

# Public Charter Schools — Frequently Asked Questions



## What are public charter schools?

Charter schools are public schools funded by government dollars. They vary from traditional public schools because they are granted “charters” by authorizers and exempt from many of the federal, state, and local laws regulating traditional public schools. Charters are valid for a specific number of years and must meet accountability measures to earn reauthorization. Public charter schools are open enrollment, and can be unionized or non-unionized. Lotteries are used when more students apply than there are spots available. A number of states direct charters to target students in low-income communities or struggling academically. Public charter schools first appeared in Minnesota in 1992.

## How many public charter schools are there across the country, and where are they located?

There are nearly 5,000 public charter schools<sup>1</sup> operating in 41 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico<sup>2</sup>.

Alaska	Kansas	Ohio
Arizona	Louisiana	Oklahoma
Arkansas	Maine	Oregon
California	Maryland	Pennsylvania
Colorado	Massachusetts	Puerto Rico
Connecticut	Michigan	Rhode Island
Delaware	Minnesota	South Carolina
District of Columbia	Mississippi	Tennessee
Florida	Missouri	Texas
Georgia	Nevada	Utah
Hawaii	New Hampshire	Virginia
Idaho	New Jersey	Wisconsin
Illinois	New Mexico	Wyoming
Indiana	New York	
Iowa	North Carolina	

Most states place caps on the number of charters that can be authorized, either annually or in total; only 18 states do not have caps<sup>3</sup>. Caps range from six annually in Idaho and Oklahoma to 1,450 in California.

## How are public charter schools authorized?

Most states allow local school boards and state boards of education to authorize public charter schools. Some states have created charter-specific boards which authorize public charter schools, and others allow universities to authorize schools.

<sup>1</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

<sup>2</sup> Education Commission of the States

<sup>3</sup> Education Commission of the States. *Does the State Have Any Caps on the Number of Charter Schools?*. October 2010. Accessed online Nov. 5, 2010. <<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/CharterSch/1-6-Num.pdf>>

## How are public charter schools funded?

Public charter schools are funded by public dollars, although they do not always receive the same level of funding as other public schools. Typically, charters receive federal and state funding, although they often have less access to local and facilities funding<sup>4</sup>. This can result in public charter schools receiving \$400 to \$12,000 less per student than public schools in the surrounding school districts<sup>5</sup>. Some public charter schools and networks raise funds from outside and/or private sources to supplement state and federal funding.

## What impact are public charter schools having on student achievement?

One of the most comprehensive studies of student performance in public charter schools found that more than 80 percent of public charter schools reported academic gains that were the same or worse than their traditional public school peers<sup>6</sup>. In the study, 17 percent of public charter schools outperformed, 37 percent performed worse, and 46 percent performed no differently than traditional public schools. However, when looking specifically at performance of low-income students and English language learners, public charter schools were found to outperform traditional public schools.

Further, when data is disaggregated at the state or local level, certain regions see public charter schools outperforming their traditional public school peers. In Arkansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Denver and Chicago, public charter schools had significantly higher learning gains for students than traditional public schools<sup>7</sup>. Another study found public charter schools in Boston outperformed their traditional public school peers at the middle and high school levels<sup>8</sup>. In other states, however, public charter schools have been found to underperform when compared to traditional public schools, namely Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, and Texas<sup>9</sup>.

Other studies have focused on specific charter operators, and found some to be more effective than others. One of the most well known charter school networks, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), was found to have significant positive impact on its students' academic achievement<sup>10</sup>. A number of other networks have been found to be high performing, including Achievement First, Uncommon Schools and Aspire Public Schools<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Batdorff, J. Maloney, J. May. *Charter School Funding: Inequity Persists*. May 2010. Ball State University. Accessed online May 12, 2011, <<http://cms.bsu.edu/Academics/CollegesandDepartments/Teachers/Schools/Charter/~media/DepartmentalContent/Teachers/PDFs/charterschfunding051710.ashx>>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes. *Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*. June 2009. Stanford University. <[http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf)>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> A. Abdulkadiroglu, J. Angrist, et al. *Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools*. January 2009. The Boston Foundation. <[http://www.tbf.org/uploadedFiles/tbforg/Utility\\_Navigation/Multimedia\\_Library/Reports/InformingTheDebate\\_Final.pdf](http://www.tbf.org/uploadedFiles/tbforg/Utility_Navigation/Multimedia_Library/Reports/InformingTheDebate_Final.pdf)>

<sup>9</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes. *Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States*. June 2009. Stanford University. <[http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE\\_CHOICE\\_CREDO.pdf](http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf)>

<sup>10</sup> C.C. Tuttle, B. Teh, et al. *Student Characteristics and Achievement in 22 KIPP Middle Schools*. June 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Education Sector. *Growing Pains: Scaling Up the Nation's Best Charter Schools*. November 2009.

