

Charter Schools

What are charter schools?

Charter schools are public institutions, supported by public funds. However, they have greater freedom from state rules and regulations than traditional public schools. Charter schools are typically free to hire or fire personnel, design curriculum, and promote specific values. A charter school must negotiate a contract (charter), usually with a local school district or charter authorizer designated by the state. Each charter may vary, because each state has different education laws and each charter school is designed to be unique in focus or student clientele. However, all contracts describe school goals, how the school will be run, the amount of public money it will receive, and the degree of freedom it will be given.

For continued reading on charter school design, development, and law see the following NCSPE articles:
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Occasional Paper 40: Scott, Janelle T. and Margaret E. Barber. 2001. "Charter Schools in California, Michigan, and Arizona: An Alternative Framework for Policy Analysis." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/468_OP40_v7.pdf

Occasional Paper 77: Henig, Jeff, et al. 2003. "The Influence of Founder Type on Charter School Structures and Operations." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP77.pdf
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Occasional Paper 79: Buckley, Jack and Simona Kuscova. 2003. "The Effects of Institutional Variation on Policy Outcomes." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP79.pdf
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Why are charter schools controversial?

The charter school movement believes giving individual schools greater freedom makes education more effective, because the needs of each community are addressed. Less regulation means there are many different kinds of charter schools. Charter schools may serve gifted students, low-income families, or religious communities. Educators and politicians argue about whether it is good to have large differences between schools. The potential advantages and disadvantages of charter schools are listed below.

What are the possible advantages of charter schools?

- **Increased Innovation.** Charter schools have the independence to try new forms of teaching and experiment with the best way to reach their students.
- **Increased Efficiency.** Charter schools avoid a myriad of challenging government regulations and the interference of state officials.
- **Greater Accountability.** Charter schools must attract students to succeed. If they do not attract sufficient numbers of students, they will close for budgetary reasons or their charter can be taken away.

- **Increased Competition.** Charter schools treat education as a product and must compete for families as customers. This is an ultimate form of accountability.
- **Private Resources.** Many charter schools have succeeded in attracting considerable philanthropic gifts to support richer programs.

What are the possible disadvantages of charter schools?

- **Greater Inequality.** Charter schools may not help all students. Admission requirements, transportation costs, and limited information can prevent disadvantaged students from attending a charter school.
- **Fewer Resources.** Few charter schools receive money to pay for start-up costs. Charter schools may have poor facilities and classroom resources.
- **Lack of Standards.** Freedom from regulations allows charter schools to avoid important standards, such as teacher certification.
- **Group Exclusion.** Schools that are sponsored by individual communities can reject important values and exclude particular groups.

For further consideration of the debate surrounding charter schools, see the following NCSPE articles:
Occasional Paper 4: Bettinger, Eric. 2000. "The Effects of Charter Schools on Charter Students and Public Schools." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/182_OP04.pdf
Occasional Paper 41: Miron, Gary and Christopher Nelson. 2001. "Student Academic Achievement in Charter Schools: What We Know and Why We Know so Little." http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/590_OP41.pdf
Occasional Paper 72: Holmes, Mark, et al. 2003. "Does School Choice Increase School Quality?" http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP72.pdf
Occasional Paper 75: Buckley, Jack and Mark Schneider. 2003. "Government Institutions and Citizen Participation: Can Charter Schools Build a Foundation for Cooperative Behavior?" http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP75.pdf

How large is the Charter School Movement?

The first charter school legislation was established in Minnesota in 1991. Since then, political support to increase school choice and empower local school districts has aided the charter school movement. Charter schools have grown rapidly over the past decade. However, most individual charter schools remain small and have class sizes smaller than traditional public schools. About 55% of all students in charter schools are in grades K-8 (SRI International, 2002). The following chart illustrates the rapid growth of charter schools.

Table 1: Charter School Growth				
Category	1995	1998	2000	2003
Number of Schools	252	1,484	1,988	2,695
Number of Students	58,620	230,299	430,000	684,000

Sources: Center for Education Reform. [<http://www.edreform.org>]. RPP International. (1997) *A Study of Charter Schools: First-Year Report*. [<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter/index.html>]. RPP International. (2000) *The State of Charter Schools, 2000: National Study of Charter Schools. Fourth-Year Report*. [<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/charter/index.html>]. SRI International. (2002). *A decade of Public Charter Schools: Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program*. [<http://www.sri.com/policy/cep/choice/yr2.pdf>]

Available evidence on student achievement in charter schools shows a mixed pattern of results. However, no evidence has convincingly demonstrated that charter schools offer superior results to traditional public schools.

For further consideration of specific state charter school reforms see the following NCSPE articles:
Occasional Paper 39: Lubienski, Chris. “Institutionalist and Instrumentalist Perspectives on ‘Public’ Education: Strategies and Implications of the School Choice Movement in Michigan.” http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/834_OP39.pdf
Occasional Paper 71: Schneider, Mark, Jack Buckley and Simona Kucsova. 2003. “Making the Grade: Comparing DC Charter Schools to DC Public Schools.” http://www.ncspe.org/publications_files/OP71.pdf

Where can I find out more about charter schools?

Charter School information located on the NCSPE website can be found at <http://www.ncspe.org/inforead.php?mysub=2>

Books reviewing charter schools have been published by:

Gill, Brian et al. 2001. *Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know about Vouchers and Charter Schools*.

<http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1118/>

Miron, Gary and Christopher Nelson. 2002. *What’s Public about Charter Schools: Lessons Learned about Choice and Accountability*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Zimmer, Ron and Richard Buddin et al. 2003. *Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence from California*.

<http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MRI700/>.

For an interesting article on charter schools see:

Sugarman, S. 2002. “Charter school funding issues.”

<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n34.html>

For additional information from internet resources see:

The US department of Education sponsored website on charter schools at:

<http://www.uscharterschools.org>

The Center for Education Reform– a strong advocate for charter schools– at:

<http://www.edreform.com>