



## *Declining Public Support for Charter Schools Results from the 2003 State of the State Survey*

Christopher B. Reimann, K-12 Outreach, College of Education, Michigan State University  
Tara B. Donahue, The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University

New data from the most recent State of the State Survey (SOSS) reveal that public enthusiasm for charter schools has cooled in the past five years. A majority of survey respondents expressed support for charter schools in 2003, as they did in 1998. Since 1998, however, support for charter schools has declined in Michigan, while opposition to charter schools has increased. The gap between those who support and those who oppose charters has shrunk from 40 percent to 28 percent (Table 1).

When responses are broken out by region, support for charters is still strongest and steadiest in Detroit. Support decreased the most and opposition increased the most in the Upper Peninsula, followed closely by Southeast Michigan (Table 2).

Broken out by community type, support for charters fell by 10 percent among the residents of Michigan cities. Opposition increased by five percent in this group. Support fell by five percent and opposition increased by six percent in Michigan's small cities, towns and villages (Table 3). In contrast to these shifts, support in the suburbs rose slightly, while opposition increased by nine percent.

African-Americans continue to be more supportive of charter schools than whites (Table 4). Respondents with school-aged children remain more supportive than those without. Support for charter schools has nevertheless softened in all four groups.

**Table 1. State-wide Results**

SOSS Results (in Percent)	1998	2003
Favor Charter Schools	63%	55%
Oppose Charter Schools	23%	27%
Gap	40%	28%

**Table 2. Charter Support by Selected Regions**

	1998			2003		
	Favor	Oppose	Gap	Favor	Oppose	Gap
Detroit	65%	22%	43%	67%	24%	43%
Upper Peninsula	63%	25%	38%	53%	38%	15%
Southeastern Michigan	68%	19%	49%	61%	30%	31%

Support for charter schools rose significantly among both Republicans and Democrats (by six and nine points, respectively), while the level of opposition remained steady (Table 5). Support is especially strong among African-American Democrats, who are even more strongly supportive of charter schools than are Republicans. More than three-quarters of African-American Democrats support charter schools, and only 17 percent oppose them. In contrast, support among Independents fell by 16 points and opposition grew by 16 points. This was the largest shift of opinion revealed in the analysis.

In 1998, support for charter schools did not differ significantly for respondents with different levels of education. Five years later, support for charters remained steady among those with less than a bachelors

degree (Table 6). Among those with a BA or higher, however, support has dropped significantly. Over the same period, opposition increased slightly among respondents with less than a bachelors degree, while

**Table 3. Charter Support by Community Type**

	1998			2003		
	Favor	Oppose	Gap	Favor	Oppose	Gap
Urban	70%	21%	51%	60%	26%	34%
Small City	66%	23%	43%	61%	29%	32%
Suburbs	57%	23%	34%	59%	32%	27%

**Table 4. Charter Support by Political Affiliation, Race, School-Age Kids**

	1998			2003		
	Favor	Oppose	Gap	Favor	Oppose	Gap
Party						
Republicans	68%	18%	50%	74%	15%	59%
Democrats	52%	32%	20%	61%	33%	28%
Independents	66%	23%	43%	50%	39%	11%
Race						
African-American	69%	21%	48%	64%	23%	41%
White	62%	24%	38%	59%	30%	29%
Parents						
With Kids < 18	68%	17%	51%	63%	24%	39%
Without	58%	29%	29%	57%	33%	24%

increasing significantly among those with college educations. The percentage gap between those supporting and those opposing charter schools narrowed from 40 points to 22 points among the college-educated.

notably among those who identify themselves as Independent voters.

Support for charter schools is especially strong among African-American Democrats, Republicans, and residents of Detroit. Support is weaker among respondents from the Upper Peninsula, respondents with college degrees, and respondents earning less than \$30,000 per year. A majority of respondents in each of these groups

**Table 5. Charter Support by Education Level**

	1998			2003		
	Favor	Oppose	Gap	Favor	Oppose	Gap
Less than BA	62%	23%	39%	61%	27%	34%
BA or Higher	64%	24%	40%	56%	34%	22%

Another large shift in support occurred among respondents with annual incomes of less than \$30,000. In 1998 support for charter schools was highest in this income group, and opposition was lowest. Five years later respondents from this income group voiced the least support for charter schools, and the strongest opposition (Table 6).

expresses support for charter schools, but they are less supportive of charters than people in other demographic groups, and less supportive than they were five years ago.

In 1998, charter schools represented a bold new idea for reforming Michigan's public school system. Today, in 2003, they are an established part of that system. More than 180 charter schools are now in operation in all parts of the state. Charters enroll more than 70,000 students. As charter schools have become more familiar, public support for them has declined and opposition has increased. It may be that charter schools have failed to convince many citizens of their original promise to improve how Michigan educates its students. At the same time, support remains strongest among those citizens

**Discussion:**

Survey data regularly suggest that a majority of Michigan residents support charter schools, and the data presented in this report show that this remains true. These new data also show that support for charter schools has softened over the past five years. The percentage gap between supporters and opponents has shrunk by 12 points among all Michigan residents, and by even more within particular groups – most

with the most to gain from educational alternatives, including households with school-aged children and residents of Detroit.

**Table 6. Charter Support by Income Level**

Income	1998			2003		
	Favor	Oppose	Gap	Favor	Oppose	Gap
Less than \$30K	67%	19%	48%	52%	33%	19%
\$30K - \$60K	62%	25%	37%	62%	25%	37%
More than \$60K	63%	24%	39%	64%	30%	34%

### **The Survey**

The survey on which this report is based was administered as part of the 31<sup>st</sup> wave of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research's State of the State Survey. A total of 965 phone interviews were completed using list-assisted random-dial sampling procedures between June 27 and August 11, 2003. The margin of error is +/-3.2 percent. The data reported are weighted to be representative of the adult population in Michigan. Data from 1998 were obtained from the 13<sup>th</sup> wave of the State of the

State Survey, conducted between December and March, 1998. The 1998 survey was based on 971 interviews. The margin of error was +/-3.1 percent. Questions on charter schools are identical in the two surveys.

For more information about this survey and related policy issues visit the Education Policy Center website at [www.epc.msu.edu](http://www.epc.msu.edu) or the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research website at [www.ippsr.msu.edu](http://www.ippsr.msu.edu).



The Education Policy Center at Michigan State University  
201 Erickson Hall , Easting Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034  
[www.epc.msu.edu](http://www.epc.msu.edu)