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Opening New Doors for Students: Washington's First Public Charter Schools

**By Liv Finne,
Director, WPC Center for Education**

June 2014

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Key Findings

1. In 2012, the people of Washington passed Initiative 1240, making Washington the 42nd state to lift its ban on charter schools.
2. Charter schools are independent, community-based public schools that are tuition-free and open to all students. Charter schools are popular with parents. Nationally, 2.5 million children attend 6,500 public charter schools. A further one million children are on waiting lists.
3. Washington law allows 40 charter schools to open over five years, eight a year, within a system of 2,300 public schools statewide.
4. In 2014, the state Charter School Commission and Spokane Schools received applications from 22 community groups seeking to open a charter school. Eight applications were approved to serve 3,500 students, creating 318 new jobs.
5. Fourteen applications were not approved in the 2014 review; these parents and children have been asked to wait. These schools are designed to serve a further 4,900 children.
6. Recommendation: Raising or eliminating the eight-schools-a-year cap would reduce the number of waiting families and allow thousands of children who wish to attend a charter school find one in their community.



POLICY BRIEF

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Opening New Doors for Students: Washington's First Public Charter Schools

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“Children who come to school with less deserve more.”
PRIDE Prep Charter School, Spokane

Introduction

In 2012, the people of Washington passed Initiative 1240, making Washington the 42nd state to repeal its ban on opening charter schools. Washington's law allows 40 public charter schools to open over five years, eight schools each year, within a system of 2,300 public schools statewide.

Charter schools are popular with parents and have been successful in educating children who are underserved by traditional schools. Nationally, 2.5 million children attend 6,500 public charter schools, and a further one million students are on charter school waiting lists.¹ If the number of charter schools were to grow to meet demand, 2,500 additional schools would open across the nation. A proven model with over 20 years of experience, charter schools represent the fastest-growing progressive reform in public education today.

This study provides an overview of the eight new charter schools that were approved in 2014 and will open soon in Washington state. Included are descriptions of the students and communities the new charter schools will serve, the leaders of the school, the school's mission, its approach to educating students, and notable features that distinguish these charter schools from traditional public schools.

This study also includes a list of charter school proposals that did not make it within the eight-school limit allowed this year, and whose students have been asked to wait for future application rounds.

1 “National Charter Schools Week 2014, Facts about Charter Schools,” Center for Education Reform, May 2014, at www.edreform.com/2014/05/national-charter-school-week-2014/.

Charter school definition and description

A charter school is a community-based public school that operates independently of central district management and administrative rules. This allows local educators to offer innovations in school staffing, scheduling, educational programs and the use of technology. Charter schools are tuition-free and open to all students. Charter schools must comply with the same civil rights, nondiscrimination and safety laws that apply to all schools. In general, charter schools spend less public money to educate the same number of students because they operate with much less administrative overhead than traditional schools.²

The nation's first public charter school law was enacted in Minnesota in 1991. Since then the idea has spread rapidly. In most states opening a charter school is noncontroversial, and the number of charter schools has increased over the last decade at an average rate of about 340 new schools per year.³

Charter schools are generally smaller than traditional public schools. On average, a charter school enrolls 372 students, and is about 22 percent smaller than other public schools. This allows charter schools to provide more personal attention to students, offer smaller class sizes, and promote a feeling of safety and security within the school. Charter schools also create special programs to meet the needs of a variety of students, especially special education students, teen parents, English language learners and gifted students.

Students at charter schools often learn better than their peers in traditional public schools.⁴ A 2013 study from CREDO researchers at Stanford University found that charter schools perform better at teaching reading, and as well as other schools at teaching math.⁵ Another recent study found that students who attend a charter school for four years learn significantly more in reading and math than their peers in traditional schools.⁶ A study by Mathematica Policy Research found that charter school

2 "Charter School Funding: Inequity Expands," School Choice Demonstration Project, Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas, April 2014, at www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/charter-funding-inequity-expands.pdf.

3 "National Charter Schools Week 2014, Facts about Charter Schools," Center for Education Reform, May 2014, at www.edreform.com/2014/05/national-charter-school-week-2014/.

