



Charter Schools Facts and Issues

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The League of Women Voters of Alabama (LWVAL) Education Fund, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government and works to increase the understanding of major public policy issues. The LWVAL Education Fund supports LWVAL citizen education and voter services in Alabama.

The issues surrounding the subject of charter schools make them a topic capable of evoking strong opinions and responses. Proponents of charter schools believe they offer flexibility in improving schools with consistently low academic performance, provide options for addressing the needs of underserved student populations, encourage classroom innovations by reducing bureaucracy and hiring educators without ties to education lobbying groups and unions, and foster market-oriented reform in public education through competitive school choice options for students and parents.

“When you have the likes of Rev. Al Sharpton and Newt Gingrich who vociferously disagree on everything else, but are working together to draw attention to the promise of charter schools, that is quite significant.” Michael Ciamarra, vice president of the Alabama Policy Institute.¹

Critics have equally strong opinions that charter schools undermine public schools systems, syphon limited funding away from existing schools, are a backdoor for privatizing public schools systems, are no more effective for fostering innovation than traditional schools, and are harmful to the teaching profession by encouraging the use of non-certified instructors and creating lower pay scales.

“I don’t believe that you improve already under-funded public schools by taking money from them and using their money to build a new system of schools called charter schools.” Paul Hubbert, executive secretary of the Alabama Education Association.²

I. Definitions of charter schools

As with most information associated with charter schools there are differences in the way the basic features of charter schools are described. Here are four examples of the ways they vary in wording and detail:

- The Heritage Foundation offers this definition: “Charter schools are publicly funded schools that agree to meet performance standards set by the state but are otherwise freed from the bureaucratic rules and regulations that encumber traditional school systems.”³
- The League of Women Voters of Auburn (now East Alabama), in its 1999 study of charter and magnet school, used this: “Charter schools are distinct legal entities. They are public schools that are financed by public funds but are governed by their own specific charters and not by traditional public school regulations.”
- In a frequently asked question section posted in connection with a series on charter schools, the Public Broadcasting System put forth this description: “In effect, a charter school is a one-school public school district. A group of people — educators, parents, community leaders, educational entrepreneurs or others — write the charter plan describing the school’s guiding principles,

governance structure, and applicable accountability measures. If the state approves the charter, the state funds the charter on a per pupil basis. In most cases charter schools operate under a clear agreement between the state and the school: increased autonomy in exchange for increased accountability. Because they are schools of choice, they are held to the highest level of accountability — consumer demand.”⁴

- US Charter Schools, an informational web site developed by a consortium of organizations interested in providing accurate information and promising practices about and for charter schools, offers this definition: “Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The ‘charter’ establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3-5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school’s contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor — usually a state or local school board — to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them.”⁵

Charter schools are not the same as magnet schools; though both are public schools that do not charge tuition, they differ in the ways they operate. Magnet schools are established by a school district and are governed the same as the other public schools in that system. Charter schools are established by parents, educators, or organizations that request and receive a charter from a state-approved authorizing entity and operated independently of the traditional school system, with their own governing body determining policies. Magnet schools are required to follow local and state regulations regarding curriculum, personnel, and management; charter schools are exempt from parts of the curriculum, personnel and management regulations that govern other public schools. The structure of the exemptions varies from state to state. (Charter and magnet schools are required to follow the same civil rights, health, and safety requirements applicable to traditional public schools.) Magnet schools may set selective admission requirements; charter schools must be open to all students. When applicants exceed the number of slots available, both magnet and charter schools use a lottery system to determine entry.

II. Why charter schools are a topic of current interest to Alabama

Alabama is one of 10 states that does not permit charter schools. The other nine states are: Kentucky, Maine, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, Washington.

