Charter Schools 101 – California

As taxpayer-funded schools, charter schools should be required to operate in a manner that is transparent and accountable to the families and communities they serve. This includes meeting the same quality standards for student outcomes, fair treatment of all students, and transparent use of taxpayer dollars the public insists upon for all other taxpayer-funded schools.

# What are charter schools?

Charter schools are privately-managed, taxpayer-funded schools exempted from some of the same standards of accountability and transparency of traditional public schools.

# When were they created?

Following passage of a charter school law the preceding year, the first charter school in the United States opened in Minnesota in 1992. California’s charter law was approved in 1993. There are about 1,000 charters in California. CTA proudly represents more than 5,000 educators in these schools.

# Why were charter schools created?

The main argument initially offered for creating charter schools focused on a desire to create greater flexibility for innovation within public education. It was hoped that successful innovations could be adapted to benefit public education more broadly. Original legislation called for mutual agreement among parents, educators and the community to create a charter school. This practice has been replaced with private management companies running the schools.

# Do charter schools operate in the same way as traditional public schools?

There are significant differences. Charter schools are exempted from some of the standards of accountability and transparency that apply to traditional public schools. Charter schools typically have appointed, rather than elected, school boards. Some charter boards hold open public meetings and some do not. Charter schools are allowed to set their own admissions policies and are not required to hire credentialed teachers. About 4 in 10 charter schools nationally are managed under contract by for-profit or non-profit charter “chains.” These may or may not be headquartered in the communities where their schools are located. The other 6 in 10 charter schools nationally, sometimes referred to as “mom and pop” charters, are not-for-profit and are operated by individuals or small groups of individuals, such as educators, who live in the local community.

# How do charter schools come into existence?

An individual or organization wanting to open a charter school must apply to a charter school “authorizer.” Each state’s charter law says which entities can authorize creation of a charter school. These entities can be a local school district, a state education department, or a separate state charter school board. The authorizer reviews each application and decides whether to approve or decline it. In California, a local school district, county office of education or the State Board of Education can authorize a charter school.

# How do students enroll in charter schools?

They apply for admission. In cases where more students apply than the school can accommodate, a lottery is held to determine admission. Some charter schools employ selective outreach and recruitment practices. These appear to have contributed to under-representation of students with disabilities, especially those with more severe disabilities, and English language learners in the charter sector.

# Are charter schools private schools?

Charter schools are taxpayer-funded but privately-managed. They are not private schools in the ordinary sense in which that term has been understood to refer to schools operated by religious or non-denominational private organizations that charge tuition to enrolled families. Because of weak oversight and a lack of transparency of the charter sector in many states, and because charter schools have been exempted from some rules designed to protect students, families, communities, and taxpayers, there can be important differences in how charter schools are operated.

# How does student achievement in charter schools compare with that in traditional public schools?

Many studies have looked at student achievement measures. These show very small differences, some favoring traditional district schools and some favoring charter schools. In the final analysis, charter schools perform no better than traditional public schools.