

Citizens' Guide to Initiative 1240

To Allow Public Charter Schools

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Key Findings

1. Initiative 1240 would allow up to 40 public charter schools to open in Washington over five years.
2. Charter schools are public schools; they are tuition free and open to all students.
3. Charter schools can offer specialized programs for at-risk youth, foster children or students with special needs.
4. Charter schools must be nonprofit; they could not be operated by a for-profit company or by a religious organization.
5. Charter schools have been part of public education for 20 years.
6. In the 41 states that have them, charter schools are popular with parents, lawmakers and the public.
7. If passed, Initiative 1240 would give Washington the best charter school law in the country.

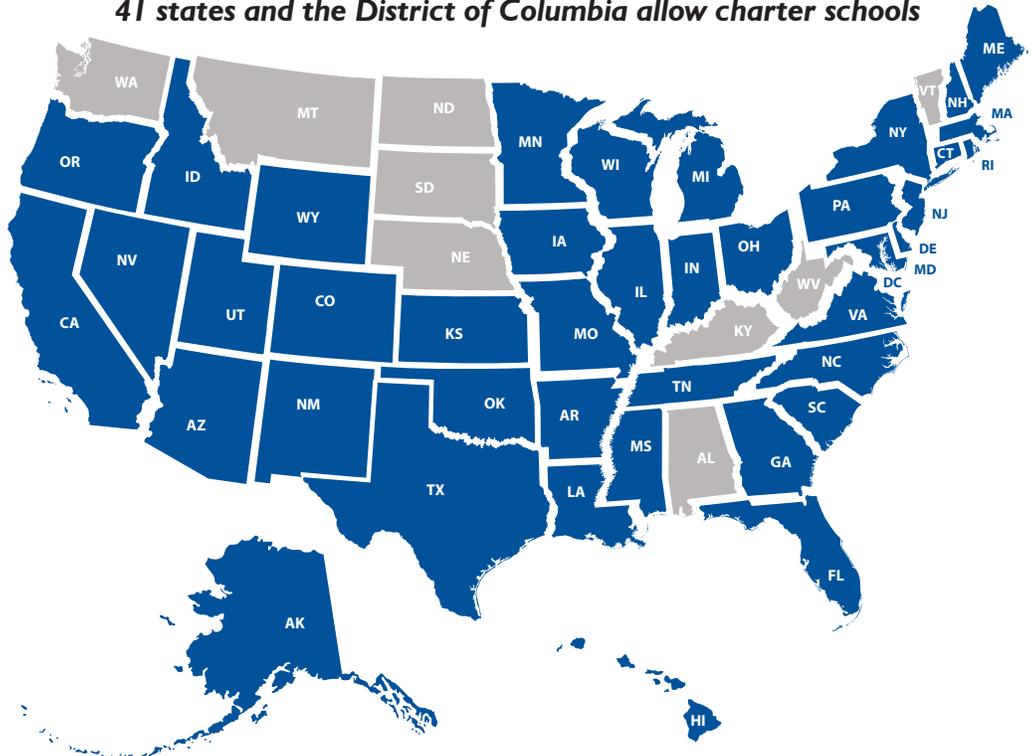
This Policy Note is a summary of WPC's in-depth Citizens' Guide to Initiative 1240, available at washingtonpolicy.org.

Introduction

Initiative 1240 would allow up to 40 public charter schools to open in Washington over five years. The state currently has 2,345 public schools. Nationally, 41 states and the District of Columbia have charter schools, serving about two million children attending nearly 5,600 charter schools. A further 600,000 students are on waiting lists.

A charter school is a community-based public school that operates independently of most central district administrative rules. Charter schools are tuition free and open to all students. Charter schools must meet academic standards and provide the same civil rights, non-discrimination and public safety protections that apply to all public schools.

41 states and the District of Columbia allow charter schools



Charter schools allow the principal greater flexibility in running a school in areas such as scheduling, teacher hiring, budgeting, curriculum and community relations. A charter school can offer increased instructional hours and can be open to students on evenings and weekends, regardless of central district rules.