In the 2010 legislative session, Alabama Governor Bob Riley championed the Alabama Innovative Charter Schools Act (Senate Bill 508 and House Bill 677), which authorized the creation of charter schools in the state. In January 2010, the Alabama Board of Education came out in unanimous support of authorizing charter schools. In a press release announcing its support, the Board touted benefits charter schools offer, noting that they can be a tool for both local school boards and the State Board of Education to turn around low-performing schools and allow local boards to be more innovative in addressing the needs of their students. The release also asserted that “Charter schools do not have the same administrative costs as other public schools and the same funding resources can be used differently (reallocated and unearmarked). Rather than draining dollars, charter schools actually bring new resources into public education in the form of federal dollars and private grants.”⁶ The bills authorizing charter schools in the Alabama did not make it out of committees, and the Alabama Education Association’s opposition to authorizing charter schools is believed to have contributed to this lack of legislative support.

The proposed 2010 Alabama Innovative Charter Schools Act defined a charter school as a public K-12 school with all of the following qualities: autonomy over decisions including, but not limited to, matters

concerning finance, personnel, scheduling, curriculum, and instruction; governed by an independent governing board; established and operating under the terms of a charter contract between the governing board and an authorizer; enrollment pursuant to parental choice; students are admitted on the basis of a random selection process; operates in pursuit of educational objectives defined by a charter contract, and operates under the oversight of an authorizer in accordance with a charter contract. The bill prohibited private schools, including church and home-based schools, from applying to become a charter school or converting to charter school status. The Alabama Charter School Pilot Program Act of 2011 (HB459) has been introduced in the 2011 Legislative Session. Many of the bill's elements are similar to the 2010 bill; however, it would not prohibit private schools from converting to charter school status.

The primary impetus for the 2010 Alabama charter schools bill was funding associated with President Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" initiative, a competitive grant program from the Department of Education designed to encourage and reward states that create conditions for education innovation and reform. In a *Birmingham News* article, Alabama School Superintendent Joe Morton was quoted as saying, "[T]he lack of charter schools puts Alabama at a disadvantage in applying for millions of federal dollars that could be used to improve existing academic program in all schools."⁷ During the past 20 years, federal funding available specifically for charter schools has increased.

As for Alabama's "Race to the Top" application, it did not get funded. In the second round of the competition, the state's application received the lowest score among the applicants. Riley and others who advocated for the application attributed the poor ranking to the state's lack of charter schools and the lack of support for the application from the Alabama Education Association. (That organization was especially opposed to one component of the application, a proposal to evaluate teachers based on students' test scores.) A *Mobile Press Register* analysis of the state's ranking found that "...even if Alabama had received all 40 points available for having 'charter or other innovative schools,' it would have advanced only from last place to second-to-last among 36 states that applied..."⁸ It also noted that Alabama lost points because the state did not have a core curriculum in line with nationally adopted standards and did not have a program to attract quality teachers and principals to hard-to-staff schools. According to the *Birmingham News*, "Reviewers all scored Alabama low for a lack of charter or other innovative schools, a lack of alternative pathways to becoming a teacher or school principal, a lack of common core curriculum standards and a lack of support from the teachers' union for a proposed plan."⁹

III. Charter school history

The first charter school legislation was enacted by Minnesota in 1991. Shortly afterward, President Bill Clinton set a goal for the year 2000 of increasing the number of states allowing charter schools to 40 and the number of charter schools to 3,000. President George W. Bush also supported charter schools as an element of his educational agenda. His 2006 budget allocated \$219 million for charter schools, including \$37 million to help charter schools acquire, lease and renovate their facilities. From 1999 to 2008, the number of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States more than tripled, from 340,000 to 1.3 million students.¹⁰ As of November 2009, more than 5,000 charter schools served over 1.5 million students—approximately three percent of all public school students—in 40 states and the District of Columbia.¹¹ [For online state by state information on the number of charter schools and students served, go to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools at: <http://www.publiccharters.org/states>. Or, see the attached chart from the Center for Education Reform. [Attachment A.]

IV. Students served by charter schools

Charter schools must be open to all students and cannot require tests to be accepted. When the number of applicants for a school is higher than the number of spaces available, the students are selected randomly by a lottery. Chartering legislation typically permits the school to give admission priority to students who

have siblings attending the school, are the children of the school's founders, or are from an underserved or disadvantaged population.