4 "Student Names on Charter School Waitlists Top One Million for the First Time," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, May 5, 2014, at www.publiccharters.org/press/waiting-list-2014/.

5 "National Charter School Study 2013," Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, page 3, at credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS_percent202013_percent20Final_percent20Draft.pdf.

6 "Charter School Growth and Replication, Volume 2," by James L. Woodworth and Margaret Raymond, PhD, Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, January 30, 2013, at credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/CGAR_percent20Growth_percent20Volume_percent20II.pdf.

students are more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to go on to college and more likely to have higher earnings in adulthood.⁷

Charter schools are popular with parents and the broader public. Polls show 73 percent of Americans support charter schools.⁸ Still, the number of students attending public charter schools is small in proportion to the total. Only 5 percent of all public schoolchildren in the United States attend a charter school.

Charter schools tend to be located in areas where traditional public schools have failed to educate children. Over half of charter schools (61 percent) serve neighborhoods where most families are low-income or disadvantaged.⁹ Many urban charter schools, such as those in Washington, D.C., New York, Boston and Detroit, serve student populations made up entirely of at-risk, low-income or minority families.¹⁰

Charter schools in Washington state

The Initiative 1240 law created the Washington State Charter School Commission, which started in the spring of 2013. Commission members promptly set to work to write the rules and administrative procedures needed to implement the new law. Locally, Spokane Public Schools became the first and, so far, is the only school district in Washington authorized to approve charter schools.

The Charter School Commission and Spokane Public Schools received 22 applications from community groups seeking to open a charter school. Applicants provided detailed descriptions of their proposed educational programs, performance measures, financial plans and fundraising capacity.¹¹ In addition, each applicant was required to demonstrate support for their school at public community meetings.

7 “Charter High Schools’ Effects on Education Attainment and Earnings,” Kevin Booker, Brian Gill, Tim Sass, and Ron Zimmer, Mathematica Policy Research, January 2014, www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/PDFs/education/charter_high_schools_IB.pdf.

8 “National Charter Schools Week 2014, Facts about Charter Schools,” Center for Education Reform, May 2014, at www.edreform.com/2014/05/national-charter-school-week-2014/.

9 “Survey of America’s Charter Schools,” Center for Education Reform, January 2014, at www.edreform.com/2014/01/28256/.

10 “Survey of America’s Charter Schools,” Center for Education Reform, January 2010 and January 2012, at www.edreform.com/2012/01/annual-survey-of-americas-charter-schools-2010/.

11 “How to Open a Charter School in Washington State,” by Liv Finne, Washington Policy Center Policy Brief, March 2013, at www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/how-open-charter-school-washington-state.

In January 2014, the Charter School Commission and Spokane Public Schools approved eight applications, the maximum number allowed by law. When these eight schools are fully operational, they will serve about 3,565 children. The Commission notified organizers of a further 14 planned charter schools that would serve a further 4,900 children that they would have to wait.

See Appendix A for the list of 14 charter school applications the Charter School Commission and Spokane Public schools did not approve this year.

Following is a brief summary of the eight charter schools that were approved.¹²

Excel Public Charter School

Name..... Excel Public Charter School

Leaders Adel Sefrioui, Executive Director, and Board of Directors: Margot Munger, Lindsey Sailors, Katherine Binder, Angela Fidler, Edgar Gonzalez, Paul Graves, Jim Karambelas, Mark Klebanoff, Brooke Valentine, Gillian Williams

Community Kent, Washington

Opening Date.....August 2015

Grades served.....6th—12th grade

Number of students525 by 2020-21

Hours of instruction.....8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

School year..... 193 days

Jobs created..... 33 FTEs

Mission: “Excel’s aspiration is to see thousands of our students graduate from the colleges of their choice and return to play an integral role in the economic sustainability and cultural viability of the Kent, Washington area.”

