CHARTER SCHOOLS
IN PERSPECTIVE→

Are Charter Schools a Good Way to Improve Education in Our Community?

PUBLIC AGENDA

Charter Schools In Perspective is an effort to enlighten and improve the conversation about charter schools in the United States. In Perspective is a joint project of the Spencer Foundation and Public Agenda, both nonpartisan organizations. Other resources include:

A Guide to Research
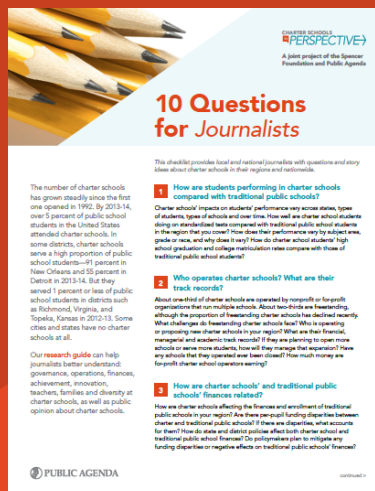
10 Questions for Journalists

10 Questions for Policymakers

Are Charter Schools a Good Way to Improve Education in Our Community?

It's a question facing communities nationwide. For parents, elected officials, educators and others looking for ways to improve education and increase student learning, the idea of bringing charter schools to the district—or opening a lot more of them—is an option that's on the table.

While charter schools can be controversial, when put in context, charters make up a small proportion of public schools. Just over 6 percent of our country's public schools are charter schools.[1] They are also a mostly urban phenomenon, with over half located in cities.[2] However, charter schools are a growing trend. Between the 2007–08 and 2012–13 school years, the number of charter schools grew at a rate of nearly 40 percent, and student enrollment in charter schools grew by just over 76 percent.[3]

Cities such as New Orleans, Chicago and Detroit have each opened dozens of charters, while other communities are just beginning to look at the idea.[4] Across the country, over 5 percent of public school students attended a charter school in 2013–14, although the percentage is much higher in areas with more charters available.[5]

Charter schools are public schools funded by taxpayers but operated by groups outside the existing school system. In fact, that's the origin of the name—local or state governments give a "charter" to a group to open a school. And these government "authorizers" can also close down a charter school if they determine that it's not performing at an acceptable level. Sometimes charter schools are started by professional educators or schools of education. Sometimes they are started by community groups, reformers, social entrepreneurs or others. Some are small operations including just one or two schools. Others are much larger, organizing many schools within a city or across multiple cities and states. Many charter schools are run by nonprofit organizations, and some are run by for-profit businesses.

1 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "Total Number of Schools, 2012–13," in The Public Charter Schools Dashboard, Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2013

2 U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, and National Center for Education Statistics, "Number and Percentage Distribution of Public Elementary and Secondary Students and Schools, by Traditional or Charter School Status and Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 1999–2000 Through 2011–12," in Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d13/tables/dt13_216.30.asp

3 NAPCS, "Total Number of Schools, 2012–13," 2014. http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/schools/page/overview/year/2013

4 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities," Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2014_Enrollment_Share_FINAL.pdf

5 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities," Washington, DC: NAPCS, 2014. http://www.publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/2014_Enrollment_Share_FINAL.pdf

All sorts of charters

People often talk about whether charter schools are a good idea or whether charter schools are better or worse than "traditional" public schools. But just like schools in the traditional system, charter schools vary enormously. Some have innovative curricula and use alternative teaching methods. Others rely on traditional courses and instruction. Some are so popular that parents have to enter a lottery to get a spot for their child. Others have been closed because of financial mismanagement or poor academic quality.

This guide is intended to help people like you think about whether bringing charter schools into a school district—or expanding the number of charters available in a community—is a good way to improve education. Our goal is to help people who are not experts or may not be familiar with the charter school debate understand more about the issue and consider the arguments in favor of and against charter schools. We hope the information here will help you weigh whether charter schools would be good for your communities and should be supported—or not.