The missions of charter schools are exceptionally diverse, thus making it difficult to compare them. Some are established by converting an existing school that is in danger of closing because it is not performing to standards. Others are created to address a specific area of education like the sciences, arts, or languages. The first Arabic language charter school was established in New York and Florida has a Yiddish language charter school. In Minnesota there is a charter school that serves an international population and offers both Arabic and English. Tennessee has charter schools devoted exclusively to the reenrollment of high school students who have dropped out of school. States are also creating cyber or virtual charter schools.

A League of Women Voters of New Jersey 2007 report on charter schools in the state offered these reasons as to why parents choose a charter school:¹²

- students have a longer school day and year to increase learning;
- parents perceive that charter schools provide a safer environment;
- parents want a smaller class size for their children;
- parents are impressed with the innovation or theme of a particular charter school;
- parents believe that charter schools have a high expectation for academic achievement.

Charter schools do have to comply with regulations regarding state education standards, accessibility, equality, and environmental safety. Alabama's 2010 proposed charter school act required local school districts to provide special education services to students enrolled in charter schools on the same basis as such services are provided to students enrolled in non-charter public schools in the local school district.

V. Charter schools funding and expenses

The federal and state funding associated with each child in a traditional public school follows that child to the charter school she or he is attending. In most cases the amount allocated to students in charter schools is less than the amount spent on the student in a traditional school. Typically a small percentage of that money is withheld by the district for administrative expenses. (The 2010 Alabama charter schools act limited it to three percent.) In most states, charter schools receive less local funding than traditional schools.¹³ The specific formulas vary not only from state to state, but also by charter to charter, since funding can also be tied to special needs students or free and reduced meal qualifiers. This makes it difficult to make meaningful comparisons. The Center for Education Reform developed an interactive online chart that shows per pupil spending for charter schools by state: http://www.edreform.com/charter_schools/funding/.

Proponents of charter schools decry the discrepancy in funding, pointing out that all public school students should have the same level of support. They also say the disparity in funding hampers efforts to develop innovative instruction. Critics of charter schools note that traditional schools are left with the same overhead costs and less funding—due to the transfer of students—thus harming the students who couldn't get into the charter schools. According to the League of Women Voters of Albany County (New York), "The lack of an independent funding stream for charter schools is perhaps the most controversial part of the [chartering] legislation, pitting charters against school districts, when theory would have them partner for the overall improvement of education."¹⁴

For an indication of the level of funding involved, the chart below lists the average per student funding in 2006 that was available for charter schools in Alabama's neighboring states (http://www.edreform.com/charter_schools/funding/) and for two states (California and Minnesota) and the District of Columbia, which received the only "A" rankings given by the Center for Education Reform (<http://www.charterschoolresearch.com/>) for having laws that create a welcoming environment for quality charter schools. Alabama is listed for comparison purposes.

	Average Funding Per Traditional Student	Average Funding Per Charter Student
National average	\$10,771	\$6,585
Alabama	\$8,560	N/A
Georgia	\$10,113	\$6,740
Florida	\$9,542	\$6,552
Mississippi	\$8,644	\$5,229
Tennessee	\$7,512	\$7,067
California	\$10,264	\$7,034
Minnesota	\$11,010	\$10,302
Washington D.C	\$18,332	\$11,154

Although charter schools receive funding for each child attending, this seldom covers operational costs. A charter school must fund and manage its own operational expenses (salaries, building maintenance and rent/mortgage, costs of administrative contracts, equipment and education materials, etc.). Also, charter schools have marketing costs associated with recruiting students, since parents must elect to send their children to the school and may not be aware of the existence of the charter school. Charter schools rely on grants, donations, and fundraising effort to create balanced budgets. Some states do offer loans and grants for start-up costs and building acquisition costs. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics has an online chart showing available federal and state start-up funding and reporting requirement, by state: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/statereform/tab4_4.asp.