Academic Program:

- A small, academically rigorous college-preparatory program in science, technology, engineering and math;

12 The applications of the seven charter schools approved by the Washington State Charter School Commission are available at www.dropbox.com/sh/i5u45fdtvj0bh5e/Dpn3Pwtx-l. The application of the charter school, PRIDE Prep, approved by Spokane Public Schools, is available at [www.spokaneschools.org/cms/lib/WA01000970/Centricity/Domain/4163/PRIDEPrep_Complete percent20Application.pdf](http://www.spokaneschools.org/cms/lib/WA01000970/Centricity/Domain/4163/PRIDEPrep_Complete%20Application.pdf).

- Provide students with character education similar to programs at KIPP and ASPIRE charter schools;
- Designed to bring all students to grade level by eighth grade, with extra time spent on reading, at 100 minutes a day, using multiple proven approaches;
- Provide more instruction in math and science;
- Provide average class sizes of 25 students;
- Provide students extra help through whole class instruction, small class groups, homeroom tutoring, after school study hall, and summer school.

Note: After seven years at Excel Public, students will have received 3.2 years of additional instruction, beyond what students in traditional Kent schools receive.¹³

First Place Scholars Charter School¹⁴

Name First Place Scholars Charter School

Leaders..... Sheri Day, Executive Director, and Board of Directors: Daniel Seydel, Isabel Landsberg, Larry Crim, Uti Cleveland

Community..... Capitol Hill neighborhood, Seattle

Opening date September 2014

Grades served..... Kindergarten – 5th grade

Number of students 154 by 2019-20

Hours of instruction..... 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

School year 182 days minimum

Jobs created 31 FTEs

Mission: To provide students with, “academic mastery, social-emotional confidence, and readiness for and commitment to a college and career readiness middle- and high-school course of study. They and their families

13 2013 Washington State Charter School Commission Charter School Application for Excel Public Charter School,” Adel Sefrioui and Excel Public Charter Board of Directors, page 27, at www.governor.wa.gov/issues/education/commission/applicantArchive.aspx.

14 First Place Scholars Charter School operated as a non-tuition private school for 25 years before becoming a public charter school. As a public charter school, First Place Scholars will expand from serving 45 students and families to serving 154 students and families.

[will] realize stability in housing, personal finance, and overall health, and possess the life skills to make future life choices.”

Academic Program:

- A strong academic program designed to educate inner-city children who have experienced extreme trauma from poverty and homelessness;
- Help parents provide their children with a stable and secure learning environment;
- Provide each child with a team of three teachers, a nurse, a mental health director, a volunteer services director, and a case manager who will help parents meet the social, emotional and academic needs of each child;
- Provide small class sizes and an accelerated academic program to help delayed children catch up in school;
- Use multiple strategies to teach math and reading;
- Provide students with character development and guidance in making positive life decisions.

Note: Educators at First Place say they need the independence and flexibility of the charter school model in order to successfully educate some of Seattle’s hardest-to-teach students.

Green Dot Charter Middle School

Name Green Dot Charter Middle School

Leaders..... Nithya Rajan
and Board of Directors: Megan Ann Quaile, Kimberly Mitchell, Andrew Buhayar, Kaaren Andrews, Marguerite Kondracke, Marco Petruzzi, Cristina de Jesus, Sabrina Ayala

Community Southeast Tacoma

Opening Date August 2015

Grades served 6th – 8th grade

Number of students.....600 by 2019-20

Hours of instruction 8:00 a.m. to 3:20 p.m.

School Year 190 days

Jobs created..... 48 FTEs

Mission: “The mission of Green Dot Charter Middle School will be to prepare students for success in college, leadership and life by providing a small, college-preparatory educational program.”

Academic Program:

- A complete, rigorous, college-preparatory curriculum;
- Provide intervention and accelerated courses to help delayed students catch up;
- Track student learning to guide decision-making and continuous improvement;
- Provide assessments that promote a culture of high expectations and achievement;
- The Green Dot program is one of the most successful new charter school networks in the nation, with over 1,500 current students and more than 8,000 graduates; 90 percent of Green Dot graduates go on to two- and four-year colleges.