Some Overarching Questions to Consider

In the following pages, we present three different ways of thinking about charter schools. Considering these alternative perspectives can help readers raise questions in their own districts and help them weigh some of the pros and cons involved for their own communities. As readers work through these alternative perspectives, however, there are four overarching questions they may want to keep in mind:

- In our community, is opening charter schools one of the best ideas for improving education, or are there other approaches that are more deserving of our time, energy and resources?

- Given that charters vary so widely, if we do decide they are a good option for our community, what kinds of charter schools do we want?

- What will be the advantages and disadvantages of charter schools for the students who attend them?

- What will be the advantages and disadvantages of charter schools for students who attend other schools in the district?

THREE BROAD PERSPECTIVES
TO THINK OVER AND DISCUSS

In the following pages, we lay out three alternative ways of thinking about charter schools, each accompanied by some advantages and trade-offs that may be associated with it. Considering these three perspectives is only a beginning, but it will give you a framework for thinking about how this issue might play out in your own community. For each perspective, we also suggest some questions you may want to ask local leaders, educators and experts, so this issue gets a good, open and thorough debate as your community decides what to do. You might also want to take a look at what researchers have found about the advantages and disadvantages of charter schools.

PERSPECTIVE 1:
Give Parents Choice.
Charter schools offer parents more and better choices for their children. And that should be our goal—giving families the power to choose the kinds of schools that are best for their children. This is an especially urgent need in communities where public schools have been failing for years.

PERSPECTIVE 2:
Preserve and Improve Neighborhood Schools.
Charter schools undermine our existing neighborhood schools. They siphon off tax dollars and separate some of the most motivated and knowledgeable parents from our regular schools. Rather than opening up new schools that only serve some children, we should focus on improving our existing schools.

PERSPECTIVE 3:
Use Charters in a Limited Way to Test New Ideas.
Charter schools offer a much-needed chance to try out new ideas and approaches—something that's sorely needed and rarely happens in the existing system. If an idea works in charter schools, then we need to ensure that it gets put into practice in the neighborhood schools most children attend.

PERSPECTIVE 1:
GIVE PARENTS CHOICE

Key policy changes associated with this perspective:

- The vision is that the district would promote charter schools, authorizing as many different kinds of charter schools as possible, moving quickly to a system where every parent can choose the best school for his or her child.

- Tax money "follows the student." If parents choose a charter, then the charter gets the "per student" allocation of tax funds. If they choose the local neighborhood school, then it gets the money.

- All schools provide detailed statistics about student test scores, graduation rates, college attendance, staff qualifications, staff turnover, safety track record, number of suspensions and so on. With this information, parents can compare and contrast the options for their own children. What's more, the transparency and competition will spur all schools in the district to improve.

Arguments often made in favor of this perspective:

- Families who live in districts with low-performing schools desperately need alternatives. Charters offer that.

- In some cases, low-income students in charters score higher on reading and math tests than students in regular schools in the same districts.

- Affluent families already have choices—they can move to districts with better schools or send their child to private school. It's poor parents who are trapped, and it's time they had some choices, too.

Arguments often made against this perspective:

- Right now, over 90 percent of students attend regular public schools. There is no way to approve enough high-quality charter schools quickly enough, and in a responsible way, to serve all students.

- If the tax money "follows the student," then traditional schools will have even less money available to them to improve learning.

- Neighborhood schools are crucial public institutions that we need to support, not undercut. Communities are stronger when children attend regular neighborhood schools.

Before you move on from this approach, have you considered…

- What is the long-term vision? Is it to have a small number of charters or to move to a point where charters predominate?

- What are the plans to improve other schools in the district—the regular neighborhood schools?

- How will the charters be funded, and what impact will that have on other schools and students? Are there ways of mitigating any negative financial consequences for the traditional schools?

- How will the district respond if there is more demand for charter schools than space available? How will the district respond if for some reason the charter does not live up to expectations?

PERSPECTIVE 2:
PRESERVE AND IMPROVE NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOLS

Key policy changes associated with this perspective:

- The vision is that nearly all students would attend traditional neighborhood schools. Rather than having more and more charter schools, we should have fewer and fewer.

- We should stop looking to charter schools for school improvement and instead improve the neighborhood schools we have, acting boldly to turn troubled schools around. If these schools need new leadership or other major changes, the district takes action.