# Public Charter Schools — Frequently Asked Questions



## What is the history of public charter schools in Washington?

Charter school language first appeared in Washington as an initiative to the Legislature in 1996. The initiative was rejected by 64 percent of voters and did not become law<sup>12</sup>. The issue then moved to the state Legislature where five charter bills were proposed over the course of seven years, the first in 1997. These bills all included caps on the number of start-up public charter schools permitted each year, ranging from 20 to 45. Later bills also allowed authorizers to convert failing schools to public charter schools, typically without limits, and required most charters serve educationally disadvantaged students.

The initial House bill<sup>13</sup> passed through the House in both 1997 and 1998; however, Senate companion bills<sup>14</sup> never made it out of committee. Another bill<sup>15</sup> was introduced in 1999, which followed the same pattern of passing the House while failing in the Senate. The following year, 2000, an initiative to the people went to a vote and a majority of voters (52 percent) again rejected the measure<sup>16</sup>.

Public charter schools did not appear again until 2003, with the introduction of a more narrowly focused bill in the Legislature<sup>17</sup>. The Senate passed its bill in both 2003 and 2004, although the bill did not come up for a floor vote in the House until 2004. Then, in March 2004, the Legislature passed charter school legislation by a vote of 51-46 in the House and 27-22 in the Senate; the governor signed the bill into law in June. Charter authorization was short lived, as a veto referendum was put on the ballot in November and the law was rejected by 58 percent of voters<sup>18</sup>.

## How could public charter schools be allowed in Washington?

---

<sup>12</sup> Initiative to the Legislature 177 was filed on July 17, 1995 and was certified to the Legislature on January 30, 1996. The Legislature failed to take action and the measure was submitted to voters on November 5, 1996, where it was rejected by a vote of 762,367 for and 1,380,816 against.

<sup>13</sup> HB 2019 would have authorized up to 25 state sponsored charter schools to be established over the next year, required charter school teachers to be state certified, required students in charter schools to meet or exceed public school standards and allowed only local school boards to sponsor charters

<sup>14</sup> The 1997 companion bill, SB 5764, also would have allowed 2- and 4-year colleges and education service districts to sponsor charters. A compromise bill, SB 7901, was introduced in 1998. This bill would have allowed school districts and universities to sponsor charters, permitted up to 20 new charters to be established each year for four years, authorized local school boards to allocate local levy revenue to charter schools and exempted school districts with less than 1,000 students because of the potential for adverse financial impact.

<sup>15</sup> HB2415/SB 6483 would have allowed up to 20 new start-up charters and unlimited conversion schools — in the Legislature's special session, it was changed to allow up to 40 new charters — and charters to be between a nonprofit organization and either a school district or the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. An amendment proposed in the Senate would have allowed teachers at charter schools to join their local teachers' union.

<sup>16</sup> Initiative 729, filed on February 23, 2000, was submitted to the voters on November 7, 2000 and rejected by a vote of 1,125,766 for and 1,211,390 against.

<sup>17</sup> HB 2295/SB5012 would have allowed up to 45 new charters to be granted over the following six years, permitted school boards to convert failing existing schools into charter schools, and permitted nonprofit organizations to partner with school districts or the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction to establish charters. In the House, an amendment to the bill required that most charter schools serve educationally disadvantaged students. In the Senate, party leaders tied the charter school legislation to three other education-related bills: one allowing school districts to collect a higher percentage of local levy dollars; one refining the Washington Assessment of Student Learning, the state's standardized test which must be passed by students in 10th grade in order to graduate high school beginning in 2008, and allowing retakes of the WASL and one changing how districts receive money to help struggling students.

<sup>18</sup> Referendum 55 was filed on March 29, 2004, submitted to the voters on November 4, 2004 and rejected by a vote of 1,122,964 approved to 1,572,203 rejected.

## Public Charter Schools — Frequently Asked Questions



To allow public charter schools in Washington State, one of three options could be pursued:

- 1) Initiative to the Legislature — if certified with sufficient signatures (8 percent of number of votes cast for the office of the governor in the last gubernatorial election), submitted to the Legislature at next regular session in January; Legislature may either:
  - a. Adopt the initiative as proposed, and it becomes law;
  - b. Reject the initiative or refuse to act on the proposed initiative, which is then placed on the ballot at the next state general election; or
  - c. Approve an alternative to the proposal, which is then put on the ballot at the next state general election along with the original proposal.
- 2) Initiative to the people — if certified with sufficient signatures (8 percent of number of votes cast for the office of the governor in the last gubernatorial election), submitted to a vote of the people at the next state general election.
- 3) Bill through the Legislature.