



Charter Schools In America: Will They Be Successful?

By Stephen M. King, Ph.D.

Educational choice options are popular among taxpayers and parents not only because traditional government schools are largely inadequate in meeting achievement levels in math and reading,¹ but also because they are not preparing students with the skills necessary to succeed in the “global economy.”² As of November 2007, eight states and the District of Columbia provide taxpayer-funded scholarships, seven states offer financial incentives, such as tax credits or deductions for educational expenses, even for private school tuition, home schooling is legal in all fifty states, and virtual and/or online education is becoming increasingly popular.³

While charter schools are increasing in popularity,⁴ they are also vilified by the government school establishment⁵ and decried by homeschooling proponents, including the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA).⁶ Despite the criticisms leveled at charter schools, it is a movement “whose time has come.”

As of September 2007, the Center for Education Reform reports a total of 4,147 operating charter schools in 40 states plus the District of Columbia, with a total enrollment of 1,241,706 students. This is a 40 percent increase in the total number of charter schools from the 1999-2000 school year (1,682) and a full five-fold increase in the number of students served since the same time period (250,000).⁷ (In contrast, Iowa has only ten charter schools serving 1,773 students.) Clearly, many states have shown a tremendous interest in pursuing charter schools as a primary means of government school choice.

Charter schools are “autonomous educational entities operating within the government school system under charters, or contracts, negotiated between organizers and sponsors.”⁸ They provide opportunities for flexibility, giving parents, teachers, administrators, and other organizers several options for making improvements in the students’ education, including focusing on the basics of math, reading, and science, establishing a magnet school in the inner city that focuses on leadership, arts, or music, instilling greater discipline and organization in the student body, changing the calendar year--and even lengthening the school day.⁹ Charter schools create greater responsiveness to market demands, more opportunities for innovation, causing traditional government schools to react to the market changes, and thus enhancing government school accountability.¹⁰

Of the 40 states with charter school laws, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin) enroll 942,566 students, or some 77 percent of all charter school students nationwide.¹¹ These eleven states have favorable charter school laws.¹²

Authorizing flexibility by states distinguishes favorable from non-favorable charter school laws.¹³ States with more liberal authorizing laws, for example, tend also to be the states that have the most successful charter schools. In fact, the Center for Education Reform provided its 2008 rankings list of states and graded them according to “favorability of laws.” States with an “A” grade included Minnesota, District of Columbia, Michigan, Arizona, California, Florida, Delaware, and Indiana. States with an “F” grade were

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Iowa and Mississippi.¹⁴ What makes the difference between an “A” and an “F?” Let’s briefly compare Minnesota (an “A” state) with Mississippi (an “F” state).

Minnesota allows an unlimited number of charter schools to be formed, while Mississippi allows only 15, no more than 50% of the government schools in one district can be converted to charter schools. (Iowa is even more restrictive: only one charter school per district is permitted.) Minnesota allows multiple chartering authorities, including school boards, colleges, and nonprofit organizations, while Mississippi permits only the state board of education to authorize charter schools. Minnesota grants automatic waiver from most state and district education laws, while Mississippi generally does not, but exemptions can be negotiated with the specific district.¹⁵ Clearly, the “A” states are much more open and receptive to promoting choice as one means of reforming traditional government schools.

The public, including parents, students, and the general citizenry, desire more school choice and charter schools are one way of securing that choice.

Endnotes

¹Dan Lips, “School Choice: Policy Developments and National Participation Estimates in 2007-2008,” *Background*, The Heritage Foundation, January 31, 2008, pp. 1, 2; American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), 2007 Report Card on American Education: A State-By-State Analysis, Washington, D.C., February 2008, especially chapters 1, 2, and 3.

²ALEC, p. 1; Linda Lantor Fandel, “As education in Iowa slips, where’s the public outcry?” *Des Moines Register*, July 20, 2008, pp. 1OP, 4-6OP.

³Ibid, ALEC, p. 2.

⁴Jessica Schwartz, “Public Demand Grows for Public Charter Schools: Polls Show Increased Support for Charter School Expansion and Core Charter School Principles,” The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, www.reuters.com/article/pressRelease/idUS151933+21-Feb-2008+PRN20080221 July 17, 2008.

⁵The National Education Association’s website (www.nea.org) summarizes numerous studies that dispute the claims made by proponents of charter schools.

⁶Christopher J. Klicka, “Charter Schools,” The HomeSchool Court Report, (January/February 2002), www.hslda.org/courtreport/V18N1/V18N101.asp?PrinterFriendly=True July 17, 2008.

⁷Amy K. Frantz, “Charter Schools—Will They Be Successful?” *INSTITUTE BRIEF*, Volume 6, Number 31, November 1999.

⁸Michael Mintrom and Sandra Vergari, “Charter Schools as a State Policy Innovation: Assessing Recent Developments,” *State and Local Government Review*, Vol. 29, No. 1, Winter 1997, p. 44.

⁹Frantz.

¹⁰Chester E. Finn, Jr., Bruno V. Manno, and Gregg Vanourek, “Charter Schools: Taking Stock,” In Paul E. Peterson and David E. Campbell (eds.), *Charters, Vouchers, and Public Education*, Brookings Institution, 2001, p. 23, 25, 26, 27, and 29.

¹¹Center for Education Reform, “National Charter School Data: 2007-2008 New School Estimates,” www.edreform.com, July 16, 2008

¹²Center for Education Reform, “Strong Charter Laws Produce Better Results: A Special Report,” www.edreform.com, July 18, 2008

¹³Center for Education Reform, “Multiple Authorizers in Charter School Laws,” www.edreform.com, July 18, 2008

¹⁴Alison Consoletti, “2008 Charter School Laws At-A-Glance: Current Rankings from First to Worst,” February 2008, www.edreform.com/charter_schools/laws, July 18, 2008

¹⁵Ibid.

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