Note: The Green Dot program is built on a key ingredient in successful education: teacher quality. Charter schools can hire and retain the best teachers to work with children in class. Poor-performing teachers are dismissed.

PRIDE Prep School of Technology and Science

NamePRIDE Prep School of Technology and Science

Leaders Brenda McDonald
and Board of Directors: Brian Coddington, Emilia Espinoza, Melinda “bob” Maureen, Kim McKenna, Kelly Scalf, Dr. John Traynor, Christine Varela, Ryan Yahne, Cory Yost

CommunityNorthwest, East Central and Northeast area of the City of Spokane

Opening DateAugust 2015

Grades served..... 6th – 12th grade

Number of students 500 – 600 by 2021

Hours of instruction..... 7:45 a.m. to 3:45 p.m. daily except Fridays, when schools ends at 1:00 p.m.

School Year..... 190 days

Jobs Created 41 FTEs

Academic Program:

- A college-prep program modeled after high-performing charter schools like Summit Schools and the Denver School of Science and Technology;
- Provide computer instruction with intensive individualized learning through one-on-one and small group instruction and constant review of student progress;
- Provide students individual learning plans, which their advisers will help them develop;
- Provide multiple methods of teaching reading, writing, math, science and history;
- Provide twice as much science and math as is required in traditional schools;
- Provide seven years of foreign language study;
- Provide over 260 hours of increased instruction time per year. Over the course of seven years PRIDE Prep students will receive an additional 1.75 years of schooling.

Note: PRIDE Prep allows skilled educators the freedom and flexibility to provide a high-quality education to children, without the limits imposed by union work rules.

Rainier Prep Charter School

Name Rainier Prep Charter School

Leaders Maggie O’Sullivan
and Board of Directors: Ed Taylor, Andrew Jassy, Joan Hsiao, Max Silverman, Adam Porsch

Community Highline, Washington

Opening date August 2015

Grades served 5th – 8th grade

Number of students 400 by 2017-18

Hours of instruction 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

School Year 188 days

Jobs created 78 FTEs

Mission: “Our mission is to enroll every graduating 8th grader into a college prep high school program, to prepare every scholar to excel at a four-year college, and, ultimately, to ensure that every scholar is ready to serve as a leader in their community.”

Academic Program:

- A small, rigorous academic program preparing students for accelerated classes in honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate in high school;
- Provide an individualized program with a personalized learning plan for each student;
- Provide advisers who act as learning coaches, advocates and family liaisons;
- Provide more instruction per day in foundational literacy and math skills;
- Provide technology in innovative ways, allowing small group instruction at each student’s skill level;
- Provide remediation and intervention for students who are behind, including 19 days of summer school.

Note: Like many charter schools, Rainier Prep will provide more days and more hours of instruction compared to traditional public schools. Rainier Prep will provide 188 days of school, compared to the maximum of 180 days in traditional schools. This is 1,488 hours of instruction annually at Rainier Prep, compared to about 1,000 hours at traditional public schools.

SOAR Academies

NameSOAR Academies

Leaders Kristina Bellamy-McClain
and Board of Directors: Dr. Thelma Jackson, Amy Barnes, Carmela Dellino, Lauren Guzauskas, George Meng

Community Hilltop neighborhood, Tacoma

Opening Date August 2015

Grades served..... Kindergarten – 8th grade

Number of students450 by 2022-23

Hours of instruction. 8:15 am to 4:30 p.m. daily except Wednesday, when school ends at 1:30 p.m.

School Year..... 185 days

Jobs created 26 FTEs

Mission: “It is the mission of SOAR Academy to provide students with a rigorous, engaging and personalized educational experience, preparing them to become productive members of a diverse, global society and equipping them academically and socially for success in and through high school, college and beyond.”

Academic Program:

- A small, academically rigorous program where every student’s progress is closely monitored and “Excellence is the standard;”
- Students will rotate from computer stations to small groups led by teachers skilled in basic instruction and innovative teaching methods;
- Provide 17:1 ratio of students to teachers in core subjects;
- Require students to assume responsibility for their own learning as they mature;
- Provide students with character development based on the Habits of Mind program;
- Provide an hour of a visual or performance art instruction every day;
- Provide each student with one hour daily to receive extra help as needed.

