

# Separating Fact & Fiction:

WHAT YOU NEED TO  
KNOW ABOUT  
CHARTER SCHOOLS

## **Mission**

*The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools is the leading national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the charter school movement. Our mission is to lead public education to unprecedented levels of academic achievement by fostering a strong charter sector.*



National  
Alliance  
for Public  
**Charter  
Schools**



## Introduction

*Between the 2008–09 and 2013–14 school years, the public charter school movement experienced a dramatic 80 percent increase in the number of students and an astounding 40 percent increase in the number of schools.<sup>1</sup> Despite this growth, there is still an overwhelming unmet parental demand for quality school options, with more than 1 million student names on charter school waiting lists.<sup>2</sup> While charter schools enjoy tremendous bipartisan support among policymakers and the general public, they also have some vocal critics who perpetuate a number of myths about charters. This paper lays out some of these myths and provides responses based on facts and independent research findings.*

*“As defined in federal and state law, charter schools are public schools. They must meet the same academic standards that all public schools are required to meet.”*

## Charter School Resources

*Some criticisms leveled against public charter schools relate to resources. Critics claim that charter schools have an unfair advantage when it comes to the distribution of public education funds and human capital. This section addresses those claims with research on charter schools’ resource policies and practices.*

### FINANCIAL RESOURCES

**MYTH:** “Charter schools are not public schools.”

**FACT:** As defined in federal and state law, charter schools are public schools.<sup>3</sup>

They must meet the same academic standards that all public schools are required to meet. They are:

- Tuition free and open to all students;
- Nonsectarian and do not discriminate on any basis;
- Publicly funded by local, state, and federal tax dollars based on enrollment, like other public schools; and
- Held accountable for meeting state and federal academic standards.

Charter schools are approved, funded, and overseen by a government-endorsed authorizing entity, just as traditional public schools are overseen by a school district.

**MYTH:** “Charter schools get more money than other public schools.”

**FACT:** On average, charter schools receive less public funding than traditional public schools.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, in many states, charter schools get no public funding for facilities. Across the country, charter schools receive nearly 30 percent less per pupil per year in funding than neighboring traditional public schools.

According to a study published by the University of Arkansas, on average public charter schools receive 72 percent of the per-pupil funding that traditional public schools receive.<sup>5</sup> This national funding discrepancy has grown in recent years, from 19 percent in Fiscal Year 2007 to the most recent gap of 28 percent in Fiscal Year 2011.<sup>6</sup>

**MYTH:** “Charter schools receive a disproportionate amount of private funds.”

**FACT:** Charter schools receive fewer private funds per pupil than traditional public schools.

Since charter schools operate with 28 percent fewer funds than their neighboring traditional public schools and often do not receive funding for facilities, many charter schools fundraise to make up this difference.

Like traditional public schools, charter schools raise money through school fundraisers; community partnerships; booster clubs; or donations by parents, businesses, or philanthropic organizations. However, the University of Arkansas study notes: “Findings for FY11 debunk the myth that charter schools received disproportionate funding from non-public sources, such as philanthropy, to reduce the gap in the funding disparity. Districts recorded more per pupil funding from ‘Other non-public sources’ than did charter schools, \$571 to \$552 per pupil, respectively. Instead of reducing the funding disparity, ‘Other’ funding in FY11 contributed to a broader disparity resulting from state funding policies.”<sup>7,8</sup>





## HUMAN CAPITAL RESOURCES

**MYTH:** “There is a lack of transparency around charter schools’ use of funds.”

**FACT:** Charter schools have greater accountability and scrutiny over their finances than traditional public schools.

As public schools, charter schools are held accountable for their finances by state law. Though public reporting laws vary by state, charter schools in every state are required to be financially transparent.