- Districts don't authorize any more charters and scrutinize existing charter schools closely, closing those that don't deliver.

Arguments often made in favor of this perspective:

- Having strong neighborhood schools helps all children in the area—not just the ones attending the charters.

- Some charters do have effective programs for enhancing learning, but so do many traditional neighborhood schools. It's what teachers, students and parents do that makes the difference—not the school's organizational structure.

- Lack of funding, overcrowding and lack of parental and community support are the real problems facing our local schools. We need to address those problems directly—not just give a small number of families a way out.

Arguments often made against this perspective:

- Many neighborhood schools have been failing their students for years. If a charter can do better, parents deserve that option.

- Traditional public schools are burdened by bureaucratic red tape and entrenched special interests such as the teachers' unions. Most charters can hire and fire teachers and other employees depending on their performance.

- There is a process for closing charter schools if they fail, making them more accountable than traditional public schools.

Before you move on from this approach, have you considered…
- What are the plans to improve student learning in your community if the district decides not to allow charters?
- What are the plans to attract, evaluate and retain good teachers and principals so neighborhood schools can improve?
- If there are schools that have been troubled and ineffective for years, is it reasonable to expect them to improve without a major shake-up?
- If the district decides to focus on the existing traditional schools, are there ideas from the charter movement that should still be considered?

PERSPECTIVE 3:
USE CHARTERS IN A LIMITED WAY TO TEST NEW IDEAS

Key policy changes associated with this perspective:

- The vision is that nearly all children continue to attend traditional neighborhood schools. Charters are authorized only to experiment with new ideas.

- The district closely monitors a small number of charter schools that are set up specifically to test new approaches that can be adopted by traditional public schools.

- The goal is to innovate—to develop new approaches to advance teaching and learning that can be brought into traditional public schools. In this approach, charters are not used to spur competition among schools or provide parent choice for its own sake.

Arguments often made in favor of this perspective:

- This was the original intent of charters—to be educational labs and incubators, not to replace traditional neighborhood schools.

- Most public schools are still relying on ideas from the 19th and 20th centuries. Education desperately needs new thinking.

- Many education reform ideas need a lot more field testing. In charters, principals and teachers can "work out the bugs" before applying new ideas to the system as a whole.

Arguments often made against this perspective:

- This does almost nothing to help most children in failing neighborhood schools. Setting up a few experiments doesn't really give parents the kinds of choices they deserve.

- Unless we give people and organizations outside the school system the chance to create and manage new schools, very little will really change.

- The problem facing schools today isn't a lack of new ideas. It's that too many students are trapped in schools that fail to teach them basic literacy and math skills and set even basic standards and expectations for student learning and behavior.

Before you move on from this approach, have you considered…

- If the charters produce better ideas, how will the district ensure that they will be adopted more broadly?

- What are the plans to improve the schools most children attend now—the regular schools in our communities?

- Organizing even a limited number of charter schools still costs money. Will there be a financial loss to the existing public schools?

- Is the problem in our district really a lack of innovation and new ideas? Or are there other, more pressing issues, such as a lack of funds, lack of accountability, poor management, poor teacher quality, community poverty or others?

USING THIS GUIDE IN COMMUNITY CONVERSATION, DISCUSSION GROUP OR CLASSROOM SETTING

After a discussion of the choices, it can be helpful to first summarize the conversation and then bridge to action-oriented deliberations, as follows:

Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?

2. What were our important areas of disagreement, the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?

3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

Bridging Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today? This is a brainstorming phase of the discussion.

2. Among the action ideas we've discussed, how should we prioritize them?

3. How should we follow up on today's conversation? Are there individual steps we can take? Are there things we can do collectively?

ABOUT CHOICEWORK DISCUSSION STARTERS

Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Starters support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations, discussion groups and classrooms and by journalists, researchers, policymakers, community leaders and individuals looking to better understand and discuss solutions to a variety of public and community issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and trade-offs. The different perspectives are drawn both from how the public thinks about an issue and from what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates. Users of the guides should be encouraged to put additional ideas on the table or consider combining elements from different choices in unique ways. They are designed as a starting point for constructive dialogue and problem solving.

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