

*The*  
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VIEW:**

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information on  
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## CHARTER SCHOOLS

### *What Are Charter Schools?*

Charter schools are legally independent public schools created through a formal agreement between a group of individuals, such as teachers or parents, and a sponsor, usually a local school board or state department. Such schools are meant to provide parents and those “closest to the classroom” with the flexibility to pursue innovative teaching methods that will improve student performance. As an incentive, charter schools are freed from most state codes and local policies regarding curriculum, instruction, budget, and personnel. In return, these schools are expected to meet certain accountability requirements — the terms of their charter — such as how success will be measured and what students will achieve. Unlike other public schools, if a charter school fails to meet these terms, the charter can be revoked and the school closed. In the competition for parents and students, charter schools are intended to challenge other public schools to raise their standards and become more

responsive to what parents and students need from public education.

### *Why Are Charter Schools Important?*

Charter schools are one of the fastest growing reforms in education. In 1992, only two states had passed charter school legislation. By April, 1997, more than two dozen states had charter school laws in place. With the number of charter schools across the country approaching 500, it is clear that this reform movement is not about to fade away anytime soon.

### *What Do Charter Schools Look Like In Action?*

No two charter schools are alike, and there are vastly different expectations for what they can accomplish. This diversity is largely due to variations in state law. Stronger charter school laws are more likely to encourage innovation and produce a successful system of independent schools, while weaker laws limit school independence as well as innovation. Louann A. Bierlein, a national expert on

charter schools, suggests seven criteria that define strong charter legislation:

1. the possibility of a non-local board sponsor,
2. permission for any group or individual to organize a charter proposal,
3. automatic exemption from state and local regulations rather than on a case-by-case basis,
4. complete fiscal autonomy,
5. complete legal autonomy,
6. no (or very high) limits on the number of charter schools that can be formed, and
7. the acceptance of some percentage of non-certified employees as teachers.

According to Bierlein, about half of the states with charter school laws in place have strong legislation.

Despite differences in state law and the subsequent impact on charter implementation, many charter schools seem to embrace a similar set of pedagogical principles:

- *reduce class size*
- *make sure parents are heavily involved*

- *keep the school size small*
- *encourage active hands-on learning, in part through the intelligent use of technology*
- *experiment with "time" by having lengthier classes that teach across disciplines*

### **What Does The Research Say About Charter Schools?**

As charter schools flourish, the big question for researchers is: *Do they work?* But the question of whether charter schools "work" can mean different things:

- Do they educate students better than traditional schools?
- Do they benefit all students equally?
- Do they lure the best students from the public schools?
- Will they truly transform public education?

Until recently, many independent researchers and the major research organizations shied away from answering questions about charter schools due to their link to the politically charged topics of vouchers and privatization. Consequently, few independent studies of

charter schools exist. The good news is that this landscape will likely change in the next few years with the infusion of federal monies for charter schools. State-mandated evaluations already are underway in Arizona, Colorado, and Minnesota, and Central Michigan University is studying the 40 schools it has chartered in that state. In addition, a massive federally supported evaluation is currently being undertaken by RPP International, with the results expected by the end of 1999.

What we know so far comes from a handful of studies, conducted primarily by acknowledged supporters of charter schools and conservative think tanks that strongly support school choice. Though much of this work lacks objectivity, some common themes about charter schools have emerged:

- Charter schools generally are small institutions with an average enrollment of just under 300 students.
- Most charters are elementary schools, although grade configurations vary widely.
- The most popular focus of curriculum in charter schools is an "integrated

interdisciplinary curriculum," with technology and "back to basics" close behind.

- Parent involvement is much greater in charter schools than in comparison schools in the same communities.
- A large number of charter schools are designed to serve at-risk children.
- Lack of start-up money, finances, and problems related to facilities are the biggest barriers to starting and maintaining a charter school.

Some studies also show that charter schools have not become *elite* schools. A statewide evaluation of California's charter schools, for example, found no evidence to "support the sensational charge that charter schools in California are either creaming the most able privileged students, or as a group skimming out those who traditionally have been underserved." On the other hand, another California researcher used census data to conclude that charter schools predominantly existed in wealthy neighborhoods where parents had high educational levels. She went on to suggest that poorer communities were possibly being excluded

from the movement because they lacked the resources to organize a charter school.

Equity is one of the most contentious issues of charter schools, and most certainly will remain a central focus of future research.

As far as student outcomes, the evidence, at this point, is mostly anecdotal — charter schools have been around for too short a time to track academic achievement in a meaningful way. However, about a dozen schools have had their charters renewed which suggests that they have met the performance goals set for them. In addition, many schools have documented single-year improvements, albeit on nontraditional assessment measures.

Given these findings, charter supporters conclude that charter schools are producing remarkable results with comparatively few resources. According to a recent report from the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank, charter schools "may be the most vibrant force in American education today." Yet, some researchers are far more cautious, and at least one research organization has sounded the warning bells. California-based RAND Corporation has observed a

troubling fact common to many charters — that educators are often ill-suited to manage them. Commenting on this, a senior RAND scientist noted that charter school operators may be visionaries with commendable ideas, but they may not have the business, management, and legal expertise to operate what amounts to a small business.

### *What Do Supporters Of Charter Schools Say?*

Advocates promote charter schools as a way to expand choice and competition in public education. Charters are viewed as a vehicle for

- revitalizing public education,
- encouraging creativity and innovation,
- increasing the range of options available to parents and students,
- providing new and expanded teaching opportunities, and
- directly involving parents and the community in the operation of their schools.

Supporters also argue that charters are held responsible for results. If they are fiscally mismanaged, fail to attract students, or do not meet

student accountability standards, their charters can be revoked.

### *What Do Opponents Of Charter Schools Say?*

Opponents claim that charter schools will draw resources away from schools that have been operating successfully as part of the regular public school system. They maintain that regulations are not the most serious obstacles to effectiveness, and when they do hinder school reform, they should be waived for the whole school system.

Critics, including the hugely influential teachers' unions, are also bothered by the fact that a new charter school takes money right out of the pockets of the conventional public school. In most states, money simply follows the student, thus if a large number of children choose charter education over conventional public schools, a district stands to lose quite a bit of money. Unions also oppose provisions in many

state charter laws that free these special schools from collective bargaining agreements.

Finally, critics are concerned that as charters are suspended or revoked due to legal challenges or mismanagement, children may suffer a discontinuity in their educational services.

### *What Is The Status Of Charter Schools In New York State?*

In the recently released State budget, Gov. George Pataki proposed plans for the creation of charter schools. Under the governor's plan, local school districts, the Board of Regents, the State University of New York, the City University of New York, or any public college can sponsor a charter school. The schools can be operated by an even wider range of players including groups of parents and teachers. The governor's plan would free charters from many state mandates, including the

requirement that their teachers be certified by the state.

Reactions to the plan have been mixed, with top education officials expressing caution and urging that the State not redirect funds away from improving troubled public schools. Commissioner Mills, though not opposed to the charter concept, has said, "We need to keep backing people who are fixing the schools . . . (not) draw energy and parents away." Regents Chancellor Hayden has also expressed caution about the charter school proposal.

### *Where Can I Get More Information On Charter Schools?*

Education Commission of the States Clearinghouse  
<http://www.esc.org>

National Charter School Directory, from the Center for Education Reform  
(202) 822-9000

*The Balanced View* welcomes your comments and questions on this topic.  
Please e-mail us or send us a FAX.