Note: SOAR Academy will monitor students closely and offer extra help as needed, to deliver excellence in instruction and to prevent students from falling behind.

Summit Charter School: Olympus

Name Summit Olympus

Leaders..... Jen Wickens and Board of Directors: Jimmy Zuniga, Diane Tavenner, Diego Arambula, Isabelle Parker, Jon Deane, Mira Browne, Adam Carter, Drew Grimshaw, Sarah Satinover

Community Tacoma

Opening Date September 2015

Grades served 9th – 12th grade

Number of students..... 448 by 2019-20

Hours of instruction 8:00 a.m. to 3:10 p.m.
School Year 180 days minimum
Jobs created..... 29 FTEs

Mission: “The mission of Summit Public School: Olympus, like all Summit schools, is to prepare a heterogeneous student population for success in a four-year college, and to be thoughtful, contributing members of society.”

Academic Program:

- A small, highly individualized and rigorous learning program combining online learning with traditional teaching;
- Students will meet once a week with a mentor to review progress on the student’s personalized learning plan;
- Teachers provide six hours of office hours a week. Students who are behind are encouraged to attend these weekly office hours;
- Provide students with “Expeditions” elective courses in art and music, or volunteering in the community, for eight weeks a year;
- Provide teachers 40 days of professional development;
- Summit Schools are a small network of highly successful nonprofit schools based in California.

Summit Charter School: Sierra

Name Summit Sierra
Leaders..... Jen Wickens
and Board of Directors: Jimmy Zuniga, Diane Tavenner, Diego Arambula, Isabelle Parker, Jon Deane, Mira Browne, Adam Carter, Drew Grimshaw, Sarah Satinover
Community South Seattle
Opening date September 2015
Grades served 9th –12th grade
Number of students..... 448 by 2019-20
Hours of instruction 8:00 a.m. to 3:10 p.m.
School Year 180 days minimum
Jobs Created..... 32 FTEs

Mission: “The mission of Summit Public School: Sierra, like all Summit schools, is to prepare a heterogeneous student population for success in a four-year college, and to be thoughtful, contributing members of society.”

Academic Program:

- A small, highly individualized and rigorous learning program combining online learning with traditional teaching;
- Students will meet once a week with a mentor to review progress on the student’s personalized learning plan;
- Teachers provide six hours of office hours a week. Students who are behind are encouraged to attend these weekly office hours;
- Provide students with “Expeditions” elective courses in art and music, or volunteering in the community, for eight weeks a year;
- Provide teachers 40 days of professional development;
- Summit is the leading charter management organization serving the San Francisco Bay Area, operating six schools with 1,600 students; 96 percent of Summit graduate go on to four-year colleges;
- Summit Schools are a small network of highly successful nonprofit schools based in California.

Note: Summit School leaders focus on hiring and retaining high-quality teachers. In its ten years of existence, more than 85 percent of teacher hires are still with the organization.

Policy recommendation

The eight new schools approved by the Charter School Commission and Spokane Public Schools will serve less than half of the families who want to send their children to a local charter school. The application process in the first year shows that community demand for charter schools is well beyond the number of schools allowed to open under current law.

The eight-schools-a-year cap is an arbitrary limit designed to introduce the charter school concept to Washington state. That goal has been accomplished. The legislature should review where further demand for these schools exists in the state, and consider raising or eliminating the annual limit on opening more charter schools. This would reduce the number of waiting families and allow thousands of children who wish to attend a charter school to find one in their neighborhood.

The result would be the expansion of learning alternatives in public education that are responsive to the needs of children and the choices of parents.

Conclusion

The eight approved charter school applications in Washington point to why charter schools have been successful in other states. Charter school educators can provide students with more instructional hours, a longer school day and an academic program that is adjusted to fit their needs.

