



# 10 Questions for *Policymakers*

*This checklist is designed to help elected officials and their staff, regulators and school district administrators think through decisions about charter schools in their jurisdictions.*

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 have no charter schools at all.

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

## **1** Which goals or problems are charter schools designed to address?

- Some advocates see charter schools as ways to spur innovation, create alternatives to failing schools or create choices for parents. What are the goals or problems in our jurisdiction that indicate a need for charter schools? How do charter schools fit into our broader approach to school improvement?
- Whom should charter schools serve? For example, should they be designed for students with specific needs or should they be designed to serve broader populations?
- What, if anything, can charter schools do that traditional public schools are unable to do?

## **2** How would introducing or expanding charter schools affect other education initiatives?

- How would charter policy proposals complement or conflict with initiatives at traditional public schools or in pre-kindergarten programs, or with after-school, job training or mentorship programs?
- Will authorizing and overseeing charter schools negatively affect the time, resources and political capital we need to enact other education initiatives?

## **3** How many charter schools do we need? How should we manage their growth or closure?

- Some states cap the number of charter schools. Do we want to cap or expand the number of charters in our jurisdiction?
- If we authorize more charter schools or if existing charters increase their enrollment, how do we ensure their academic quality and financial stability?
- If demand exceeds capacity, what are the plans for ensuring that all families understand their options and have equal opportunities to attend charter schools?

- How can charter schools sustain themselves through fluctuations in enrollment and public funding?
- If any of our charter schools close, what will happen to its students, teachers and staff?

#### 4 What should be the relationships between charter schools and traditional public schools?

- If charter schools negatively affect traditional public schools' finances and enrollment, will we mitigate those effects? How and at what cost?
- Are there funding disparities between charter schools and traditional public schools?
- Are there opportunities to promote collaboration and the sharing of best practices between charter schools and traditional public schools?

#### 5 What outcomes should we expect from charter schools?

- Which measures will we use to assess charter schools?
- How many years should charter schools be given to show results?
- Should we expect charter schools to produce measurably better academic outcomes than traditional public schools?

#### 6 Who operates charter schools?

- Who can apply to open and operate a charter school in our jurisdiction?
- How will we assess the previous finances, management and academic impacts of the organizations that are seeking to operate charters in our jurisdiction, and how will we monitor them in the future?
- If operators are planning to open more schools or serve more students, how will they manage that expansion?

#### 7 How much oversight do charter schools need?

- Who authorizes and oversees the establishment of charter schools in this jurisdiction?

- Do authorizers have sufficient staff, resources, experience and training?
- How can we give charter schools enough flexibility to achieve their goals while ensuring accountability for taxpayer money, public school students and public employees?
- What rules and regulations should apply to charter schools on standardized testing, Common Core, student discipline, contracting, hiring, conflicts of interest, professional misconduct, data transparency, unionization and employee benefits?

#### 8 What are voters' perspectives on introducing or expanding charters?

- Many members of the public do not understand that charter schools are public schools funded by taxpayers. How can we help them better understand charter schools and the benefits and trade-offs of introducing or expanding them?
- What concerns do community members have? Do they worry that traditional public schools are threatened or are being closed to accommodate charters?

#### 9 Will charter schools polarize our communities?

- Charter schools have been polarizing in some communities. What is the potential for polarization in our communities? How can policymakers facilitate a more informed and civil dialogue about charter schools?
- Will controversy over charters have long-term effects on our community and its politics?

#### 10 What can we learn from other communities?

- Charter schools and policies differ across the nation. How can the significant body of research on charter schools inform policymaking in our jurisdiction?
- How can visiting and learning from other communities help inform local debates and suggest solutions to problems in our jurisdiction?