



WHAT PARENTS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT:
CHARTER SCHOOLS

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This brief article will provide questions and tips that can help parents and chapters make sense of the charter school issue and all of its implications. While Parents for Public Schools has not taken an official position on charter schools, PPS remains an organization interested in improving public schools for all children.

How can we improve public schools, particularly low performing schools, so they can accelerate improvement in student achievement? This is the key question facing education professionals, reformers, and parent advocates. There are various answers floating around, with some claiming that their answer is the “silver bullet” to school improvement.

Increasingly, some are holding up charter schools as that silver bullet. Unlike a voucher system, charter schools are part of a publicly funded education system. Charter schools are schools run independently of the traditional public school system that receive public funding and are held accountable by an agreement (a charter) between the charter school and the state or the school system. Operating outside of state or local policies in the name of innovation, they are often overseen by their own board of directors, which can include parents, business people, civic leaders, educators or other volunteers. Initially, charters to open the schools, and keep them open, had to be approved by either the local school board or the state, depending on states’ laws. Now, statewide charter school boards and other entities sometimes approve charter schools, bypassing the role of locally elected or appointed school boards. Teachers, parents, higher education groups or foundations often initiate charter schools. They are free of many district regulations and, as a result, are often tailored to meet specific community needs and experiment with different educational approaches.

The official definition of charter schools by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a national advocacy group, reads: “Charter schools are independent public schools allowed freedom to be more innovative, while being held accountable for improved student achievement. They foster a partnership between parents, teachers and students to create an environment in which parents can be more involved, teachers are given the freedom to innovate and students are provided the structure they need to learn, with all three held accountable for improved student achievement.” You can read the National Alliance’s common questions and answers about charter schools here: <http://www.publiccharters.org/About-Charter-Schools/What-are-Charter-Schools003F.aspx>. You might also be interested in reading information at www.edreform.com.

At first, in the mid-1990’s, charter schools filled specific community needs. If parents wanted to start a school as an alternative to a struggling traditional public school, a charter school might fit the bill. A school focused on science or the arts? A school for children with specific disabilities? Charter schools were a potential answer.

Today, charter schools are likely the most comprehensive reform of public education in the past two decades. About 5,275 charter schools now operate in 41 states, representing about 5 percent of all public schools, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Several new issues have emerged in the charter schools movement more recently. One such factor is the potential for profit. While many charter schools are run by not-for-profit community boards or organizations – even by universities – some charter schools are managed by for-profit companies or by non-profits that may not have the stability to run good schools.

Another new development is that in the past several years, charter schools have gone online. In many cases, these virtual charter schools are run by for-profit companies. An increasing number of states and school districts are turning to for-profit companies to run online schools, either as charter schools or as contracted schools hired to offer online courses for students. While many new developments in online learning are promising, serious policy questions are being raised about whether for-profit companies should be operating public schools in what essentially is an online monopoly. On the other hand, many states and school districts do not have the capacity to offer the online K-12 courses students want – and therefore have little choice but to opt for these well-established companies' offerings.

Research on the academic success of charter schools shows mixed results. Charter schools, like traditional schools, vary tremendously in quality. Some charter schools may be the right fit for specific students or to fill a community need. Charter schools may give parents another choice within the public school system when traditional schools are not meeting their child's needs. Sometimes charter schools succeed in pushing traditional public schools to improve. On the other hand, some charter schools have shown academic results that are below that of traditional public schools. Some charter schools have gone out of business due to lack of proper financial management, or worse, fraud.

Parents for Public Schools believes that parents need to be involved in their children's schools, whether charter schools or traditional public schools. The issue of charter schools demands that parents be informed about their state's own charter school laws, charter school operators, and the policies that govern them – in addition to being informed about their district's traditional public schools.

The charts provided here will shed light on the facts, the pros, and the cons of charter schools. Also provided is a document which parents can use in order to ask the right questions for their own information.

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