

CHARTERS

Both Sides of the Argument

In September 1992, the nation's first charter school opened in St. Paul, MN. By June of 1998, 786 charter schools had been opened and 429 had been approved. This mushrooming of publicly funded, but independently operated schools, has stirred national debate. Little conclusive research has surfaced to clarify the advantages to student achievement – and published research has shown mixed results. Proponents and opponents have cohesive appeals and some preliminary research to back up their views. We have outlined some of each below:



What Proponents Say:

- Charter schools are often centered on specific academic themes such as “back to basics,” Afrocentric principles, arts and drama – objectives parents believe their local schools are not equipped to teach successfully.
- Schools are most effective when they are uninhibited by legislation and bureaucracy. Teachers and administrators in charters feel empowered by this freedom and are therefore more effective.
- Charter school parents are more likely to participate in their children's education because they were given the power to choose and are then more responsible for their children's education.
- Charter schools created healthy competition among schools and create incentives for higher levels of performance.
- Tax dollars should be spent on educating children in ways that parents/taxpayers believe will be most effective.
- Charter schools are effective as educational laboratories, and their success should be used to spur educational advancement for public school systems.



What Opponents Say:

- All students – not just some – should be given the best education possible. The best way to achieve that goal is to put all the best educational resources and energy into improving the existing schools. Similarly, tax money should be used for the largest public good, i.e., improving the existing system.
- Theme-based charter schools shift the balance in public schools. Charters based on arts and drama, for example, siphon the artistic students from the school system and create a “drought” in other public schools.
- Charter schools often siphon active parents. Parents who choose to send their children to charter schools are often highly-involved in their children's education. Removing these parents creates an energy drain in the remaining schools.
- Charters schools seek to get away from rules imposed by a district's bureaucracy, but that are designed to promote equality. Many federal and state regulations seek to ensure that all children receive an equal education, particularly children of color and those with disabilities. These goals should not be abandoned.

SIZING Up Charter Schools

Facing the prospect of charter schools in your community or state? Below is a set of suggested questions parents may want to ask. Answering these questions can help frame and shape a chapter's response to the proposed schools.



Context

- What are the circumstances that have led to consideration of a charter school?
- Can these circumstances be addressed only by forming a charter school?
- Have you tried to meet these needs with the current system? What was the result?
- Do the stakeholders who want to form the charter school include representatives from the broader school community (parents, teachers, district personnel, community representatives, even students)? If not, what efforts are planned to build bridges and bring others into the process?
- What is the focus of the charter? Is there a broad consensus about this?



Access

- As a publicly funded school or a private school converting to public charter, will there be equal access for all children? What are the criteria and process for admission?
- Will accommodations be made for the special needs of children with disabilities?



Academic and school life

- Are the academic standards and expected levels of performance for students clearly articulated?
- Will children be exposed to the arts? Will they have access to physical education and varsity sports participation?
- What are the qualifications required for teachers?
- What is expected of parents?
- Connection to the district
- What are the measures of educational and fiscal accountability?
- How much autonomy from the district will the charters have?
- How will the schools be governed?
- If the school succeeds, is there a plan for sharing best practices to the public school system?