Charter schools are able to employ the latest cutting-edge strategies to help students learn. These strategies include using technology in the classroom, smaller class sizes, personalized learning plans, daily or weekly meetings between struggling students and supportive advisers, and many other opportunities for students to get remedial help.

Charter schools administrators have the freedom to employ multiple approaches to find out what works for their students, even if some of these are opposed by central district officials. In charter schools, union membership for teachers is not mandatory. A portion of public education funds are not diverted to unions each month through mandatory dues. In addition, union restrictions do not prevent poor-performing teachers from being fired, resulting in higher-quality instruction in the classroom for children.

In traditional public schools, teachers and principals are often frustrated by bureaucratic regulations, central office restrictions and the collective bargaining rules that come with a heavily unionized workforce. These controls prevent teachers and principals from adjusting their academic program to meet the needs of their students. This is especially true in schools that serve disadvantaged students.

Washington's new charter school law is attracting energetic school leaders, teachers and principals who are eager to provide a high-quality public education to disadvantaged children. In spite of ongoing opposition from some organized interests in the traditional public education system, charter school teachers are committed to preparing all of our students to succeed in school, in college and in life.

Appendix A

Below is a list of the 14 charter school applications the Charter School Commission and Spokane Public schools did not approve in the 2014 review, and whose parents and children have been asked to wait. These schools are designed to educate 4,900 children.

School name: Academy of Arts and Sciences
Grades served: Kindergarten – 12th grade
Community: Spokane
Number of students: 1,000
Jobs Created: 36 FTEs

School name: Cedar River Academy
Grades served: Prekindergarten – 9th grade
Community: Enumclaw
Number of students: 92
Jobs Created: 14 FTEs

School name: Coral Academy of Science
Grades served: Kindergarten – 12th grade
Community: South King County
Number of students: 1,050
Jobs Created: 71.5 FTEs

School name: Evergreen Leadership Academy
Community: Grays Harbor
Grades served: 6th – 12th grade
Number of students: 210
Jobs Created: 22 FTEs

School name:ILead Spokane Charter School
Grades served: Kindergarten – 8th grade
Community:Spokane
Number of students: 810
Jobs Created:35.6 FTEs

School name:King County Academy
Grades served: Kindergarten – 8th grade
Community: Seattle
Number of students: 216
Jobs created: 34 FTEs

School name:Out of the Box Learning Studio
Grades served: 5th – 12th grade
Community: Seattle
Number of students:440
Jobs created:25 FTEs

School name: Pioneer School
Grades served: Kindergarten – 4th grade
Community: Spokane and Central Valley School Districts
Number of students: 75
Jobs Created:9 FTEs

School name: Sports in School Team Charter
Grades served: 9th – 12th grade
Community: Seattle

Number of students: 180

Jobs Created:35.5 FTEs

School name: Sunnyside Charter Academy

Grades served: Kindergarten – 8th grade

Community:Sunnyside

Number of students:..... 504

Jobs Created:..... 40.2 FTEs

School name: CAL Elementary

Grades served: Kindergarten – 6th grade

Community: South Seattle

Number of students:..... 450

Jobs Created: 45 FTEs

School name: The Village Academy

Grades served: Kindergarten – 12th grade

Community: Joint Base Lewis McChord

Number of students:780

Jobs Created:53.0 FTEs

School name: Washington STEM Charter School

Grades served: Kindergarten – 12th grade

Community: Online program focused on the Spokane area

Number of students:1,000

Jobs Created: 36 FTEs

School name:Yakima Academy Charter School

Grades served: Prekindergarten – 12th grade

Community: Yakima

Number of students:800

Jobs Created: 99 FTEs

Published by Washington Policy Center

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Liv Finne is director of WPC's Center for Education. Prior to that position she served as an adjunct scholar focusing on education policy issues, authoring in-depth studies including *An Overview of Public School Funding in Washington* and *Early Learning Proposals in Washington State*. She is the author of Washington Policy Center's *Education Reform Plan: Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools*, *Learning Online: An Assessment of Online Public Education Programs*, *Review of Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Programs for Child Care Services*, and more. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College.