VI. Establishing and operating a charter school

A proposed charter school must be approved and chartered by an entity authorized by the state. An authorizing entity may approve or reject charter school applications, enter into a charter school contract with approved applicants, monitor performance, and review expired contracts to determine whether to renew or revoke the charter. The process for becoming an authorizing authority and their responsibilities varies by state. In some states, a local school board is the sole authorizer. Washington, D.C. and Hawaii have charter school review boards, which are the sole authorizing authorities. Other states offer multiple authorizing options, including independent or quasi-independent (from state school boards) organizations and authorizing centers located at universities and non-profit organizations. Alabama’s 2010 charter school legislation permitted local boards of education to register as authorizers, while allowing the State Board of Education to authorize charters schools in districts where there are no registered authorizers. This chart from the Center for Public Education shows authorizing authorities by type and which state uses them.¹⁵

Local school board alone	IL, MD, OR, PA, TN, VA, WY
State board of education alone	CT, MA, NJ
Local school board and state board of education	AR, DE, LA, NH, NM, RI, TX
First local school board then state board of education	AK, IA, KS
State charter school review board	D.C., HI
Local school board and state charter school commission	GA, ID, SC, UT
Combination (in some cases including higher education and not-for-profit)	AZ, CA, CO, FL, IN, MI, MN, MO, NV, NY, NC, OH, OK, WI

In addition to variations in the charter approval process, there are variations in the appeals process if a charter is revoked, or an application is denied, and whether there are caps on the number of charter schools allowed in the state or district. Opinions vary as to which route is the most conducive to quality charter schools. However, there is general consensus that the willingness of the chartering entities to close

or not re-authorize poorly performing schools is crucial to the health of charter schools in a state. Advocates for charter schools tout the fact that market forces make sure that ineffective charter schools are closed. However, problems arise when a charter school closes without sufficient notice (or opens later than planned). Parents and school officials have little time to find alternatives for their children. Also, charter schools slated for closing can elicit the same level of parental and community resistance to closing as any other school. Such factors make it as difficult for authorities to close charter schools as it is to close traditional schools.

In a July 2010 speech to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said, “I challenge the charter community to be more vocal and to step out on charter schools that weren’t succeeding, bad charter schools. Quite frankly, I’ve felt a lack of courage around that this past year, and I think the damage that that’s doing to all of you in the charter brand around the country is unfortunately huge. As we look to shut down and turn around the 5,000 lowest performing schools around the country, about 200 of those happen to be charter schools, and that to me is absolutely unacceptable.”¹⁶

The mechanisms for authorizing charter schools, the level of regulation on them, and requirements for accountability from them vary from state to state, as does the application process. These web sites offer opportunities to compare various features related to authorizing criteria:

- The Education Commission of the States, an interstate compact created in 1965 to improve public education, offers an interactive map that provides profiles of charter school policies state by state—including what entities have charter approval authority, criteria for student eligibility, reporting requirement, and rules pertaining to teachers.
http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/CharterSch/state_map.htm
- The Center for Education Reform, a pro-charter school organization, evaluates and ranks the components of chartering legislation in each state on an annual basis. The Charter School Laws Across the States 2011 Rankings and Scorecard, 12th Edition” is presented as an online, interactive map: <http://www.charterschoolresearch.com/>
The information looks at authorizers, number of schools allowed, operational autonomy, and equity (funding levels).
- US Charter Schools provides an interactive map showing statistics on each state’s charter schools, and offers a quick overview of chartering legislation for them.
http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/sp/index.htm
- National Association of Charter School Authorizers created an interactive map showing specific authorizers in each state and how many schools they oversee.
<http://www.qualitycharters.org/overview-interactive-map>

After charter schools are authorized, the task of running them must be addressed. As mentioned earlier charter schools are managing their own administration, in addition to educating students and encouraging the professional development of their staff. A growing trend is to contract with non-profit charter management organizations or for-profit education management organizations to handle these responsibilities. “The CMO [charter management organization] model is meant to meld the benefits of school districts—including economies of scale, collaboration among similar schools, and support structures—with the autonomies and entrepreneurial drive of the charter sector.”¹⁷ According to the Center for Reinventing Public Education, “The vast majority of CMO-affiliated schools operate in nine states (California, Arizona, Texas, Ohio, Illinois, New York, Louisiana, Florida, and Pennsylvania) and the District of Columbia. CMO-affiliated schools are also concentrated in big cities, particularly Los Angeles, New York City, New Orleans, Chicago, the District of Columbia, and Houston.”¹⁸

The Center for Public Education reports that “[f]or-profit education management organizations (EMOs) and nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) represent a small but growing portion—approximately 9 percent—of charter schools nationally. Despite their small national numbers,

management organizations (MOs) represent a significant focus of foundation grants and private investment and have attracted considerable attention from policymakers and media.”¹⁹ In September 2010, the U.S. Department of Education announced it was awarding 12 charter school grants totaling \$50 million for charter management organizations to replicate and expand high-quality charter schools that have demonstrated success.²⁰

VII. Teachers and charter schools

A selling point for charter schools is that they attract and keep excellent teachers by offering freedom to innovate in the classroom. Another touted benefit is that charter schools are not restricted to hiring only state-certified teachers, though some states require that teachers hired by charter schools be certified by the state and be eligible for state teacher retirement plans. The 2010 Alabama Innovative Schools Act included a requirement that at least 75 percent of a charter school’s teaching faculty of be certified by the state and that charter school employees participate in the Teachers’ Retirement System of Alabama and the Public Education Employees’ Health Insurance Plan.

An evaluation by the Center for Public Education found “charter school staffs appear more diverse, have fewer years of experience, and are paid less than those at the typical public school.”²¹ In a research brief on teacher turnover in charter schools compared to traditional public schools, David Stuit and Thomas M. Smith, with the National Center on School Choice, reported:²²

- The rate that teachers leave the profession and move between schools is significantly higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools.
- Charter schools that are started from the ground up experience significantly more attrition and mobility than those converted from traditional public schools.
- Differences in teacher characteristics explain a large portion of the turnover gap among charter and traditional public school teachers.
- Dissatisfaction with working conditions is an important reason why charter school teachers are significantly more likely to switch schools or leave the profession.
- Involuntary attrition is significantly higher in charter schools.

VIII. Studies looking at charter school efficacy

There are numerous reports and news story highlighting the success of charter schools. *Newsweek* observed that at least 15 of the schools on its 2010 list of top public high schools were charter schools.²³ In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released “A Commitment to Quality: National Charter School Policy Forum Report” that highlighted some of these success:²⁴

- Amistad Academy in New Haven, where 84 percent of the middle-schoolers are low-income, outperforms Connecticut’s students in both reading and math based on the average state test scores, with 80–85 percent of students passing the tests.
- During the 2006–07 school year, 100 percent of the third- and fourth-graders—90 percent of whom are from low-income families—at Carl C. Icahn Charter School in the Bronx scored proficient and above on the state mathematics exam, compared to 61 percent of third-graders and 52 percent of fourth-graders in the district.
- According to a 2008 RAND study of Chicago’s charter schools, 49 percent of eighth-grade charter school students who go on to attend a charter high school are likely to enroll in college five years later. Only 38 percent of eighth-grade charter school students who transfer to a district high school are likely to do so.

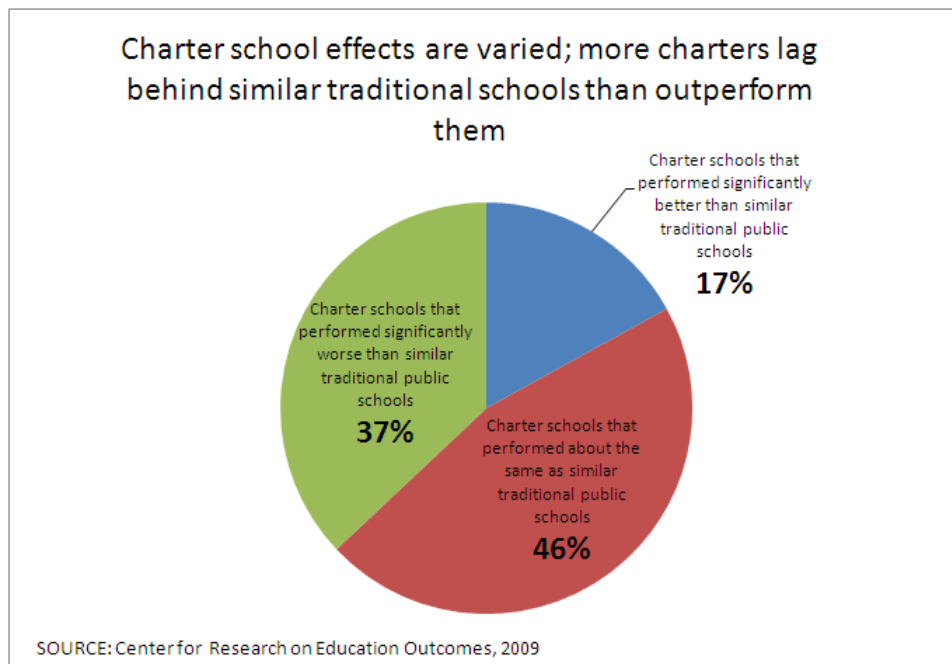
A January 2010 report by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that “charter schools in New York City are demonstrating significantly better results for their students in reading and in math than their traditional public school counterparts. These trends were consistent for students overall, as well as for several key groups, including Blacks and Hispanics in both subjects, for students who had not previously done well in traditional public schools, for students in poverty in reading, for students enrolled for at least two years or more in reading, and for all students in math regardless of how long they were enrolled.”²⁵

A 2009 study on charter schools in eight states by the RAND Corporation, which it claimed was the first to examine the effects of charter schools on long-term attainment outcomes, found that in the two locations (Florida and Chicago), "...attending a charter high school is associated with statistically significant and substantial increases in the probability of graduating and of enrolling in college."²⁶ The same report also noted that there was no dramatic shifts by race or ethnicity in any of the schools in the study and the racial composition of the charter schools were similar to that of the traditional public schools from which the students transferred.

The research by Carolyn Hoxby, Sonali Murarka, and Jenny Kang on New York City charter schools, published in 2009, was based on a multi-year study that involved the majority of the city's charter schools and followed the progress of students in grades 3-12 who either were selected by lottery to attend a charter school (lotteried-in) or remained in a traditional public school after not being selected for a charter school by lottery (lotteried-out). The findings related to achievement included:²⁷

- Charter school applicants are much more likely to be black and much less likely to be Asian or white than the average student in New York City's traditional public schools.
- Charter school applicants are more likely to be poorer than the average student in the city's traditional public schools.
- Based on data estimates, on average, a student who attended a charter school for all of grades kindergarten through eight would close the achievement gap (between students in affluent locations and students in much less affluent locations) in math and English.
- "Lotteried-in" students who attend a charter high school have higher graduation examination scores than "lotteried-out" students (about 3 points for each year in a charter school before taking the test.) For instance, a student who took the English Comprehensive exam after three years in charter school would score about 9 points higher.
- Students who attend a charter high school are about 7 percent more likely to earn New York's Regents diploma (a level of high school graduation based on test scores) by age 20 for each year spent in that school. For instance, a student who spent grades ten through twelve in charter high school would have about a 21 percent higher probability of getting a Regents diploma.

In a 2009 report on a study tracking charter students, CREDO found that "... a decent fraction of charter schools, 17 percent, provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their student would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools. These findings underlie the parallel findings of significant state-by-state differences in charter school performance and in the national aggregate performance of charter schools."²⁸ The study used longitudinal student-level achievement data from 15 states and the District of Columbia to create a virtual twin of charter school students based on students who match the charter student's demographics, English language proficiency and participation in special education or subsidized lunch programs. The report noted that virtual twins were created for 84 percent of the students in the study's charter schools. The Center for Public Education created this chart²⁹ using CREDO findings:



The U.S. Department of Education released the study, “Evaluation of Charter School Impacts,” in 2010. This study involved 36 charter middle schools across 15 states, and tracked students who entered a charter school lottery, and were either accepted and attended a charter school or not accepted and attended a traditional public school. Key findings from the evaluation included:³⁰

- On average, the charter middle schools in the study were neither more nor less successful than the traditional in improving student achievement, behavior, and school progress.
- The impact of charter middle schools on student achievement varies significantly across schools.
- The studied charter schools serving more low income or low achieving students had statistically significant positive effects on math test scores, while charter schools serving more advantaged students—those with higher income and prior achievement—had significant negative effects on math test scores.
- Some operational features, including smaller enrollments and ability grouping in math or English classes were associated with positive impacts on achievement. Longer- versus shorter- hours of operations and higher versus lower revenue did not play a significant role in achievement. Nor were there statistically significant relationships between achievement and the charter schools’ policy environment, including the extent of its decision-making autonomy, the type of authorizer and how the authorizer held the school accountable, and whether it was operated by a private organization.