Charter schools also have another level of oversight beyond traditional public schools because they are accountable to their authorizers. Public charter school authorizers are required to approve and renew only those charter schools that have demonstrated they can improve student performance in a fiscally and organizationally sound manner.<sup>9</sup>

The National Alliance supports laws requiring strong financial accountability for charter schools. In our model charter school law, we recommend that states require charter schools to follow Generally Accepted Accounting Principles and conduct an independent annual audit that is reported to their authorizers.<sup>10</sup> The model law is used to promote state legislation that creates a high-quality charter school policy environment. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) also sets clear requirements and recommendations for an authorizer’s oversight of its charter schools’ financial operations.<sup>11</sup>

**MYTH:** “Charter school teachers are less qualified than teachers in traditional public schools.”

**FACT:** Like all public school leaders, charter leaders aim to hire talented, passionate, and qualified teachers who will boost student achievement and contribute to a thriving school culture.<sup>12</sup>

But in contrast to many other public school leaders, charter school leaders have flexibility to ensure that the teachers they hire not only are qualified but also are producing results for students and families. These flexibilities include the ability to decide whom to hire, how to pair teachers to best meet students’ needs, and how to fairly hold teachers accountable for improving student achievement.

The flexibility that public charter schools have to make personnel decisions allows them to draw from a wider candidate pool—including content area experts who may not have followed a traditional teacher certification path. The public charter school model also gives teachers the flexibility to use their talents and abilities to design programs that work better for the students they serve, while being held accountable for student achievement. So if a school leader chooses to hire a teacher with nontraditional experience or a nontraditional background, that teacher is still held to a high level of accountability for student results.



**MYTH:** “Charter schools are anti-union.”

**FACT:** Charter schools are neither pro-union nor anti-union: They are pro-teacher.

The National Alliance believes that teachers in any school should be treated fairly and should be given the due process rights they are accorded under the law. And we believe in giving school leaders the flexibility they need to staff their schools with teachers who support the mission and will meet school standards.

State legislatures determine whether or not charter schools are required to be unionized. Even when state law doesn’t require charters to be unionized, teachers still can voluntarily decide they’d like to unionize. Most of the time, when given that choice, public charter school teachers decide not to unionize.

Approximately 12 percent of public charter schools were unionized as of the 2009–10 school year.<sup>13</sup> Most unionized charter schools nationwide (388 out of 604 charter schools, or 64 percent) are bound by state law to the collective bargaining agreements used by the traditional school district and the teachers union. Further, “conversion” charter schools—schools that transitioned from a district to a charter school governance structure—account for 31 percent of unionized charter schools, while they are only 6 percent of all nonunionized charter schools.

**MYTH:** “Charter schools aren’t accountable to the public since their boards aren’t elected.”

**FACT:** Charter schools are directly accountable to the public.

They are approved and overseen by a government-endorsed authorizing entity. If they do not serve the public by producing results, they can be improved or closed far faster than other schools. Charter schools are also funded with public funds, just like all other public schools.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, charter schools are uniquely accountable to the public because they sign contracts with a government-endorsed authorizer explaining how the schools will operate and the results they will achieve. If they don’t produce these results, their authorizer has the power to work to immediately fix the schools or close them. In fact, 11 states have automatic closure laws for charters that fail to meet their obligations. Traditional public schools can fail for years—even generations—and never be closed down for bad performance.

In addition to being accountable to their authorizers and being subject to fixing or closure for poor performance, charter schools are accountable because:

- Charter students must take the same tests as students in traditional public schools;
- Charter schools must meet state and federal academic standards that apply to traditional public schools; and
- Charter schools are required to undergo financial audits.

*“As public charter schools enroll more students of color and from low-income backgrounds than traditional public schools.”*



## Students Served

*Public charter school critics have questioned charter enrollment practices and student demographics. This section corrects the record and examines some of those myths.*

**MYTH:** “Charter schools cream or cherry-pick the best students from traditional public schools.”

**FACT:** Public charter schools are generally required to take all students who want to attend.<sup>15</sup>

If there are more interested students than available seats, the schools are generally required to hold lotteries, which randomly determine which students will be enrolled.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike magnet schools overseen by school districts, public charter schools cannot selectively admit students. According to federal law, they must accept all students, including students with disabilities and English Learners (ELs), regardless of previous academic performance.

In 2014, the U.S. Department of Education revised its long-standing policy requiring charter schools to use a “blind” lottery when they are oversubscribed. Where it is permitted by state law, charters can now use “weighted” lotteries to preference “educationally disadvantaged” students. This change will likely result in charter schools serving an even *greater* share of disadvantaged children than they already do.

**MYTH:** “Charter schools don’t enroll children from underserved families.”

**FACT:** Public charter schools enroll *more* students of color and from low-income backgrounds than traditional public schools.

