



## Education Policy Brief

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# Charter Schools

The General Assembly passed Delaware's original charter school law in 1995, and there are currently 11 charter schools serving about 5000 students in Delaware. Charter schools receive public funds and are required to follow state Department of Education guidelines and the guidelines laid out in their own charters, but charter schools are exempted from some bureaucratic reporting and paperwork.

Because charter schools are so new, there is not yet sufficient data to determine whether charter school students learn or achieve differently than regular public school students. However, initial results indicate that charter schools have both strengths and weaknesses, some similar to, and some noticeably different from, those of regular public schools.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1988, educator Ray Budde published *Education by Charter: Restructuring School Districts*. At about the same time, Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), began developing ideas for improving American education through charter schools. According to both Budde and Shanker, the goals of these “charter schools” were to redefine the roles of teachers, administrators, and school boards; to continuously improve the curriculum; and to identify the research or other source of the curriculum used. Teachers would control the instruction methods they used and be accountable for student achievement. Administrators would focus on long-term planning and overall school climate, and school boards would attend to educational results and how they should be achieved.<sup>1</sup>

### *What Are the Arguments in Favor of Charter Schools?*

- The combined pressures of consumer choice and market competition will force public education to improve. Charter schools will make public schools offer more to their students—for example, all-day kindergarten, music and art classes, programs for at-risk youth, or after-school programs—in order to keep them.<sup>2</sup>
- Charter schools will produce higher achievement, encourage innovation, and promote equity by giving families, particularly poor families, more options.
- Charter schools will offer parents, teachers, and community members the opportunity to experiment with innovative teaching and learning strategies without having to negotiate the bureaucracy of a school district.

### *What Are the Arguments Against Charter Schools?*

- Competition will drain money from regular public schools without giving them the resources to improve.
- Charter school programs will decrease public accountability and oversight because charter organizers are not elected by the general public.
- Desegregation progress may be lost if students distribute themselves largely by race or economic level.
- Charter schools will concentrate the least advantaged students in the least advantaged schools.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In 1991, Minnesota passed the first charter school law; California passed the second in 1992. As of June 2002, 37 states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico had passed laws defining and permitting charter schools. According to the Center for Education Reform, there were more than 2700 charter schools serving roughly 575,000 students nationwide,<sup>3</sup> or about 1.2 percent of the U.S. public school student population, as of fall 2002.<sup>4</sup> In early October, the United States Department of Education announced that it would provide \$198 million “to help set up, develop and expand charter schools” and to promote national exchanges of information regarding what has worked in charter schools to help improve student performance.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of charter schools are clustered in states with laws authorizing charter schools to operate with little oversight or responsibility for day-to-day reporting to the charter authorizer. Such laws are called “strong” charter school laws by their supporters; using this definition, most sources consider charter school laws similar to Delaware’s to be fairly strong.<sup>6</sup>

Most charter school operators have responsibility for improving student achievement, complying with state and federal laws, exercising sound fiscal management, and adhering to any agreements specific to their own charters. According to the “accountability for autonomy” equation, if a school does not meet these responsibilities, it is sometimes required by its authorizer to document the reasons for its failures and to provide a plan for remediating them.

Ultimately, if a school does not meet its responsibilities, the charter school authorizer may revoke or not renew the charter. According to the Center for Education Reform, 6 percent of charter schools opened have been closed by their authorizers. Most of these closures have been due to financial difficulties or mismanagement. Also, in what supporters claim is the ultimate form of accountability, parents who are not satisfied with their charter schools can withdraw their children and place them in other public schools.

**Research on teacher preparation and satisfaction**—Charter school teachers are generally satisfied with the academic conditions in charter schools (for instance, class size and educational philosophy) and their relationships with fellow teachers and with administrators. However, a Hudson Institute study found that some teachers felt charter schools were unsuccessful at providing adequate teacher planning time, integrating technology into the curriculum, and providing instructional supplies.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the AFT noted that teachers working in charter

schools are less satisfied with “physical resources, job security, salary, and potential for career advancement;”<sup>8</sup> this type of dissatisfaction, if it were to continue long-term, can be related to teacher burnout, which is another challenge for charter schools.<sup>9</sup>

