

# Charter Schools: Are They Living Up To Their Promise?

By Kenneth Davis

Ever since the charter school movement began more than twenty years ago, there have been ongoing debates about the effectiveness of charter schools and if they are really an improvement over traditional public schools. Proponents of charter schools loudly sing their praises and view them as a panacea to the myriad problems that have plagued the public school system; but opponents feel that charter schools have fallen way short of expectations and view the movement as a failed experiment that needs to end.

Charter schools are public schools of choice that are designed to provide a fresh alternative to traditional public schools. One of the key selling points of charter schools is that they are allowed to operate independently from much of the stifling bureaucracy that applies to traditional public schools. Educators in charter schools have more freedom in creating their lesson plans without being subject to the same rules, regulations and statutes that bound teachers in typical public schools. Ideally, this environment would produce more unique and creative approaches to teaching and would allow educators the flexibility to tailor their curriculum to meet the needs of each individual student. Another positive aspect of charter schools is that they allow parents the opportunity to choose schools that they feel will provide the best education possible for their child. And an additional goal of charter schools is to encourage community and parent involvement in public education.

In 1991, Minnesota became the first state to pass a [charter school law](#), and in 1992, the first charter school opened in St. Paul, MN. Charter schools are publicly funded and, unlike private schools, are tuition-free. Charter schools are [accountable](#) to their sponsors—usually a state or local school board—to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The “charter” establishing each school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. If a charter school is unable to meet the expectations set by its sponsor within the contract time frame, then its funding could be cut, leading to closure. The length of time for which charters are granted varies, but most are granted for 3-5 years.

## Charter Schools Are More Popular Than Ever

According to the U.S. Department of Education’s [website](#), the charter school movement is one of the fastest growing education reform efforts in the United States. Charter schools have become increasingly more popular over the years, and enrollment numbers continue to grow exponentially. From 1999-2000 to 2007-08, the [number](#) of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States has tripled from 340,000 to 1.3 million students. And during those same time periods, the number of charter schools in the United States has increased from 1,500 to 4,400. There are currently about [5,000](#) charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia. (Ten states don’t have laws allowing charter schools.) Collectively, they serve approximately 1.6

million students across the country. Also, in last year's Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup education poll, 68 percent of respondents said they support charter schools, up from 42 percent in 2000. "The public education system is shifting in major cities across the nation," said [Peter C. Groff](#), president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. "When families have an option, an increasing number of them are choosing public charter schools over the traditional public schools available to them."

### **Impact Charter Schools Have Made On The Public School System**

Although far from being the huge success that many had hoped for, charter schools have made significant strides in the last few years. For instance, out of *Newsweek* magazine's annual list of the top 100 high schools in the United States of 2010, 15 were [charter schools](#). That is quite impressive since charter schools only make up four percent of total public schools. However, the news is not all positive for charter schools. Stanford University's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) 2009 [report](#) found that 37 percent of charter schools were doing significantly worse than traditional public schools, while 17 percent of charter schools showed significant academic gains, and 46 percent of them demonstrated no significant difference.

But the report also found several key positive findings regarding academic performance of charter school students living in low income areas. It revealed that charter schools had a "larger" and "more positive" effect on students in low income areas than their counterparts in traditional public schools. Plus, English Language Learner students reported significantly better gains in charter schools, while special education students showed similar results to their traditional school peers. And another bit of encouraging information found in the report is that students do better in charter schools over time. While first-year charter school students on average experienced a decline in learning, students in their second and third years in charter schools saw a significant reversal, experiencing positive achievement gains. So it appears that when students become more acclimated to the charter school environment, they thrive. And this is important information for charter school students and their parents to not get discouraged when positive results don't come right away. They need to give it a little time.

Additionally, the report points to one of the biggest concerns among charter schools: quality. While some charter schools are exceeding expectations, others are falling far below. The successful ones prove that charter schools can be a viable alternative to traditional public schools, but there is no uniformity of quality; and that's a big concern. "The issue of quality is the most pressing problem that the charter school movement faces," said Dr. Margaret Raymond, director of CREDO at Stanford University. "The charter school movement continues to work hard to remove barriers to charter school entry into the market, making notable strides to level the playing field and improve access to facilities funding, but now it needs to equally focus on removing the barriers to exit, which means closing underperforming schools."

### **Other Key Problems Facing The Charter School Movement**

One of the biggest problems that the charter school movement faces is the high turnover rate among teachers. According to a 2007 [study](#) titled "Teacher Attrition in Charter Schools" by Gary

Miron and Brooks Applegate of Western Michigan University Evaluation Center, as many as 40 percent of newer charter school teachers end up leaving for other jobs. The study found that while overall attrition rates fluctuate from year to year and state to state, as many as one in four charter school teachers leave each year; this is approximately double the typical public school attrition rate, which is around 11 percent. And this high turnover rate is costly and time-consuming, because charter schools regularly have to provide pre- and in-service training to new teachers. And according to Miron and Applegate, “it impedes schools’ efforts to build professional learning communities and positive and stable school cultures. And it is likely to undermine the legitimacy of the schools in the eyes of the parents.”

And in a more [recent study](#) conducted in June 2010 by Vanderbilt University’s Peabody College, researchers found that the odds of a charter school teacher leaving the profession versus staying in the same school were 130 percent greater than those of a traditional public school teacher. Some of the reasons for the high turnover rates among charter school teachers include burnout, disillusionment, frustration, dissatisfaction and inexperience.

### **Charter Schools Becoming Increasingly More Difficult To Get Into**

Another big charter school issue is the growing difficulty many young people have in getting into one. As the popularity of charter schools continues to increase, the waiting lists for them keep getting bigger. There are an estimated [420,000](#) students on various waiting lists to get into charter schools. And presently there are not enough charter schools to meet this growing demand. As a result, charter schools hold lottery drawings to determine enrollment. By law, when more students apply to a charter school than there are seats available, the school has to hold a lottery to determine who gets in. These lottery drawings were addressed in the award-winning documentary *Waiting for ‘Superman’*, in which five kids enter a lottery in hopes of getting into a coveted charter school. President Barack Obama, a strong advocate of the charter school movement, has been working on ways to make charter schools available to more students. In 2009, he introduced his ambitious “Race to the Top” education reform agenda. And one of the issues that it focuses on is the proliferation of charter schools.

### **Charter Schools Have Proven To Be Effective If Done Right**

While charter schools haven’t quite lived up their great promise, they have made considerable inroads in America’s educational system. The charter school movement has proven that charter schools can work if done right, but there needs to be more consistency with regard to their quality.