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ABSTRACT

Charter schools are public schools operated under a charter (contract) between a public agency and groups of parents, teachers, school administrators, or others who want to create more alternatives and choice within the public school system. The contracted agencies are expected to produce agreed-upon levels of student achievement within a certain period (usually three to five years). If they don't, their sponsors may end their charters. Charter schools give parents, students, and educators public school alternatives based on the idea that competition will bring new educational ideas. This brochure provides an overview of the charter school movement's history and development up to the present time, and provides a short description of their varying structures, operations, student populations. Some of the arguments for and against charter schools are listed. A basic step-by-step procedure is presented allowing one to design and start a charter school in one's community. The brochure also lists organizational and Web site sources, and references for additional information. (Contains 14 references.) (RT)

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What Are Charter Schools?

Charter schools are public schools operated under a charter (contract) between a public agency and groups of parents, teachers, school administrators, or others who want to create more alternatives and choice within the public school system. The contracted agencies are expected to produce agreed-upon levels of student achievement within a certain period (usually three to five years). If they don't, their sponsors may end their charters. Charter schools give parents, students, and educators public school alternatives based on the idea that competition will bring new educational ideas. This brochure provides an overview of the charter school movement and directs you to additional sources for more information.

What Do We Know About Charter Schools?

Since Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991, 36 other states and the District of Columbia have passed similar laws (Hirsch, 1998). The Center for Education Reform (1999) estimates there were 1,684 charter schools serving 350,000 students nationwide as of September 1999. Most of these schools were in the South and West.

"Charter schools are havens for children who had bad educational experiences elsewhere," according to a Hudson Institute survey of students, teachers, and parents from 50 charters in 10 states. More than 60 percent of the parents surveyed said charter schools are better than their children's previous schools in terms of teaching quality, individual attention from teachers, curriculum, discipline, parent involvement, and academic standards. Most teachers reported feeling empowered and professionally fulfilled (Vanourek and others, 1997).

Two studies funded by the U.S. Department of Education offer a detailed look at charter schools nationwide (RPP International and University of Minnesota, 1997; RPP International, 1998; Hirsch, 1998). These ongoing studies will not review academic achievement for at least another year, but they have already provided valuable information.

First, individual states vary in how they define the number, type, and operation of charter schools; who grants charters; who may start schools; who sets personnel policies; and who determines the ultimate effect on public schooling. Some states let charter schools work fairly independently, while other states use more control.

Second, there is no typical charter school, but charter schools tend to be small (60 percent have fewer than 200 students) and newly created schools (60 percent) instead of being established schools that have changed to charter status. Compared with statewide averages for other schools, charter schools tend to have a similar racial makeup, a slightly lower proportion of students with disabilities, a lower proportion of students with limited English-language capabilities, and about the same proportion of low-income students.

Third, parents and students tend to choose charter schools because of dissatisfaction with public schools. Parents and students are attracted to charter schools because of their high standards, small size, and supportive environment.

Finally, charter schools tend to have different grade configurations than those of other public schools, such as K–12, K–8, and ungraded schools.

What Are Some Arguments For and Against Charter Schools?

Some people hope that charter schools might provide both new models of schooling and competitive pressure on public schools that will improve the current system. Others fear that charter schools might, at best, be little more than a way to relieve pressure for genuine change and, at worst, add to other forces that threaten public education.

There are many arguments for and against charter schools (McCotter, 1995; Harrington-Lueker, 1994; Molnar, 1996; O'Neil, 1996; and Sautter, 1993). Reasons for starting charter schools include encouraging new ideas in teaching, creating professional opportunities for teachers, promoting community involvement, and improving student learning and making students responsible for their own performance (Molnar, 1996). Supporters like the movement because they believe that charter schools:

- Allow increased attention to students because they are smaller than public schools.
- Are public schools operating outside the establishment, which could help change existing public schools.
- Emphasize performance and standards.
- Take creative and innovative approaches without excessive structure and rules.
- Stand for something, such as a particular set of values or learning styles.
- Offer more options for parents and children.
- Operate under the direction of parents and community members.
- Can reach dropouts and other at-risk students.
- Replace failing schools.

Opponents warn that charter schools:

- Are unable to waive rules seen as barriers (such as health and safety rules or contract laws).
- Create competition, which means economic—not educational—ideas dominate.
- Are just about impossible to establish in poor areas because their creation might decrease the resources available to the existing public schools.
- Increase the potential for use of public funds for private or home schooling.
- Increase competition for scarce dollars and result in a net financial loss to a school district because students' attendance at the new school does not always lower the sponsoring organization's costs.
- Risk becoming elite facilities, doing little for at-risk students.
- Create isolation based on race or ethnic background.
- Have shown neither a logical nor a demonstrated relationship to higher achievement.
- Are less accountable.

How Can I Help Bring a Charter School to My Community?

The following steps for starting a charter school come from the U.S. Department of Education's U.S. Charter Schools Web site.

First, review the territory. Gather basic background information on charter schools in your state by contacting your state department of education. Then assemble a school design team and framework and determine whether your school design fits into your state's charter school development process. During this stage you must identify experts, agencies, and organizations; investigate state laws and policies; review chartering agency policies; design a comprehensive school plan; and review resources on the charter development process.

Next, draft and negotiate the terms of an actual charter document and submit it to a charter-granting agency for approval. In addition to meeting your state's charter requirements, your charter must

include a clearly explained mission and goals, a solid administrative and financial structure, a full curriculum plan, and a plan to measure results/achievements.

Finally, open the doors. Following the approval of your charter application, either develop a school from scratch or change an existing school to charter status. During this stage you should develop a pre-operations strategy and, once the school has opened, clarify expectations and beliefs and troubleshoot and improve on the foundation you have built.

Chances for a charter school's success depend on a community's history of supporting good schools and its citizens' will to persevere in their pursuit of high-quality education for their children.

Conclusion

Charter schools remain experimental, so it is too soon to judge their effectiveness; however, the idea of charter schools has come far in the past decade. Congress and the President assigned $130 million to support charter school activities in fiscal year 2000—up from $57 million in 1997. These funds will assist 1,700 new or redesigned schools that offer creative approaches to education. And the nation is well on its way to meeting the President's goal of establishing 3,000 charter schools nationwide in the first year of the new century. The hope is that the flexibility and creativity given to charter school staff through their independence will enable these schools to act as idea labs that help lead America's public schools in new, positive directions.

Where Can I Get More Information?

You can visit the Web sites at http://www.uscharterschools.org and http://csr.syr.edu. On America Online, access keyword: charter. In addition, the following organizations offer information on the topic of charter schools:

Center for Education Reform
Toll Free: 800–521–2118
Phone: 202–822–9000
E-mail: cer@edreform.com
Web: http://www.edreform.com

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management
Toll Free: 800–438–8841
Phone: 541–346–5043
E-mail: eric@eric.uoregon.edu
Web: http://eric.uoregon.edu

U.S. Department of Education
Public Charter Schools Program
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
Toll Free: 800–877–8339
Phone: 202–260–2671

Sources

References identified with EJ or ED are abstracted in the ERIC database. EJ references are journal articles available at most research libraries. ED references are documents available in library microfiche collections and from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1–800–443–3742. Call 1–800–538–3742 for more details.

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This and other Parent Brochures are available online on the ERIC systemwide Web site (http://www.accesseric.org/resources/parent/parent.html). You can call ACCESS ERIC at 1–800–LET–ERIC (538–3742) for additional free printed copies of this brochure while supplies last.

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