



A Charter School Primer

CAPS advocates for strong, effective public schools because our members know that public education builds strong communities. We support reforms in public education that have been shown by research to be effective. These include some of the reforms listed below that are part of Race to the Top, the United States Department of Education's program to raise outcomes for all students:

- Improving standards and assessments
- Improving the use of data to support instruction
- Developing great teachers and leaders
- Turning around struggling schools

We also believe that all reform efforts should be based upon solid evidence that the programs actually work and are part of sound, comprehensive systems designed to improve the effectiveness of teachers and school leaders. The ultimate goal is to provide all students with a comprehensive education that is appropriate and necessary in order to compete globally in the 21st century. Because charter schools are touted as one solution to the improvement issue, we encourage you to learn more and participate in a dialogue that can lead to genuine public school improvement.

Are Charter Schools a Solution to Educational Reform?

Traditional charter schools began in the United States in 1988 and operate at both the elementary and secondary level. No tuition is charged to students, and contrary to what some people believe, charter schools are not private but are funded with taxpayer money. In fact, those funds come directly from public school districts, further straining their resources, especially in struggling districts.

For Profit Charter Schools

Some charter schools are run by organizations that are responsible for making a profit for their principles or shareholders. But their profits come directly from public school budgets. According to an

article entitled "Charter Schools and Private Profits," which appeared in the May 2000 issue of *School Administrator*, "The emergence of educational management organizations (EMOs) to run charters raises questions about the pursuit of profits and the quality of education. Unlike the schools with which they contract, which are legally prohibited from seeking profits, EMOs usually are for-profit firms that seek to earn profits from their provision of administrative and educational services to schools."

Although this article is rather old, the issues haven't changed. "There are two questions we need to answer as we seek to evaluate the role of EMOs in the public school system," according to the article. "First, can EMOs produce student educational outcomes that are equivalent or superior to traditional public schools while generating profit rates sufficient to attract private investors? Second, can EMOs generate profits from increased efficiency and improved performance - and not at the expense of students who remain in traditional public schools?"

The article further states that "even if privately managed schools satisfy both of these conditions, thoughtful people may disagree as to whether they advance or undermine other values that are important in the public school system."

Do Charter Schools Outperform Traditional Public Schools?

Charles Murray, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote an Op-Ed article published by *The New York Times* on May 4, 2010. Here's what he said, "The latest evaluation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program, the oldest and most extensive system of vouchers and charter schools in America, came out last month, and most advocates of school choice were disheartened by the results."

"The evaluation by the School Choice Demonstration Project, a national research group that matched more than 3,000 students from the choice program and from regular public schools, found that pupils in the choice program generally had 'achievement growth rates that are comparable' to similar Milwaukee public-school students. This is just one of several evaluations of school choice programs that have failed to show major improvements in test scores, but the size and age of the Milwaukee program, combined with the rigor of the study, make these results hard to explain away."

Another study conducted at Stanford University and published in June 2009 showed that 37 percent of charter school students had significantly worse results on math tests, 17 percent achieved higher scores, and the remaining 46 percent of charter school students were about even. This research was carried out in 2,403 charter schools in 15 states as well as the District of Columbia. It reinforces other evidence that charter school performance is sometimes equal to, and sometimes lower than, the performance of traditional public schools. Additionally, the record for charter schools that operate with a profit motive is no better than for non-profit charter schools.

Are Cyber Schools a Good Option for Students?

Cyber charter schools, another type of charter, offer education via the Internet, either in real-time or self-paced (at the student's discretion). But there has been insufficient research to properly evaluate all of the long-term consequences of educating students in this way. Also, even though the school district where the student lives has no control over the curriculum or learning, it is still responsible for paying the students' tuition, regardless of where the actual cyber charter facility is located or how well the students are performing.

Both brick and mortar and cyber charter schools are considered alternative and are started and attended by choice. While they are free from many of the rules, regulations and statutes that traditional public schools are required to adhere to, we believe that they should still be accountable for producing the results stated in their charter.

Cyber education also presents unique challenges in the delivery of instruction. Since there has been very little research on this topic, we do not know if it is appropriate for young children to receive the majority of their instruction in front of a computer. Because the long-term consequences of cyber education are so important, it is crucial to conduct an in-depth study so that the public, parents and students can be assured that those who choose this means of education are not being shortchanged.

The study should:

- Examine whether the system for funding cyber schools and the levels at which they are funded is appropriate
- Review the quality and appropriateness of cyber schools curricula to determine if they align with Pennsylvania's academic standards
- Determine how appropriate cyber education is for students with specific disabilities or other learning needs
- Assess the academic quality of education being offered by Pennsylvania's cyber schools
- Include a detailed evaluation of the developmental effectiveness of their programs for young learners

A system of accountability tailored to the realities of cyber education also needs to be developed.

Certified Teachers and Charter Schools

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (called No Child Left Behind - NCLB in the Bush administration) has identified a very specific vision of teacher qualifications to which all students are entitled. Traditional public school educators are working hard to ensure that all students are taught by

teachers who are considered highly qualified and certified, and they have gone the extra mile to meet the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's definition of "highly qualified." However, in the state's charter school law, as many as 25 percent of teachers can be neither certified nor highly qualified in the content they teach.

Charter School Accountability

In a comprehensive response to the United States Department of Education's program Race to the Top, the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) indicated in August 2009 that a review of evidence from studies of charter schools showed:

- Charter schools do not differ from regular public schools in average student achievement
- They have not improved the educational performance of urban, low-income, minority children
- Charters have higher student turnover than regular public schools
- Competition from charters has not improved public school performance

Additionally, there is no research evidence to show that charter schools, reconstituted schools, or privately managed schools are inherently more innovative than other public schools. In fact, traditional public schools are engaged in a tremendous amount of research-based innovation. Career academies, cyber learning opportunities, early college high schools and dual enrollment (attending public school and being home-schooled simultaneously) are a few of the innovations that are taking place in traditional public schools. The key to innovation is an ethos of leveraging resources in new ways to meet both ongoing and emerging needs among children.

Learn More About Charter Schools

To read research reports, newspaper articles and commentaries, we invite you to visit:

<http://www.friendsofpubliced.org/more-information-about-charter-schools/> and use the "Contact Us" form to share your thoughts and opinions.

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