

Charter Schools Today: Changing the Face of American Education

Executive Summary

The Center for Education Reform



This report from the Center for Education Reform captures a vivid snapshot of the charter schools movement in the United States. Less than a decade after the first charter school opened its doors, 1,674 charter schools now not only provide a very popular alternative to traditional public schools, but are having a dramatic impact on other competing schools in the communities where they have been established.

Although public schools currently outnumber charter schools by more than 40 to 1, the ripple effect being created by charter schools is remarkable. Wherever a large number of charters are clustered, traditional schools have begun to behave differently in order to keep up, and in many states their presence is accelerating system-wide school improvement.

Six of the seven national and state studies examining the impact of charter schools, find a positive ripple effect. A Western Michigan University study produced this typical finding: "Even in areas with no PSAs [Public School Academies, as charters are known there], evidence of the impact of the PSA initiative can be seen in the renewed debate over the quality and performance of public schools." Charter schools are not a silver bullet - to claim this is to set them up for failure. But they are a necessary impetus for accountable, results-driven reform.

While charter schools are having a widespread and positive impact on public education, the movement has often generated a powerful reaction from vested interests. They have faced more than their share of roadblocks, including both political opposition and operational hurdles.

Today's charter schools are encountering different types of obstacles than they did just a few years ago. In the beginning, charters faced mainly facility and operational hurdles, but the most common obstacles now involve political opposition from teachers unions, state boards and bureaucracies, and local board/district offices. By insisting on compliance with seldom-enforced regulations or magnifying legislative anomalies, the powers that be can - and do - diminish, delay and even kill charter efforts. California's experience is typical; the state's Little Hoover Commission found that "both the State Department of Education and sponsoring school districts have taken actions that constrain the ability of charter schools to operate freely."

The severity of the obstacles is invariably linked to the quality of a state's charter school law. A strong law will provide more flexibility for schools, autonomy from school districts, full operational funding and better facilities options. A weaker law will provide only partial funding and restricted facilities options and will impose regulatory requirements to comply with district-imposed rules.

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The logo for the Center for Education Reform, featuring a green rectangular background with the text "Center for Education Reform" in white, serif font. To the left of the text is a small icon of a building with a flag on top.



Capital financing remains one of the most challenging obstacles that charter schools face. Too often little, if any, capital assistance is available. State legislators are just beginning to amend their charter laws to allow charter schools more access to state funds. These funds help charters pay for capital and start-up costs such as facilities, purchases, and renovations or construction. More states need to follow suit, however. Of the 37 charter school laws in existence in 1999, 26 did not provide any start-up funding at all, leaving charter school founders the difficult task of getting to be fully operational before ever seeing a dime of state or local public education funding. CER 's most recent survey of charter schools found that 38 percent regarded funding to be their biggest challenge and 21 percent regarded facilities as their biggest concern. In the face of obstacles such as these, successful charter operators have prevailed against great odds. And even as the charter school movement is maturing, and legislators are learning to draft legal definitions so that operators can acquire facilities more easily and negotiate bureaucratic hurdles more readily, charter school critics are becoming more sophisticated in their opposition.

To date, more than 50 reports on the progress, success rates and achievement of charters have been completed by states, universities, and regional and national groups. More than 80 percent show that charter schools are achieving their goals.

A relative handful of charter schools have failed. As of the end of 1999, 39 charter schools had closed their doors, representing 2.3 percent of the 1,713 charter schools that have opened for business. Some closed voluntarily, while others were forced to do so because of low enrollment, administrative or fiscal difficulties, or because their charters were revoked due to poor management, inadequate educational programs, fiscal or administrative disorder or misconduct. Far from being an indictment of charter schools, however, these closures are evidence of accountability, one of the great strengths of the charter school movement. It is a quality too often missing at many traditional public schools.

CER 's nationwide survey of charter schools includes data compiled from the 1997-98 and 1998-99 school years. Responses were received from 305 of the 1,208 charters operating as of June 1999 in 23 states and the District of Columbia. It is the largest sample to date of activity in and around charter schools nationwide. Among the major findings:

- Charter schools deliver the smaller size that parents want. Average enrollment is about 250.
- Two-thirds of charter schools have significant waiting lists.

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- A majority of charter schools are approved by an agency other than the local school board. Local boards are more likely to grant charters where state law allows for multiple charter-granting bodies.
- Charter schools serve large percentages of children who are typically underserved in America's schools.
- Curriculum programs vary widely, the top five are all known for their academic rigor and integrity: science/math/tech, Core Knowledge, thematic instruction, back-to-basics, and college prep.

Although two-thirds of schools responding were less than three years old, 39 percent reported early evidence of academic improvement, including gains in reading and math performance, test scores that are higher than district and state averages, increased parental involvement, higher attendance and fewer discipline problems.

In just eight years, charter schools have had a measurably positive impact on the health of traditional public schools and have often shown enormous achievement among even some of the nation's poorest children. This report from the Center for Education Reform provides a comprehensive profile of a charter school movement that is now beginning to mature, learn and provide real lessons for all who are concerned with the quality of education in America.