

# “Charter Teachers” to Expand Choice and Transform Schooling

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## Key Points

- Just as schools receive charters to run independently of districts, teachers could receive charters to run classrooms independently of schools.
- In addition to providing teachers with more autonomy, charter teachers would give families the opportunity to select not the school their child attends but the individual who guides their child’s learning and development.
- Charter teacher policies could elevate the teaching profession, help retain talented educators by giving them control and agency over their own classrooms and careers, and attract a new generation of educators previously disenchanted by the idea of working in a large bureaucracy.

Despite decades of policy initiatives at all levels of government, education advocates and policymakers have yet to find a way to catalyze the most important in-school factor for student learning: the classroom teacher. TNTP has documented the “pervasive neglect of the nation’s best teachers.”<sup>1</sup> Frederick Hess has shown just how easy and common it is for a web of rules and processes to stymie teachers’ creativity and entrepreneurialism.<sup>2</sup> And EdChoice’s 2019 *Schooling in America* survey indicates that fewer than one in four teachers would recommend the profession to others.<sup>3</sup>

What if we unleashed the talent, passion, and initiative of individual teachers to more flexibly cultivate individual students’ potential? Just as schools receive charters to run independently of districts, *teachers* could receive charters to run classrooms independently of schools. In addition to providing teachers with more autonomy, doing so would give families the opportunity to select

not the *school* their child attends but the *individual* who guides their child’s learning and development.

There are many ways to translate this idea into policy and practice. One approach would be for state-level leaders to establish a process for teachers to apply for a charter and become charter teachers. Once approved, teachers could develop and communicate their vision for students’ day-to-day classroom experience and their own pedagogical approach to families. Families could consider this information, alongside information from various public and private sources, and identify and select teachers for their children. To maximize equitable access, families could then enroll their children through a transparent process akin to charter school lotteries.

Empowering families with choice at the individual teacher level may sound like a pipe dream, but, in fact, similar configurations of teaching and learning already exist. Alongside numerous tutoring organizations, such as Kumon, and online

learning portals, such as OutSchool, there are more than 200 micro-schools across the country. Micro-schools often serve fewer than 70 students, and many have just a single teacher serving a small group of students.<sup>4</sup> However, they operate primarily in the private sector and rely on tuition, private capital, and philanthropy to operate. A charter teacher policy would allow these and other models to emerge in the public sector, pairing the benefits of public revenue with more equitable access for families.

The result might place charter teachers in a role similar to that of primary care physicians with their own medical practice. Just as parents choose a physician to care for their child, they could choose their child's teacher. Just as a physician might hire a nurse or a medical assistant, teachers could hire someone to support them with anything from data analysis to classroom management, depending on the skills that best complement their own. Just as physicians can decide how many patients to serve, with agency over the trade-offs in compensation and lifestyle, teachers could also exert control over the oft-debated merits of smaller class sizes by deciding for themselves how many students they serve. And just as physicians leverage other outfits for lab tests, procedures, or specialist opinions, teachers could form cooperatives with trusted colleagues to support distinct student needs.

Charter teacher policies can, and should, vary among states. For instance, some states may launch programs to provide teachers with small startup grants to launch their practice; others may rely on philanthropy or other sources of private funding. Some states might leverage educational savings accounts, in which parents access and deploy their child's per-pupil funding to various education providers, including teachers. Some states might draw on the "backpack funding" model and have each child's per-pupil funding follow them to their teacher of choice. Others might create a combination, in which students' base levels of funding follow them to their teacher, but families can flexibly direct supplemental funds for other purposes. Regardless, the additional funding currently allocated to high-need students through state and federal programs could provide incentives, remuneration, and supports for teachers to serve them.

State-level leaders could also try different approaches to accountability. Some may apply standard accountability measures that, like those applied to charter schools, are limited to outcomes rather than inputs. Some may take a more market-based approach and rely on families to impose accountability by voting with their feet. Others might strike a middle ground, combining common measures of accountability for student learning with systems for collecting and reporting parent and student feedback.

Regardless of how state policies vary, policy-makers will need to trust teachers as professionals and resist inevitable efforts to reregulate or standardize instruction. They will need to embrace teaching and learning that will—and should—look markedly different than what they're used to. And they will need to embrace the humility necessary in any new endeavor, working incrementally to improve the policy design and its effectiveness over time.

Beyond the direct impact on students and families, a charter teacher policy could have several benefits for the education system as a whole: It could elevate the teaching profession and help retain talented educators by giving them control and agency over their own classrooms and careers. It could also attract a new generation of educators previously disenchanted by the idea of working in a large bureaucracy. It could reengage former educators in more flexible or part-time opportunities. And, as charter teachers become the leaders of the profession, the chartering process could pressure schools of education and licensing boards to rethink their approach, which has proven durable, despite limited evidence of effectiveness. Finally, charter teachers could foster direct communication, collaboration, and accountability between families and teachers and build the school-to-home partnerships that help students realize their potential.

Past efforts to reform schooling have yet to yield the game-changing results that families and students need, but neither have they created opportunities for teachers to put the full weight of their skill and ingenuity into the challenge. A charter teacher policy could be just that opportunity.

## About the Author

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*The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author. They do not purport to reflect the opinions or views of AEI or the series coordinator, Frederick M. Hess.*

## Notes

1. TNTP, “The Irreplaceables: Understanding the Real Retention Crisis in America’s Urban Schools,” 2012, <https://tntp.org/publications/view/the-irreplaceables-understanding-the-real-retention-crisis>.
2. Frederick M. Hess, *The Cage-Busting Teacher* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2015).
3. Paul Diperna, Drew Catt, and Michael Shaw, *2019 Schooling in America: Public Opinion on K–12 Education, Busing, Technology, School Choice*, EdChoice, 2019, <https://www.edchoice.org/research/2019-schooling-in-america-survey/>.
4. Juliet Squire, Melissa Steel King, and Justin Trinidad, *Working Toward Equitable Access and Affordability: How Private Schools and Microschools Seek to Serve Middle- and Low-Income Students*, Bellwether Education Partners, 2019, <https://bellwethereducation.org/publication/toward-equitable-access-and-affordability-how-private-schools-and-microschools-seek>.