



10 Questions for Journalists

This checklist provides local and national journalists with questions and story ideas about charter schools in their regions and nationwide.

The number of charter schools has grown steadily since the first one opened in 1992. By 2013-14, over 5 percent of public school students in the United States attended charter schools. In some districts, charter schools serve a high proportion of public school students—91 percent in New Orleans and 55 percent in Detroit in 2013-14. But they served 1 percent or less of public school students in districts such as Richmond, Virginia, and Topeka, Kansas in 2012-13. Some cities and states have no charter schools at all.

Our **research guide** can help journalists better understand: governance, operations, finances, achievement, innovation, teachers, families and diversity at charter schools, as well as public opinion about charter schools.

1 How are students performing in charter schools compared with traditional public schools?

Charter schools' impacts on students' performance vary across states, types of students, types of schools and over time. How well are charter school students doing on standardized tests compared with traditional public school students in the region that you cover? How does their performance vary by subject area, grade or race, and why does it vary? How do charter school students' high school graduation and college matriculation rates compare with those of traditional public school students?

2 Who operates charter schools? What are their track records?

About one-third of charter schools are operated by nonprofit or for-profit organizations that run multiple schools. About two-thirds are freestanding, although the proportion of freestanding charter schools has declined recently. What challenges do freestanding charter schools face? Who is operating or proposing new charter schools in your region? What are their financial, managerial and academic track records? If they are planning to open more schools or serve more students, how will they manage that expansion? Have any schools that they operated ever been closed? How much money are for-profit charter school operators earning?

3 How are charter schools' and traditional public schools' finances related?

How are charter schools affecting the finances and enrollment of traditional public schools in your region? Are there per-pupil funding disparities between charter and traditional public schools? If there are disparities, what accounts for them? How do state and district policies affect both charter school and traditional public school finances? Do policymakers plan to mitigate any funding disparities or negative effects on traditional public schools' finances?

4 What are the long-term goals of state and local charter school policies?

Some states cap the number of charter schools. Several states are considering raising their caps. Do state and local policymakers have clear projections of how many charter schools and how many traditional public schools they think the community needs? Are those projections backed by reliable data? How will states and districts manage enrollment and finances in ways that promote the quality of all schools, particularly those serving the most vulnerable students?

5 How are charter schools governed in your region?

What entities authorize and oversee charter schools in your state or region? How are authorizers funded? Do authorizers have the staff, resources, experience and training they need? How many charter school applications do authorizers approve and deny each year? How many schools do they review, and how many have they closed?

6 What and how do charter schools teach? Are they innovative?

What curricula, teaching methods and administrative practices are charter schools using in your region? How, if at all, are charter schools innovating? Is innovation an explicit goal of charter schools in the region that you cover? Are policymakers or districts attempting to forge collaborative relationships between charter schools and traditional public schools? What can traditional public schools adopt from charter schools, and what can they not?

7 What are the rules and regulations for charter schools?

What rules do charter schools in your region have to follow on issues such as standardized testing, Common Core and student discipline? What rules and regulations do they have to follow on financial and management issues such as building maintenance, conflicts of interest in contracting and hiring, professional misconduct and data transparency? Can charter school teachers in your state join unions? What is the status of any ongoing charter unionization efforts? Can charter school teachers participate in public employee benefit and retirement programs?

8 What do members of the public understand and misunderstand about charter schools?

Many members of the public do not understand that charter schools are public schools funded by taxpayers. What questions do people in your region have, and what assumptions are they making about charter schools? For example, do some parents assume that charter schools charge tuition or do not accept English-language learners? Do those assumptions dissuade any parents from entering their children into charter admission lotteries? Do community members worry that traditional public schools are being closed to make way for charter schools?

9 Why have charter schools been so controversial in some communities?

Why are some people passionately opposed to and others passionately in favor of charter schools? What are advocates' and critics' assumptions and interests? What are their areas of common ground? Does your region have a specific history or set of political circumstances that might make charter schools especially divisive? What effects has controversy over charter schools had on local politics? Have any communities in your region managed to avoid major controversy over charter schools?

10 What can we learn from charter schools in other communities and nationwide?

Charter schools, the policies governing them and communities' experiences with them vary from state to state and district to district. How can the significant body of research on charter schools in other communities and nationwide inform local reporting about charter schools? How does your region differ from others? Furthermore, what can journalists learn by visiting schools in other communities and interviewing leaders, parents and students at other communities' charter and traditional public schools?