According to the most recent national demographic data, public charter schools enroll a greater percentage of:

- Students of color:<sup>17</sup>
  - Black students comprise 29 percent of charter school enrollment and 16 percent of the traditional public school student population.
  - Charter schools have a 27 percent Hispanic population, while traditional public schools have a 23 percent Hispanic population.
- Low-income students:<sup>18</sup>
  - 53 percent of charter students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, compared to 48 percent of traditional public school students.

But in some communities, charter schools enroll vastly more underserved students than the national averages listed above. In New York City, for example, 93 percent of all students attending charters are students of color, compared to 85 percent of traditional public school students.<sup>19</sup>





*“There is no significant difference in the percentage of English Learners served by traditional or public charter schools. More importantly, EL students are showing great academic success in charter schools.”*

**MYTH:** “Charter schools serve fewer English Learners than traditional public schools.”

**FACT:** There is no significant difference in the percentage of English Learners (ELs) served by traditional or public charter schools.

The most recent Department of Education survey data show that 10 percent of charter school students are ELs, compared to 9 percent of students in traditional public schools, however, there is no measurable difference between the two groups.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, EL students are showing great academic success in charter schools.

In 2013, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University released the largest national study of charter school performance, which used data from 25 states along with New York City and the District of Columbia.<sup>21</sup> The CREDO study found that by attending a public charter school, EL students—regardless of race or ethnicity—on average gained 36 days of learning in reading and 36 days of learning in math compared to their traditional public school peers. Considering that the standard school year is 180 days for traditional public schools, this finding means that EL students attending public charter schools gained 20 percent more learning in both core subjects.

The study’s findings for Hispanic EL students were even more dramatic: Attending a public charter school resulted in 50 additional days of learning in reading and 43 additional days of learning in math.

**MYTH:** “Charter schools serve fewer students with disabilities.”

**FACT:** According to the most recent publicly available data, 10 percent of charter school students are students with disabilities, compared to 12 percent of students in traditional public schools.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond these largely comparable numbers, students with disabilities are thriving in charter schools. The 2013 CREDO national study found that in terms of achievement, students with disabilities attending public charter schools gained 14 days of learning in math compared to their traditional school peers.<sup>23</sup>

Federal law requires charter schools to comply with all the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Some school-level practices can be examined as possible explanations for the seemingly lower enrollment of children with special needs. For example, many public charter schools offer earlier intervention or specialized programs without giving students the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) designation. Moreover, for students with an IEP—the legal document outlining special education services the student is to receive—charter schools keep more students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment for most of the school day. For instance, 73 percent of charters—versus 50 percent of traditional public schools—keep students with disabilities in the general education classroom at least 80 percent of the day.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, many charters have safeguards in place to ensure that students are not misidentified for services and have the special education label removed when learning disabilities are addressed.<sup>25</sup>





**MYTH:** “Charter schools’ strong academic results are attributable to charters “counseling out” underperforming students, either explicitly or implicitly, through strict discipline and attendance policies or high academic or parent involvement expectations.”

**FACT:** There is no evidence of charter school policies that explicitly push out students.

Furthermore, a recent study found that below-average students were more likely to leave *traditional public schools* than public charter schools.<sup>26</sup>

Emerging research provides evidence that public charter schools are *not* pushing out low-performing students. A 2013 study by Ron Zimmer and Cassandra Guarino examined patterns of student transfers in an anonymous school district with more than 60 public charter schools.<sup>27</sup> The study finds no evidence that public charter schools were more likely to push out low-performing students. Conversely, the study finds that below-average students were 5 percent more likely to leave traditional public schools than below-average students in public charter schools. In fact, a larger percentage of public charter schools in the district made Adequate Yearly Progress compared with traditional public schools, making the district a good case study for examining whether charter schools were pushing out low-performing students to meet federal accountability standards.

