

Chicago's charter schools

Charter schools have been one of the most hotly debated school issues in Illinois since they emerged in the mid-1990s. President Barack Obama's support of them has raised the temperature even more. There are more questions than answers about charter schools, but here are highlights of what we know about charters in Chicago.

What is a charter school?

Charters are public schools that operate free of most state and local school regulations. They are publicly funded, and, with a few exceptions, open to all students in the district. Exceptions are 10 Chicago charters with attendance boundaries, two single-sex schools—Urban Prep for boys, Young Women's Leadership for girls—and Youth Connections, a network of small schools for dropouts. Admission is by lottery.

A charter begins with a proposal that a nonprofit organization submits to the Chicago Board of Education for approval. Every five years, the organization must seek renewal of its charter, a process during which the district examines student performance and the charter's financial standing. The idea is that if the school does not live up to its charter, the School Board can close it. So far, five Chicago charters have been revoked or not renewed since the first charters came on line in 1997.

Unlike most school districts, Chicago's has embraced charters and fought to raise the state cap on the number it can authorize, which for Chicago began with 15 and now stands at 75.

What supporters say

■ Charters are places of innovation

Some charters certainly are doing things that are out of the ordinary, such as extending the school day and assigning counselors to follow students through high school and college. However, there is no mechanism for spreading innovations or determining what it would take to spread them.

■ Charters create healthy competition with regular schools

A RAND Corp. study that included Chicago and seven other regions found no effect on traditional public schools. But separate studies on North Carolina, Florida and Texas schools that used more refined data found small positive effects.

■ Charters add to Chicago's portfolio of schools with specialized programs

■ Charters break union 'strangle hold'

What opponents say

■ Charters siphon the better students from regular schools

A well-regarded study by the RAND Corporation and a test score analysis by Catalyst found that charters do not "skim" the better students as defined by students with higher incoming test scores.

But charters do enroll slightly fewer low-income students and students with special needs. Researchers also say that the fact that parents went through the application process may indicate that students are more motivated, better supported or, at the very least, not representative of the neediest children in the city.

■ Charters siphon money from regular schools.

Charter schools are part of the district and receive their funding from the district. They also enjoy indirect support, ranging from breaks on the issuance of bonds to participation in district professional development, that make it difficult to say whether their public support is more or less than regular schools receive.

■ With private organizations in charge, charters undermine public education

■ Charters undermine collective bargaining and teacher voice

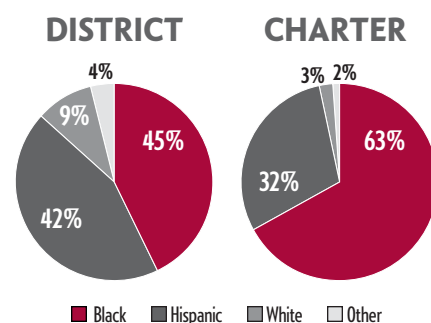
The charter footprint

Students enrolled 33,500 (8% of CPS)
Number of schools 70 (10% of CPS)

Source: 2010 CPS Racial ethnic survey

Who attends charters

Charters tilt toward African Americans and enroll slightly fewer students with special needs.



Source: 2010 CPS Racial ethnic survey

STUDENTS	CHARTER	DISTRICT
Low income	74%	83%
Limited English	5%	15%
Special education	11%	12%
From neighborhood	60%	N/A

Source: CPS Office of New Schools, 2007-2008 data

Who started them?

While the corporate community is a big cheerleader for charters, Chicago's were launched mainly by local teachers and community-based organizations.

- Teachers, 18
- Community organizations, 17
- Local business, civic leaders, 19
- Schools and universities, 12
- National networks, 4

Source: Catalyst Chicago analysis, fall 2009

Who runs them?

Most are run by the nonprofit that holds the charter. A few hire educational management organizations (EMOs). Chicago International Charter Schools, which oversees 13 Chicago campuses, relies entirely on nonprofit and for-profit EMOs.

