

Strong Public Support of Michigan Charter Schools

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Charter schools remain politically controversial in Michigan. The controversy focuses on questions of choice and accountability. Advocates assert that parents should have choices—especially poor parents who otherwise lack good options. Critics argue that charter schools perform no better than regular public schools, or that they are insufficiently accountable to public authority. The Michigan legislature has failed to raise the cap, despite the policy suggestions of the Commission on Charter Schools¹. What do Michigan citizens think about charter schools?

Seventy-two percent of Michigan residents favor charter schools, the latest survey conducted by the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University confirms. Although levels of support differ according to demographic factors such as region, income, age, party identification, and union membership, the majority of respondents in almost every demographic group support charter schools. Residents of the Upper Peninsula were the only group in which less than half (40%) of the respondents support charter schools. In this report we describe the charter school presence in Michigan and present the results of the survey. At the end of the report, we compare the results of this survey to a similar survey conducted in 1997-98.

¹ To see the complete report of the Commission on Charter Schools, please visit <http://www.charterschools.msu.edu/cschoosrpt.html#as>.

Charter Schools in Michigan²

Charter Schools, or public school academies (PSAs), are publicly funded schools that operate independently under charters granted by a variety of public agencies. These agencies include local school districts, Intermediate School Districts (ISDs), community colleges, and public universities. Though universities can issue charters statewide, the other boards can only issue charters within their own districts. Michigan first adopted a charter school law in 1993. There are now more than 180 charter schools in the state.

Authorizing bodies have responsibility to insure that the charter schools remain in compliance with state educational laws and regulations. They can revoke charters in schools that fail to meet agreed-upon goals and standards. Charter schools must adhere to many (but not all) of the rules and regulations governing other public schools. They must employ certified teachers, and their students must take the state-mandated Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) tests. As public schools, they must enroll all students who seek admission and for whom they have

² The introductory information on Charter Schools can be found on the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University Web site at <http://ed-web3.educ.msu.edu/epc/issues/focus.htm>. The Web site also addresses Charter School Caps, Charter Schools and EMOs, and Charter Schools and Accountability. Recent articles and other resources are also listed on the Web site.



space. If there is insufficient space to enroll all applicants, charter schools must use a fair lottery to make enrollment decisions. They may enroll pupils from any school district.

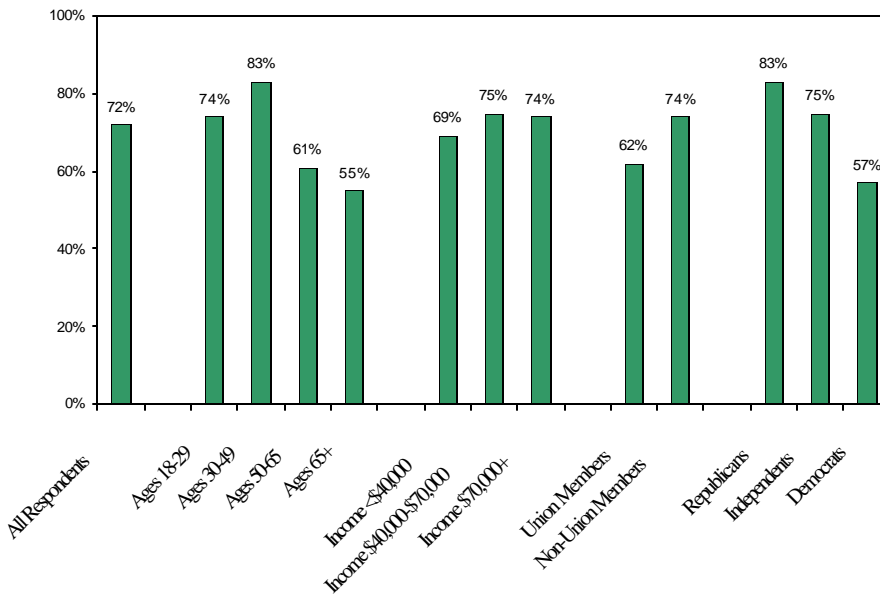
The authorizing bodies also oversee the fiscal performance of PSAs. Charter school funding comes directly from the state. The amount they receive depends on the number of pupils they enroll. The authorizing body receives the school’s financial allocation from the state and then turns it over to the local school. These bodies are permitted to keep up to 3% of the total state school aid received by the schools they have authorized.

Charter schools are funded by public money and are therefore accountable to taxpayers, parents, students, and community members. Like traditional public schools, charter schools can be held accountable for academic performance, financial planning and distribution of resources, and administrative oversight. Charter authorizers and charter school boards play important roles in determining if the school is meeting legal requirements, and they are the primary actors in ensuring the charter school is meeting all accountability standards.

Key Findings

- **A majority of Michigan residents (72%) favor charter schools.** About one quarter (28%) are opposed to charter schools. Over half (58%) said that they were familiar or very familiar with charter schools, while 4% have children who attend a charter school.
- **Residents familiar with charter schools are less supportive than residents not familiar with charter schools.** Sixty-four percent of Michigan residents favor charter schools when they are very familiar with them, and 73% favor charter schools when they are somewhat familiar with them. People reporting that they are not very familiar or not familiar at all with charter schools express slightly stronger levels of support, 76% and 75%, respectively.
- **Younger people are more supportive.** People ages 30-49 are most likely to favor charter schools (83%). Younger people, those between the ages of 18 and 29, are also highly favorable to charter schools (74%). The percentage of people favoring charter schools between the ages of 50 to 65 drops to 61%, and only 55% of the population over the age 65 favor charter schools. A factor that may account for these numbers is that people between the

Percentage of Michigan Residents Who Favor Charter Schools



ages of 30-50 are the most likely to have school age children.