A 2012 Mathematica study of KIPP Schools, which manages more than 150 charter schools, looked thoroughly at attrition at 19 KIPP middle schools in nine

states plus the District of Columbia and comparison middle schools in geographically relevant school districts.<sup>28</sup> The study found:

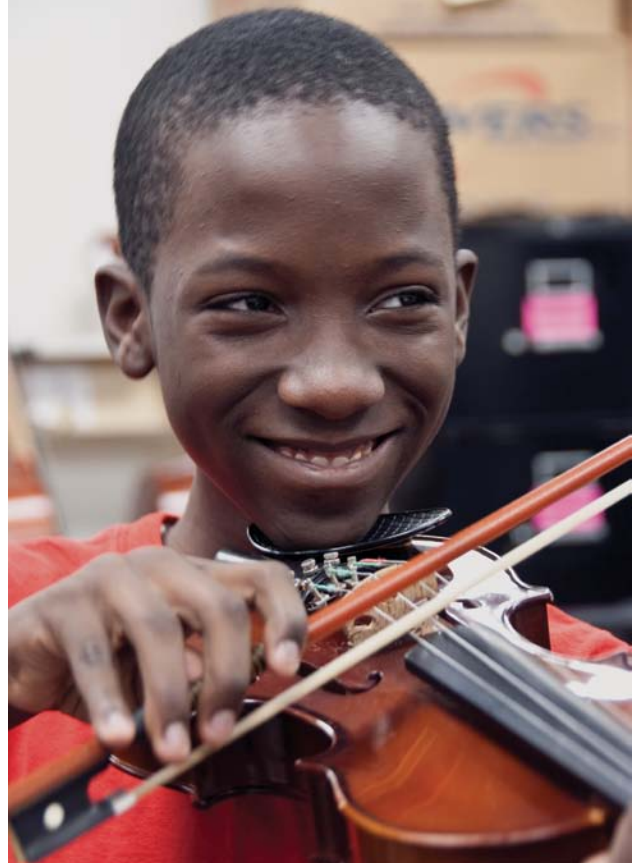
- Cumulative and grade-level attrition rates were similar for KIPP middle schools and comparison traditional middle schools.
- Student characteristics (i.e., race, free and reduced-priced lunch eligibility, baseline test scores) were the *same* for students who left KIPP as for students who left comparison traditional middle schools.

**MYTH:** “Charter schools have higher suspension and expulsion rates.”

**FACT:** Federal data show that the expulsion rate for public charter schools is *no higher* than that of traditional public schools.<sup>29</sup>

An *Education Week* analysis of federal data for the 2009–10 school year shows that public charter schools did not report using discipline, defined as out-of-school suspension and expulsion, at higher rates than reported by traditional public schools. This data set is from a survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education as part of the Civil Rights Data Collection. Its primary use is to give federal officials information to enforce civil rights laws that regulate equal educational opportunities for all students. This nationally representative data set includes most traditional schools and about one-quarter of public charter schools.<sup>30</sup>

*“Between 2010 and 2013, 15 of 16 independent studies found that students attending charter schools do better academically than their traditional school peers.”*



## Performance and Accountability

*Research on student achievement in public charter schools is the best source to evaluate whether or not charters are meeting their obligations to serve students well.*

**MYTH:** “Charter school students do no better than traditional public school students.”

**FACT:** Between 2010 and 2013, 15 of 16 independent studies found that students attending charter schools do better academically than their traditional school peers.<sup>31</sup>

The 2013 CREDO national study found that overall, students in public charter schools are outperforming their traditional public school peers in reading, adding an average of seven additional days of learning per year, and performing as well as students in traditional public schools in math. The CREDO study also showed positive results in math and reading for many demographic groups,

including Black students, students in poverty, ELs, and students with disabilities. The impact was particularly significant for Hispanic students who were also categorized as ELs. Those students learn the equivalent of 50 additional days in reading and 43 additional days in math.

In 2011, researchers from the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) released a meta-analysis on charter school research, which is a strategy popularized by the medical research field that pulls together the results from a body of research and analyzes the overall effect of a program. Consequently, the findings from this meta-analysis—regarding the overall impact of charter schools on student outcomes—are stronger than results from any individual study. The UCSD meta-analysis found that public charter schools outperform traditional public schools in the following areas: elementary reading and math, middle school math, and urban high school reading.<sup>32</sup>

Given the large number of studies on KIPP charter schools, the UCSD authors were also able to break out KIPP findings specifically. They found large, positive results for KIPP middle schools in reading and math. In sum, charters serving elementary and middle school grades by and large outperform traditional public schools.<sup>33</sup>



**MYTH:** “Underperforming charter schools are allowed to remain open.”

**FACT:** Charter schools introduce an unprecedented level of accountability into public education. If a public charter school is not improving student achievement as laid out in its foundational charter agreement, it can be closed down.