Charter law changes

The evolution of Illinois' charter laws represents ongoing compromises mainly between unions and charter supporters.

1996

Key features of the original law:

- The number of charters is limited to 45: 15 in Chicago, 15 in the suburbs and 15 in the rest of the state.
- With one minor exception, school boards grant charters.
- Charters are for three to five years.
- Any non-certified teachers must have a bachelor's degree and 5 years of relevant experience.
- Charter employees may form unions, but they must be separate from any bargaining unit in the local district.

2003

Key revisions:

- The cap in Chicago is increased to 30.
- All new charters are limited to one campus, but existing charters are "grandfathered."
 - ▶ Currently, nine charters have multiple "campuses."
 - ▶ Youth Connections is an umbrella charter for 22 small alternative schools serving dropouts.
- In schools created prior to 2003, 75 percent of teachers must be certified; in schools created after 2003, 50 percent must be certified. All special needs teachers must be certified.

2009

Key revisions:

- The Chicago cap is raised to 70, plus 5 more multi-campus (but small) schools for dropouts. The rest of the state gets a total of 45 charters.
- Increased accountability requires charters to report data by campus and submit more detailed financial information.
- Over three years, all charters must have 75% certified teachers.
- A cap is created for so-called contract schools, a CPS creation that allows outside organizations to run schools indefinitely under contract. CPS may have 30 contract schools, five for its turn-around program.

Do charters produce higher student achievement?

The most sophisticated studies done in Illinois, including the one by RAND, indicate that elementary students, on average, initially suffer in charter schools but then do at least as well as they did in regular schools or as well as similar students do in regular schools. The RAND study compared the growth of students in charters to the growth of these same students when they attended regular schools.

RAND found more positive effects for charter secondary schools, especially if they include at least some lower grades, for example, 6 to 12 or K to 12. The average 8th-grade charter student who continued in a charter high school:

- Was 7 percentage points more likely to graduate
- Was 11 points more likely to enroll in college
- Scored about a half point higher on in the composite ACT score.

These positive impacts existed on a smaller scale for students who enrolled in the charter freshman year.

The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that in the aggregate Chicago charter students are on par with their "virtual counterparts" at traditional public schools

in reading and ahead in math. The CREDO study compared charter students to demographic "twins" at the regular schools the charter students would have attended.

But in analyzing the achievement gap with whites students, these researchers raised red flags for Hispanic students in math and special education students in math and reading.

Nationally, CREDO found that the test score gains at only 17 percent of charter schools were significantly better than those at traditional schools, 37 percent were worse and 46 percent were not significantly different. The study noted that different state policies had different effects on outcomes.

What don't we know?

A lot, either because charters are not required to disclose the information or because no one has gathered and reported it.

- Teacher salaries, demographics (educational attainment) and turnover
- How many students leave and why
- How much charters rely on charitable contributions.
- Discipline records and practices
- Expected total enrollment when the currently approved charter schools have opened all their grades—most start with just a few and add one a year.

How are charter schools funded?

Unlike most CPS schools, charters get what amounts to weighted per-pupil funding—a base amount of money for every student and an additional amount for every student with special needs. By law, a charter must receive between 75 percent and 125 percent of the district per-pupil average.

Last year, the district allocated \$7,350 per student for basic educational expenses at charter high schools and \$5,880 at elementary schools—plus additional payouts for low-income and other at-risk groups.

The district also allocated \$425 per student to help charters pay for facilities—a figure that charter advocates say is well short of the district's support for its traditional schools. However, some charters also have benefited from CPS spending on their facilities and from breaks on bonds.

Charters that are housed in a CPS-owned facility pay the district nearly \$1000 per student in rent.

Recently, the state voted to give nearly \$196 million to charter schools—with nearly \$100 million to the United Neighborhood Organization alone—for capital needs.

Charters supplement public money in varying degrees by foundation grants and private donations.

More at www.catalyst-chicago.org

- For links to documents and *Catalyst* stories about charters, go to www.catalyst-chicago.org/InBrief
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