On average, charter school teachers have less classroom experience than regular public school teachers, and they are less likely to be certified. According to a U.S. Department of Education report, approximately 80 percent of charter school teachers are certified, while 91 percent of all public school teachers are certified. In states that require certification for a proportion of charter school teachers, the percent of charter school teachers certified is 84.<sup>10</sup>

**Parent satisfaction**—Most research indicates that parents are fairly satisfied with the charter schools their children attend.<sup>11</sup> A survey of charter school parents in Arizona noted that “parent overall satisfaction with the charter school attended by their children is very high, growing each year, and substantially greater than the satisfaction of parents of traditional public school students.”<sup>12</sup> Parents were least pleased with the facilities of charter schools.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that parents of charter school students are a self-selected population: parents who think they and their children will like a charter school are more likely to send their children there.<sup>14</sup>

**Student demographics**—Most studies note that overall, charter schools are serving as many minority and lower-income students as are regular public schools. However, student populations within individual charter schools tend to be largely homogeneous, possibly because “charter schools promote a ‘distinctive’ school as opposed to a ‘common’ school approach. . . . accelerat[ing] the trend toward social separation.”<sup>15</sup> Early achievement data indicates that, nationwide, charter schools are enrolling students with special needs at a rate similar to regular public schools. Again, however, these students tend to be concentrated within individual charter schools, not distributed throughout all of the schools.\*

**Achievement measures**—Because charter schools are relatively new, there is no definitive achievement data that can show that, over time, students in charter schools achieve better or worse than students in regular public schools.

## DELAWARE SITUATION

Delaware’s charter school law states that the legislative intent of the charter school law is to

improve public education overall, . . . to improve student learning, encourage the use of different and innovative or proven school environments and teaching and learning methods, provide parents and students with measures of improved school and student performance and greater opportunities in choosing public schools within and outside their schools districts; and to provide for a well-educated community.<sup>16</sup>

In the 2001–2002 school year, Delaware’s charter schools enrolled about 4239 students or about 3.84 percent of Delaware’s public school students. This percentage, which is already noticeably higher than the national average, is projected to increase. The Delaware Charter School Network estimates this year’s charter school enrollment at 5100.

In Delaware, charter schools are regulated most closely in the start-up phase. Twenty-seven charters have been approved, most by the Department of Education. Eleven schools are currently operating, and four are scheduled to open in 2003. Of the 10 approved charters that never opened schools, most were revoked or surrendered because they did not have sufficient funds and/or appropriate facilities. Only two schools have closed down after being opened to students.

**Teacher preparation**—Delaware law requires that at least 65 percent of teachers in a charter school be certified in the field in which they are teaching; currently 79 percent of charter school teachers are certified, while 89 percent of all public school teachers are certified.

**Parent satisfaction**—According to the results of the *Survey of Parent Satisfaction* conducted last spring for the Delaware Department of Education, parents of children in the seven Delaware charter schools surveyed seem fairly satisfied with their children’s charter schools. Parents consistently indicated high levels of satisfaction in the areas of teaching (parents are satisfied that teachers have high expectations and communicate those expectations to students) and in school safety (85 to 89 percent of parents rated their schools a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale on safety items). Parents were least satisfied with the ability of the schools to meet the needs of students with special needs.

\* For a longer discussion of this assertion, please see J. Murphy and C.D. Shiffman. (2000). *Understanding and Assessing the Charter School Movement*, pp. 86–90.

Even on this lowest-ranked item, however, 63 percent of parents surveyed answered that they were at least fairly satisfied with the school’s ability to meet special needs (similarly, 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale).<sup>17</sup>

**Student demographics**—Delaware trends are similar to national trends in this area. That is, while charter schools in Delaware serve a high percentage of minority and low-income students, individual charter schools have very homogenous student populations. For instance, in 2001, in the three elementary charter schools located in Wilmington, 93 percent, 96 percent, and 100 percent of the students were African-American or Hispanic.<sup>18</sup>

Student populations are also stratified by economic class, according to the percentages of students who qualify for free or reduced lunches. Finally, the percentage of special education students in charter schools, at 4.48 percent, is significantly lower than that in regular public schools: 11.70 percent.<sup>19</sup>

**Achievement measures**—Preliminary achievement measures suggest that Delaware’s charter schools may cluster low-achieving students and high-achieving students in different schools. According to these measures, Delaware’s charter schools are serving a diverse population of students, but individual schools are serving largely homogenous populations. The tables below illustrate that individual charter schools tend to be either well above or well below the statewide averages.

