

Charter Schools: Myth vs. Reality

Despite the success of charter schools, or perhaps because of it, misconceptions abound about what charter schools are and what they do. Supporters of the educational status quo have propagated a number of myths about charter schools—myths that have sometimes proven hard to dispel in the popular press and with some members of the general public. Today, perhaps more than ever, it is critical that these myths be dispelled. You can find Frequently Asked Questions about charter schools, videos and more at www.calcharters.org.

MYTH: Charter schools are private schools.

REALITY: Charter schools are public schools open to any child, free of charge. They offer options to families that may be dissatisfied with their local schools, but cannot afford private school. Choice is a powerful tool for parents seeking educational equity and equal access to quality education for their children.

MYTH: Charter public schools accept only the "cream of the crop" and reject underperforming students.

REALITY: Unlike exclusive private schools, charter public schools do not recruit and select "the best" students. When enrollment requests exceed the number of seats, charter schools are required by law to hold a public lottery to determine who will attend. Because they are free and open to all, charter public schools do not engage in selective admissions policies.

California charter schools serve a large number of students traditionally considered to be low-achieving or otherwise "at-risk," educating some of the state's most underserved students, allowing them to achieve success where the conventional system failed to do so. Research shows that charter schools educate diverse students of varying aptitudes.

MYTH: Charter public schools do not provide special education services.

REALITY: Like all public schools, charter schools understand their responsibility to serve all students, and charter schools are committed to serving students with exceptional needs. In fact, because charter schools are designed to have more flexibility than traditional public schools, they are uniquely situated to provide innovative, high-quality educational services to students with unique learning needs.

MYTH: Charter public school enrollment does not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

REALITY: Like California's population, charter school students are incredibly diverse. As of the 2011-12 school year, 46% of state charter students are Hispanic/Latino, 32% are White, 10% are African American, and 12% are other (Asian, Indian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, Multi-racial subgroups).

MYTH: Charter public schools take money away from public schools.

REALITY: In California, public school funding follows the student, with the funding going to the public school the parents choose, whether a charter school or a traditional district school. When charter public schools are funded, there is no overall loss of public school money because charter schools are public schools. However, even with the funding "following the student" charter schools receive less funding for each student than a school district would if it were to serve the same student.

MYTH: Charter public schools receive more money than district public schools.

REALITY: In most cases, charter schools receive LESS federal and state money than district public schools, for a variety of reasons. A January 2012 report by the state Legislative Analyst's Office found that charter schools receive at least 7% less funding than traditional schools across the board, or \$395 per student, and as much as \$1,000 per student for some charter schools.

Several other factors increase that gap. For instance, charter schools do not have the same access to local parcel taxes and bonds as traditional districts and often have to pay to rent facilities out of their operating funds. Charter schools have also been particularly hard hit by the state budget crisis because they are not able to access low-cost financing as school districts can to help address state deferrals.

MYTH: Charter public schools are not held accountable for academic performance.

REALITY: Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools, are academically accountable on two counts. They are held accountable by their authorizer (usually the local school district) and, most importantly, by the families they serve. When a team of school developers submit their charter petition, they must define their academic goals. In order to be authorized, their goals must be rigorous. In order to stay open, they must meet or exceed those goals. Families make the choice to enroll their children in charter schools, and families can remove them if they are dissatisfied with the school. A charter school that neglects its academic duties will soon find that its enrollment has dwindled, as well as its budget accordingly, and major changes may be necessary for the school to remain open.

MYTH: Charter schools operate without any oversight.

REALITY: Charter schools must operate within the provisions of state and federal law. They must abide by health, safety and civil rights laws, and cannot discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex or national origin. Charter governance bodies are subject to various business regulations, such as ethical financial practices, and public body rules, such as open meeting laws. Charter schools also have oversight from their authorizers (usually the local school district, county office of education or State Board of Education). In fact, the very name charter refers to the "contract" that the school enters into with their authorizer. Authorizers review financial reports, have the authority to conduct audits, determine if the school is to be renewed at the end of the charter's term (usually every five years) and can revoke a charter for certain reasons within charter law if the school is not meeting the terms of its charter.

MYTH: Charter public schools are an unproven experiment.

REALITY: The incredible growth in charter schools – more than 1,063+ schools serving more than 484,000 students in 2013, as well as long waiting lists for most charter schools - suggest that families believe charters to be a common sense solution to their education needs. As outlined in CCSA's Portrait of the Movement, available on our website, for families in urban centers, charters represent a beacon of hope - charters serving low-income populations are much more likely to be high-performing than non-charters serving low-income populations.

MYTH: Charter public schools are a fad.

REALITY: Families of the hundreds of thousands of California students that attend charter schools would not call charters a fad. Charter public schools are an important part of the state's public school system, providing a space for innovation, educational opportunity in low-income communities and unique curriculum options. Charter schools have been reinventing public education in California for nearly 20 years and most Californians, according to public opinion research, consider them a "bright spot" in the educational landscape.

Parts of this document were adapted from the Massachusetts Charter School Association.