- **African Americans are more favorable toward charter schools.** Seventy-five percent of African-Americans favor charter schools, while 71% of whites favor charter schools.
- **Parents with children under the age of 18 are more likely to favor charter schools.** Parents with children under the age of 18 are more likely to favor charter schools (79%). People with no children under the age of 18 are less likely to favor charter schools (67%).
- **People earning middle to high incomes tend to favor charter school.** Three quarters (75%) of Michigan residents earning incomes between \$40,000 and \$70,000 favor charter schools. Among those earning less than \$40,000, 69% favor charter schools while those earning over \$70,000 favor charter schools by 74%.
- **Union members are less likely to favor charter schools than non-union members.** Sixty-two percent of union members favor charter schools, while 74% of non-union members favor charter schools.
- **Republicans and Independents are more likely to favor charter schools than Democrats.** Eighty-three percent of Republicans and 75% of Independents favor charter schools

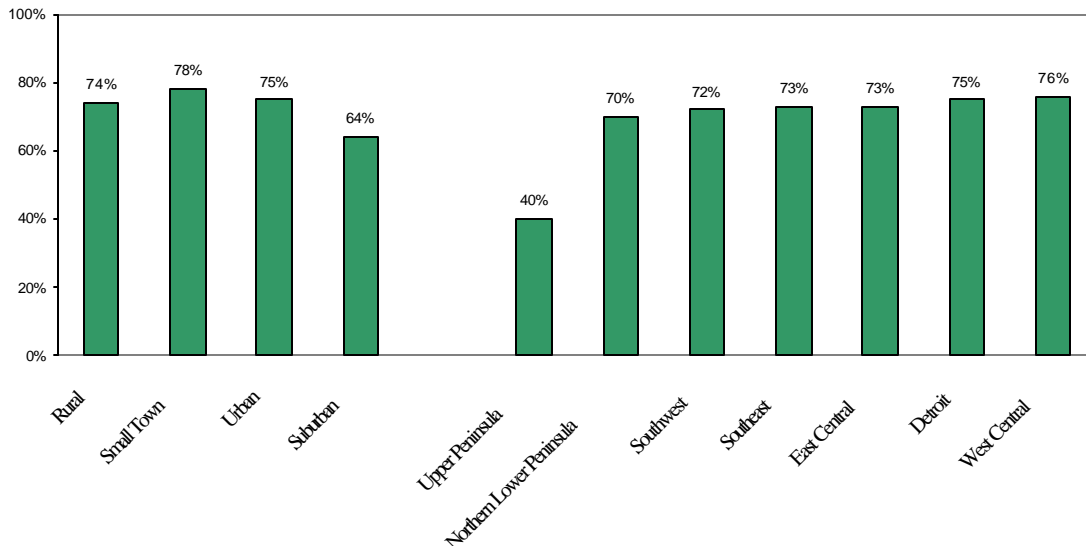
while a significantly lower 57% Democrats favor charter schools.

- **Enthusiasm for charter schools differs according to community type.** Rural, small town, and urban areas favor charter schools by 74%, 78%, and 75%, respectively. Only 64% of suburban residents favor charter schools.
- **Residents of the Upper Peninsula are least likely to favor charter schools.** Forty percent of residents in the Upper Peninsula favor charter schools. In the Lower Peninsula, support for charter schools ranges from 70% in then Northern Lower Peninsula to 76% in West Central Michigan. Residents in the Northern Lower Peninsula favor charter schools by 70% followed by residents in the Southwest (72%), the Southeast (73%), East Central (73%), Detroit (75%), and West Central (76%).

Has Support of Charter Schools in Michigan changed since 1997-1998?

The findings from the SOSS 26 Survey are similar to findings from the SOSS 13 survey conducted in 1997-1998. Data from the two surveys are not directly comparable, but a substantial majority favored charter schools in both. For example, 62.6% of Michigan residents favored charter schools in 1997-1998 and 23.4% opposed. In 2002, 72% favored charter schools and 28% opposed. Both support and opposition show an increase because the older survey also included “indifferent” and “don’t know” as response choices, while the later version did not. The percentage of respondents answering “indifferent” or “don’t

Geographic Locations of Michigan Residents Favoring Charter Schools



know” in SOSS 13 was 13.9%. Democrats were less likely to favor charter schools than Republicans or Independents in both surveys, and people living in suburban areas were more likely to oppose charter schools than residents of any other community type in both surveys.

Conclusion

Despite the strong public support for charter schools in Michigan, many questions regarding the efficiency, quality, and accountability of charter schools remain unanswered. The question of how to strengthen accountability measures in charter schools, and whether to raise the cap on the number of schools will certainly be revisited by the new legislature. For the

time being, Michigan legislators have decided not to raise the cap on university-issued charters, thereby limiting the expansion of charter schools.

The Survey

The 26th round of the State of the State Survey (SOSS) was conducted by MSU's Institute for Public Policy and Social Research (IPPSR) from May 21 through July 16, 2002. The quarterly survey is administered via telephone by IPPSR's Office for Survey Research. This round of the survey reached 933 Michigan adults. The margin of sampling error was ± 3.2 percent. More information on SOSS is available at <http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/SOSS>.



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