schools were created. Although there has been some excellent evaluative work done on charter schools, lessons learned are so far poorly reflected in state policies and practices. And the current U.S. Department of Education has cut back on collecting data on charters, which researchers maintain is important for evaluating results.¹²

Perhaps the most fundamental question that needs to be answered about charter schools is: where students are thriving in charter schools to a greater degree than are their demographically comparable peers in regular public schools, what specific practices and policies account for the positive differences, and are these differences both replicable and sustainable on a broad scale?

Antiunion bias: Several prominent charter school advocacy groups have a clear antiunion agenda. Education employees deserve a voice in the working conditions that affect their ability to do their jobs well. Yet many state laws fail to acknowledge the right of charter school employees to join a union if they so choose. In the case of converted charter schools, educators who do not support the conversion should be afforded the opportunity to transfer to a comparable position at another regular public school.

Access and equity for at-risk students: NEA remains concerned about reports of some charter schools using practices to screen out students with disabilities, push them out once admitted, or fail to provide services called for under federal law. This is a potential concern for English Language Learner students as well. Charter school policies also should not result in resegregation or increased segregation of students by race, ethnicity, or family income level. NEA

will continue to monitor these issues and work with like-minded organizations to make them visible to policymakers who are enacting charter school policies.

References

¹ US Charter Schools Web site, "State-by-State #s," www.uscharterschools.org/cs/sp/query/q/1595.

² Data is from National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education: "Contexts of Elementary and Secondary Education," Table 32-1, at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/section4/table.asp?tableID=718>, and "Characteristics of Schools, Districts, Teachers, Principals and School Libraries in the United States, 2003-2004," Tables 3-5, at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006313.pdf>.

³ US Charter Schools Web site, "State-by-State #s," www.uscharterschools.org/cs/sp/query/q/1595, and "State Information," www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/sp/index.htm.

⁴ Data in this and preceding paragraph is at "Contexts of Elementary and Secondary Education," (see note 2 for link), Tables 32-1, 18, 20, 21, and 23.

⁵ "Strong Charter School Laws Are Those That Result in Positive Outcomes," Gary Miron, The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University, April 2005, pp. 7, 1, www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter/aera_2005_paper_charter_school_laws.pdf.

⁶ Ohio: Amy Hanauer, "Profits and Privatization: The Ohio Experience," pp. 35-52 in *Keeping the Promise: The Debate Over Charter Schools*, ed. Leigh Dingerson, et al., Rethinking Schools, 2008; Michigan: "Strong Charter School Laws are Those That Results in Positive Outcomes (see note 5), pp. 6, 3; Arizona: Pat Kossan, "Arizona Lax on Charter School," *Arizona Republic*, September 2, 2007, www.azcentral.com/specials/special44/articles/0902charterfinance0902.html; Connecticut: "Strong Charter School Laws..." (see note 5), pp. 5, 4, 3.

⁷ "The Impacts of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: Evidence from North Carolina," Robert Bifulco and Helen F. Ladd,

August 2005, http://media.hoover.org/documents/ednext20054unabridged_60.pdf; "A Closer Look at Charter Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling," Henry Braun, Frank Jenkins, and Wendy Grigg, National Assessment of Educational Progress, U.S. Department of Education, NCES 2006-460, August 2006, <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/studies/2006460.pdf>; "Charter, Private, Public Schools and Academic Achievement: New Evidence from NAEP Mathematics Data," Christopher Lubienski, Sara Lubienski, National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, January 2006, p. 4, www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP111.pdf.

⁸ "Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences," Caroline Hoxby, December 2004, www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/downloads/papers/hoxby-rockoff2004.pdf; "Advantage None: Re-Examining Hoxby's Finding of Charter School Benefits," Joydeep Roy and Lawrence Mishel, Economic Policy Institute Briefing Paper #158, April 2005, www.epi.org/content.cfm/bp158, and *The Charter School Dust-Up: Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement*, Martin Carnoy, Rebecca Jacobsen, Lawrence Mishel, and Richard Rothstein, Economic Policy Institute, 2005, pp. 98-106.

⁹ NEA Charter School policy, www.nea.org/charter/index.html.

¹⁰ Quoted in "Charter Advocates Rethink School Reform," Detroit News, March 10, 2008, www.detroitnews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080310/OPINION03/803100361/1320/AUTO04.

¹¹ "Principles and Standards for Quality Charter School Authorizing," National Association of Charter School Authorizers, 2005, www.qualitycharters.org/files/public/Quality.pdf.

¹² "U.S. Cutting Back on Details in Data About Charter Schools," New York Times, August 29, 2004, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E00E1DE1F3EF93AA1575BC0A9629C8B63&scp=1&sq=U.S.+Cutting+Back+on+Details+in+Data+About+Charter+Schools&st=nyt>.

Resources

NEA background and policy on charter schools

www.nea.org/charter

The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University offers links to evaluation reports on charter schools and school choice by the Center.

www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter