

Issue Brief: Charter Schools and Choice

For decades, American families had two choices in schooling: the public school down the street, or the parish school at their church. Now there are charter schools, district “pilot” and magnet schools, virtual schools, independent private schools, mission-driven religious schools, home-schooling and, in some cases, vouchers to help families pay for private schooling.

In particular, alternatives for public school students have boomed over the past two decades, as families and lawmakers fled troubled city school districts. Leaders in several states have tried to pass laws that would allow families to use taxpayer dollars for private school tuition vouchers. Many have hit either political or legal roadblocks. Only two major programs are now operating: The Washington (D.C.) Scholarship Fund sent 2,000 students to private schools this year although the program may end next year. A Milwaukee, Wis., program serves roughly 20,000 students, or about one-sixth of the city’s school population, with vouchers. Several states offer a politically more palatable tuition tax credit, which allow tax credits to either families or donors in exchange for tuition payments.

Vouchers get a lot of attention, but most of the momentum in the choice movement today is in charter schools: tuition-free schools that are part of the public school umbrella but are run independently of their districts. The first charter opened in Minnesota less than two decades ago. Now more than 4,600 charters in 40 states teach more than 1.4 million students—double the number of just five years ago. Three to four hundred new charters open each year across the country. Now that President Obama has called for states to lift caps on charter school growth, the expansion is apt to continue.

Some public school districts, seeking to keep students from leaving for charters, have invited families to choose any of their schools in a system known as “open enrollment.” And others have attempted to take a page from the charter model: By next year, Boston, Los Angeles and St. Louis will have all created self-governing “pilot” schools, who have the independence and authority to experiment with academics, school hours and staff hiring.

Growth and Performance

Healthy school choice systems grow. Sick ones lose students. Keep track of enrollment growth within existing schools, as well as growth to come from new schools, and the effects of that growth on public school districts. Charter schools, as independent groups, sometimes aren’t on top of their numbers, or don’t know when they are required to give them out. But your state does, and charters have to report to the state regularly on such issues as student head counts, attendance, etc. Also, new charter schools usually have to either ask permission, or at least file their charters with the state before they open.

Charter school students must take the same annual state tests as other public school students. For existing schools, track tests scores and watch for rising or falling trends. And read accountability reports that charter school sponsors and evaluation teams file with states.

Develop relationships with your state charter school association and school choice advocates.



They often have a big-picture perspective on activities and growth. National organizations, such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, often publish “best practice” information regarding school oversight and accountability programs.

Charter Chains

Some charter schools are one-hit efforts by grassroots organizers; others are part of national chains. The chains are getting lots of attention these days, particular those considered “high-performing,” such as the Knowledge Is Power Program, Green Dot and Achievement First. Chain schools are run with certain methods and philosophies that permeate the company, but you should approach coverage them as you would any individual school in your district.

Private School Financials

Private schools don’t have to tell you if their enrollments are up or down, or what happens with test scores. But you’ll at least get a hint about enrollment in their yearly financial reports. They’ll tell you how much money the school gets in donations, how much in tuition, and how much from other sources, like endowments. The annual reports are created for donors each year, and usually given out freely.

Sources:

The **National Alliance for Public Charter Schools**, **US Charter Schools**, the **National Charter School Research Project** and the **National Association of Charter School Authorizers** have information on charters. The National Association of Independent Schools promotes private schools. The **National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education** tracks choice in general.