A *Newsweek* article on charter schools offered this summary: “Generally speaking, in states and cities where the bar is set high for both entry and performance (Boston, New York, D.C., Chicago), charter schools do well. In states that started with the loosest oversight (Arizona, Florida, California, Ohio, and Texas), there’s much more of a mixed bag.”³¹

Diane Ravitch (former assistant secretary of education under former President George H.W. Bush and author of *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*) takes a more critical view of charter schools. In a March 2010 editorial to the *Wall Street Journal*, she said, “Given the weight of studies, evaluations and federal test data, I concluded that deregulation and privately managed charter schools were not the answer to the deep-seated problems of American education. If anything, they represent tinkering around the edges of the system. They affect the lives of tiny numbers of students but do nothing to improve the system that enrolls the other 97%.”³²

IX. Best practices for establishing charter schools

State laws and regulations governing charter schools vary widely, making it difficult to compare them and develop best practices recommendations. In an article written in conjunction with a consensus on education and currently posted on its web site, the League of Women Voters of Albany County (New York) observed that "...there is distressingly little research about what separates successful from unsuccessful charters. Without this type of research, one of the basic purposes of charters, allowing for educational experimentation into more effective ways to educate children traditionally left behind by public schools, will remain unfulfilled."³³ The Center for Public Education offered a similar observation, "Charter schools need more research, oversight, and true evaluation to fulfill their purpose of being laboratories that traditional public schools can learn from."³⁴

The National Education Association's policy statement offers broad parameters and minimum criteria by which to evaluate state charter laws. They include³⁵:

- A charter should be granted only if the proposed school intends to offer an educational experience that is qualitatively different from what is available in traditional public schools.
- Local school boards should have the authority to grant or deny charter applications; the process should be open to the public, and applicants should have the right to appeal to a state agency decisions to deny or revoke a charter.
- Charter schools should be subject to the same public sector labor relations statutes as traditional public schools, and charter school employees should have the same collective bargaining rights as their counterparts in traditional public schools.

The American Association of University Women—which believes that charter schools and other nontraditional public school options could facilitate education reforms and develop beneficial new teaching methods—offered similar recommendations when reviewing and evaluating charter schools and the legislation governing them, in addition to a few different ones³⁶:

- Institute safeguards to ensure fiscal accountability to the public.
- Establish detailed curricula and procedures for assessment and evaluation throughout the duration of the charter.
- Ensure equal access and retention policies for all students.
- Ensure the maximum possible teacher, parent, and student involvement in the development and implementation of school programs and policies.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which seeks to improve public education by improving the policies and practices of the organizations responsible for authorizing charter schools makes these recommendations: authorizers should ensure quality oversight that maintains high educational and operational standards, preserves school-level autonomy, and safeguards student and public interests.³⁷

X. Summary

Compare information about charter schools is very difficult. The enabling legislation, degree of oversight, and levels of funding available to charter schools differ by state. The criteria for operations, curriculum, teachers, and management are as varied as the charters the under which the schools operate. The quality of the traditional public schools in the areas where charter schools are established and the economic and racial make-up of the students requesting enrollment are also seen as playing a role in the successes or failure experienced by charter schools. And not insignificantly, research findings are influenced by all these variables, as well as the positions of the organizations with which the researchers are associated. Research findings are contested on all sides of the issue. By accessing the supporting information used in this report, a reader may be able to gain a better understanding of the subject and start developing questions she or he feels needs to be answered about what would be applicable to Alabama. To facilitate access, a concerted effort was made to use reliable online information as sources.

Note: The League of Women Voters of Alabama does not currently have a position on charter schools. This report is designed to give the public a general understanding of facts about charter schools and the issues associated with them.

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