### Selected DSTP Scores: Charter Schools vs. Statewide Averages

<b>Eighth Grade</b>	<i>Positive Outcomes</i>	<i>Campus Community</i>	<i>Sussex Arts &amp; Sciences</i>	<i>Statewide Average</i>
Reading	493.8	524.6	526.34	514.11
Math	448.2	492.91	495.3	488.48

<b>Third Grade</b>	<i>East Side</i>	<i>Campus Community</i>	<i>Thomas A. Edison</i>	<i>Marion T. Academy</i>	<i>Statewide average</i>
Reading	423.77	442.2	397.1	398.11	436.2
Math	414.83	437.05	385.26	387.05	431.93

The data above are most likely to be an indicator of the types of students that these charter schools have attracted. (Note: Positive Outcomes Charter School was created to serve at-risk students.) Over time, longitudinal data may show how well charter school students are improving; however, it will still be problematic to compare charter school students to all public school students in general: charter school students are a self-selected population because the students and parents have actively participated in the choice process. This active participation sets them apart from public school students in general.<sup>20</sup>

In order to determine the effects of the charter schools on their students, research would need to include comparison groups of students from charter schools and from regular public schools with similarly motivated parents, similar home situations, and similar previous achievement.

## RESEARCH SUMMARY

Currently, there are not enough data available to determine whether children educated in charter schools are receiving a better education. Initial data suggest that parents, teachers, and students are fairly satisfied with their charter school experiences. These data also suggest that there are areas in which many charter schools often experience difficulty, including funding, facilities, and attracting diverse student bodies.

Most charter schools in Delaware have waiting lists. Therefore, it seems likely that the numbers of charter schools and charter school students will continue to grow. Research should continue in an effort to determine whether all students are well-served by their charter schools in the long term and whether parents and teachers continue to be satisfied with their schools.

## POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- What—if any—is the state’s role (either by the General Assembly or the Department of Education) for ensuring the success of charter schools?
- How can the state assess whether charter schools are living up to the expectations set out in Delaware’s charter school law: to improve learning, encourage innovation, create greater opportunities for measuring achievement, and offer real choices to parents and students?
- If charter schools continue to be increasingly segregated by socioeconomic status and achievement, should the state provide those schools with additional support in an effort to change this pattern?
- Given the current legislative focus on educator accountability, is it advisable to maintain different levels of teacher certification and professional development for charter school teachers and regular public school teachers?

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> State of California Little Hoover Commission. (March). *The charter movement: Education reform school by school*. Report 138. Retrieved October 1, 2002, from <http://www.lhc.ca.gov/lhcdir/138rp.html>.
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- <sup>3</sup> Center for Education Reform. *Charter School Highlights and Statistics*. Retrieved October 1, 2002, from <http://edreform.com/pubs/chglance.htm#Charter Schools in Operation, Fall 2002>.
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- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2002). Paige announces \$198 million in support for charter schools. [Press release]. Retrieved November 6, 2002, from <http://www.ed.gov/PressReleases/10-2002/10072002.html>
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- <sup>7</sup> Vanourek, G., Manno, B.V., Finn, Jr., C.E., Bierlein, L.A. (1997). Charter schools as seen by those who know them best: students, teachers, and parents. *Charter Schools in Action Project: Final Report, Part I*. Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from <http://www.edexcellence.net/chart/chart1.htm>.
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- <sup>13</sup> Vanourek, G., Manno, B.V., Finn, Jr., C.E., Bierlein, L.A. (1997). Charter schools as seen by those who know them best: students, teachers, and parents. *Charter Schools in Action Project: Final Report, Part I*. Washington, DC: The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from <http://www.edexcellence.net/chart/chart1.htm>.
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- <sup>16</sup> Delaware Code Title 14 § 501. Legislative intent.
- <sup>17</sup> Gabbert, L. Delaware Department of Education, personal communication, October 4, 2002.
- <sup>18</sup> Delaware Department of Education. (2002). *Delaware charter schools: Fifth annual state report*. [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 11, 2002, from <http://www.doe.state.de.us/CharterSchools/Chart5thAnnReport.pdf>
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