Description of Initiative 1240

Initiative 1240 would allow up to 40 public charter schools to open over a five-year period, with no more than eight schools allowed in any one year. Priority would be given to charter schools that serve at-risk students or those attending low-performing public schools.

Charter school enrollment would be voluntary. If more families apply than spaces available, students would be chosen by lottery. Charter schools could not discriminate on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, disability or other protected category. As with all public schools, charter schools could offer specialized education programs for at-risk youth, foster children or students with special needs.

Funding

Students at a charter school would receive the same state and federal funding that students in other public schools receive. A public school that converts to a charter would continue to receive local levy funding. A newly opened charter school would receive a fair share of levy funds after passage of the next local levy. Central administrative costs would be capped at 4%, with 96% of education funding going to the local charter school. A charter school must be public and nonprofit; it could not be operated by a for-profit company or by a religiously affiliated organization.

Accountability

Charter schools would be required to follow all local, state and federal regulations regarding health, public safety, and parental, student and employee rights. They must provide a basic education as defined by state law, and they must follow state testing requirements. Administrators would be accountable to their authorizing organization, either the local school board or the state Charter School Commission.

Charter schools would operate under a five-year contract. Each year charter schools would report on academic progress toward student growth targets. If students failed to learn, the authorizing agency could cancel the contract and install new management.

Charter school teachers would be required to hold a state-approved teaching certificate. Charter school faculty would not be required to join a union, but they could form a union if they so chose. Charter schools would receive the same funding for teacher pay and pension benefits as other public schools.

Academic Achievement in Charter Schools

Several large-scale studies show charter schools routinely perform better in educating hard-to-teach students than conventional public schools. Researchers at Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania and the National Bureau of Economic Research found that charter school students scored considerably higher on standardized math and reading tests than children who had applied to a charter school but, because of space limitations, were required to attend a conventional public school. Students attending charter schools scored 31 points higher in math and 23 points higher in English than similar students who attended other public schools.

State officials in Massachusetts report that “Charter Schools — at both the middle and high school levels — have a very positive impact on student achievement. The results in math achievement for middle-school students are nothing short of remarkable.” They further note that charter schools are “popular with families” and that parents say these schools “create the kinds of learning environments that benefit students.” The state study concludes, “Charter Schools in Boston are making real progress in breaking the persistent connection between poverty and poor [academic] results.”

A study by the RAND Corporation conducted in eight states found that charters do not selectively accept the best students in a given area, and they do not leave conventional public schools with lower-achieving 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 (districtwide or statewide) averages in every geographic location included in the study.”

RAND researchers also found that opening a charter school does not drain resources away from other public schools in the area: “There is no evidence in any of the locations that charter schools are negatively affecting the achievement of students in nearby TPSs [Traditional Public Schools].”

After debunking two of the most persistent myths about charter public schools, RAND researchers found that charters can have significant positive effects on student learning. Students who attended a charter middle school and went on to a charter high school were seven to 15 percentage points more likely to graduate than those who attended a conventional public high school. In addition, students who attended a charter high school were eight to 10 percentage points more likely to go on to college.

Arguments Against Initiative 1240

Opponents of Initiative 1240 make several arguments against charter schools. This section presents these arguments along with responses.

Claim: Charter schools drain money from public schools

Response: Charter schools are public schools; they do not take money away from public education. Charter school students would receive the same funding they would receive at a conventional public school. In both cases, the level of per-student funding would be the same. Initiative 1240 creates a limited program within the current education system.

Claim: Charter schools would privatize public education

Response: Charter schools are public schools. Their teachers are public employees, they receive public funding and they operate under public supervision. Under Initiative 1240, only nonprofits could apply to open a charter school. For-profit companies and religious groups would be barred from participating.

