

Key Findings

1. Charter public schools are popular with parents; 365,000 students are on waiting lists to attend a charter public school.
2. Across the nation, over 1.7 million children now attend 5,453 charter public schools. This number increased by 9% in 2010 alone.
3. Well-run charter public schools perform significantly better than traditional public schools.
4. Charter public school students are no different in academic background and motivation than students attending traditional public schools.
5. Charter public schools in Massachusetts and elsewhere have closed the achievement gap between minority and white students.

An Option for Learning

An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools

by Liv Finne
Director, WPC's Center for Education

January 2011

This is a summary of an in-depth Policy Brief, "An Option for Learning," available at washingtonpolicy.org.

Washington's Charter School Ban

In 2004, Democrats and Republicans joined together to pass HB 2295, the Washington Charter Schools Act, which was signed into law by Governor Gary Locke in March. Union executives strongly oppose charter schools, and Washington's powerful teachers union, the WEA, launched Referendum 55 to repeal the new law. The referendum passed, thus reinstating the charter school ban. Today it is illegal to operate a charter public school in Washington state.

Nationally, forty states and the District of Columbia allow charters, and today over 1.7 million children attend 5,453 charter public schools. Charter schools are popular. An estimated 365,000 students are on waiting lists, enough to fill about a thousand more charter schools.

Many children in Washington state are trapped in poor-performing traditional public schools. Education officials say more than half of students, 597,000 children, attend "struggling" or "fair" schools, and only 10 percent attend "very good" or "exemplary" schools. Statewide, more than one-third of students drop-out. In contrast, charter public schools in other states are improving learning for students.

Case Study: Commonwealth Charters

In 1993, Massachusetts passed a law allowing principals at Commonwealth Charter Schools to control budgets, staffing and curricula. The results are stunning: Six of the state's seven best high schools, and seven of the ten best middle schools are Commonwealth Charters. A RAND study shows charters do not selectively accept only the best students:

"We find no systematic evidence to support the fear that charter schools are skimming off the highest-achieving students. The prior test scores of students transferring into charter schools were near or below local (district wide or statewide) averages in every geographic location included in the study."¹

RAND researchers also found that opening a charter school does not drain resources away from other public schools in the area.

Case Study: SABIS International Charter School

About 1,576 K-12 students attend SABIS International Charter School in

¹ "Charter Schools in Eight States," by Ron Zimmer et al., RAND Corporation, Spring 2009.

Massachusetts, and it has the longest waiting list of any Massachusetts charter. This school has successfully closed the achievement gap among students based on race, ethnicity and income level. Low-income and African American tenth graders at SABIS outperform average student performance on the state assessment. For the past seven years, every SABIS high school graduate has been admitted to college or another institution of higher learning.

Case Study: KIPP Academies

The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) runs 99 public charter schools serving 26,000 students in 20 states and the District of Columbia. Over 90 percent of KIPP students are black or Hispanic/Latino, and more than 80 percent are from low-income families.

A study of 22 KIPP public schools found that over 90 percent of middle-school students go on to attend college-prep high schools, and over 85 percent of KIPP public school graduates attend college. The study found KIPP schools do not “skim off the best” students. In fact, they often enroll students who enter at a lower achievement level than the district-wide average.

Case Study: Green Dot Schools

Green Dot operates 19 schools in the poorest neighborhoods of Los Angeles and New York. Nearly all the students are Hispanic/Latino or black, and one-third arrive struggling to speak English. Green Dot’s graduation rate, 80 percent, is nearly twice that of comparable traditional public schools. Students at Green Dot high schools learn under California’s rigorous A-G curriculum, a course of study designed to prepare students for college. Less than 30 percent of other public schools meet this standard.

Case Study: Rocketship Schools

Rocketship operates two elementary schools in San Jose, California, serving about 1,000 students. Ninety percent of Rocketship students are from low-income families, and 70 percent of them speak English as a second language. In 2007, Rocketship students scored seventh highest in the state for low-income elementary schools. One year later, they scored third highest, outperforming students at the wealthy Palo Alto Unified School District.

Case Study: New Orleans Charter Schools

After Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans re-opened many public schools as charters. Today nearly 70 percent of New Orleans students attend charter public schools, and academic results have been dramatic. The number of 4th graders passing state tests rose by nearly a third – from 49 percent in 2007 to 65 percent in 2010. The number of 8th graders passing state tests rose from 44 percent in 2007 to 58 percent in 2010.

Conclusion

The research shows charter public schools provide a better, decentralized model for providing public education than most traditional public schools. Some charter public schools have eliminated the achievement gap between black and white students. Charter public schools achieve remarkable academic results for less money while serving average students, not by “skimming off the best.” Given this new evidence, policymakers should lift the ban on charter schools, and allow all Washington children access to this proven option for learning.

Liv Finne is Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center, a non-partisan independent policy research organization in Washington state. Nothing here should be construed as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any legislation before any legislative body.