Claim: Charter schools “cream off” the best students

Response: Charter schools are open to all students; administrators are not permitted to discriminate among students. Over-subscribed admissions are decided by lottery. Charter schools often open in urban neighborhoods where parents have become dissatisfied with how the system is serving their children. Lottery data show that charter school students generally reflect the population of the surrounding neighborhood.

Claim: Charter schools do not perform better than conventional public schools

Response: This objection contradicts the previous one. If charters “cream off” the best students, how can their students perform worse than students at conventional schools?

This objection is based on a single, flawed study from Stanford University, the CREDO study. The study lumped charter schools from 15 states together, without controlling for different state laws. The data included charter schools open less than one year, and students who had attended a charter school for less than one year. In both cases the research period was not long enough to provide meaningful conclusions. Numerous studies show charter school students often perform as well or better than similar students who attend a conventional school, especially those from at-risk populations.

Claim: Charter schools reduce public involvement in public education

Response: Initiative 1240 would make no change in the way school boards are elected or how conventional public schools are administered. Charter schools are part of the public education system. They would be authorized by elected school boards or by a state commission appointed by elected representatives.

Initiative 1240 would likely increase public involvement in public education because charters are community-based and attendance is voluntary. Families would choose to get involved in their local charter school, rather than seeing their children assigned by central administrators, as is often the case with conventional schools.

Claim: Supporting charter schools is immoral

Response: Initiative 1240 opponents say there is a “moral obligation” to fund existing public schools, implying that supporting charter schools is immoral.¹ Charter schools would be one option within the public education system. It is not immoral for families to choose a form of public education that works best for them. The parents of two million children currently attending charter schools have not made an immoral decision.

¹ “I’m voting ‘no’ on Initiative 1240 because our kids can’t afford it,” by Rep. Marcie Maxwell; “Is It Time for Charters?” July 17, 2012, at www.publicola.com/2012/07/17/is-it-time-for-charters/.

Claim: Supporting charter schools is racist

Response: Initiative 1240 opponents say they are concerned “over segregation and the failure to meet the needs of students of color.”² Students at a charter school would receive the same civil rights and anti-discrimination protections as children attending other public schools. In any case, racial discrimination in public education is illegal under federal law, and this law cannot be changed by a state initiative.

Research shows the racial make-up of charter schools reflects the demography of the surrounding neighborhood. Charter school attendance is voluntary. Administrators could not adopt a racist admissions policy even if they wanted to, as opponents seem to imply.

Conclusion

Charter schools have been a successful part of U.S. public education for 20 years. In all that time no state has repealed its charter school law, and millions of graduates have gone on to lead successful, productive lives.

The key to the success of charter schools is local control. Principals at charter schools manage their budgets, teaching staff and educational programs with minimal central bureaucratic interference. Administrators are held accountable for student performance, both to parents and to their charter authorizer. Charter schools are reviewed annually and those that fail to educate students can be placed under new management.

In the 41 states that have them, charter schools are popular with parents, lawmakers and the public. Long waiting lists indicate parents in many communities believe charter schools offer a better education and better life prospects for their children. Across the country, opening a charter school is routine and noncontroversial; it is seen as simply one way to provide children with a good public education.

It is the paramount duty of the state to provide for the education of all children residing within its borders. Charter schools can play a role in fulfilling this duty, especially for low-income and minority students who are often underserved by conventional public schools.

If passed, Initiative 1240 would give Washington the best charter school law in the country. Allowing a limited number of high-quality, nonprofit charter schools would give Washington children, especially those living in communities with low-performing schools, fair access to this proven form of public education.

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² Ibid.

Additional resources from Washington Policy Center:

- Guide to Major Charter School Studies, July 2012, www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/guide-major-charter-school-studies
- Lifting the State Ban on Charter Schools, February 2012, www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/legislative/lifting-state-ban-charter-schools
- An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools, January 2011, www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/brief/option-learning-assessment-student-achievement-charter-public-schools
- WPC Education Reform Blog, www.washingtonpolicyblog.org