This is not the case for traditional public schools, where failing schools often undergo school improvement and turnaround measures for years, while generations of children continue to receive a subpar education.

According to analysis by the National Alliance, an estimated 200 public charter schools that were open in 2012–13 did not open their doors to students for the 2013–14 school year.<sup>34</sup> These schools closed for a variety of reasons, including low enrollment, financial concerns, and low academic performance. The closures provide evidence that the charter school bargain works: Schools that do not meet the needs of their students will be closed.

## Impact

*This final section looks at charter schools and their impact on public education.*

**MYTH:** “Charters are an urban-only phenomenon.”

**FACT:** Nearly half of all public charter schools are found *outside* city limits in rural communities, suburban areas, and towns.

Notably, rural charter schools are the fastest-growing segment of the charter school community.<sup>35</sup>

In the 2010–11 school year, 814 rural charter schools were in operation, comprising 16 percent of all charter schools nationwide.<sup>36</sup> Educating students in rural communities presents specific challenges. The flexibility charter schools have in operating can benefit rural communities as they navigate complex funding, human capital, and transportation obstacles.





**MYTH:** “Competition from charter schools is causing neighborhood schools to close and harming the students attending them.”

**FACT:** No research has shown that the presence of public charter schools causes neighborhood schools to close.

Neighborhood schools close for a variety of reasons, including declining student enrollment due to changing community demographics or shifting population centers.

School closures are unfortunate and can be upsetting for students, parents, teachers, school staff, and the community. However, we have some evidence from independent studies about the impact of school closures on student learning. Research done on the D.C. Closure Initiative, which closed or consolidated 32 elementary and middle traditional public schools the summer before the 2008–09 school year, shows that school closures did *not* produce long-term negative effects on students in those schools.<sup>37</sup> The researchers found that the performance of students who were displaced dipped in the first year after school closures but rebounded by the second year. Moreover, students affected by school closures did not demonstrate higher rates of subsequent mobility.

That study builds on previous research on the impact of school closures by RAND and the Consortium on Chicago School Research.<sup>38, 39</sup> The findings from all of these studies support the notion that making tough but necessary decisions to close chronically low-performing or under-enrolled schools will ultimately ensure that students have access to better learning environments.

**MYTH:** “Charter schools take funding away from traditional public schools.”

**FACT:** Public school funding is sent to the public school that a student attends.

If a student chooses to leave one traditional public school for another traditional public school, funding goes to the new school, which is now responsible for educating that student. The same is true if a student chooses to leave a charter school to attend a traditional school. The previous school, no longer responsible for educating that child, no longer receives those funds.

However, if a student leaves a traditional public school for a charter school, only a *portion* of that student’s funding goes to the new school.<sup>40</sup> So, in fact, charters are at a disadvantage when they receive an unequal portion of funds for educating the same child. Charter schools don’t affect districts financially any more than district student transfers do.

There’s no question that resources are strained in American public schools. But we have to make sure resources are directed to effective schools that will challenge all of our students and prepare them for the future. Charter schools allow public resources to stay in the public school system and help ensure that taxpayer dollars are well spent by requiring schools to perform well or close.



*“Public charter schools are using their autonomy to push boundaries to better serve students, generating lessons that can be refined and shared throughout the broader public school system.”*



**MYTH:** “Charter schools resegregate public education.”

**FACT:** Parents decide where to send their children to school within the options available to them.

Research shows that when students enroll in a public charter school, their families usually choose schools with student compositions similar to those of the traditional public schools they left.<sup>41</sup>

Many high-performing public charter schools are specifically focused on educating students from communities that have traditionally had few quality educational options, including lower-income communities. Given that the demographics of these communities are often homogenous, it is no surprise that the demographics of schools serving them are as well. Neighborhood compositions are determined by factors like housing affordability, residential choice, and possibly residential segregation.

More charter schools are beginning to open that actively create racially and economically diverse student populations through location-based strategies, recruitment efforts, and enrollment processes. A National Alliance issue brief showcases this development in Denver; Washington, D.C.; and San Diego.<sup>42</sup>

**MYTH:** “Some charter schools are religious schools.”

**FACT:** No public school, whether traditional or charter school, can operate as a religious school.

Under federal law, public charter schools must provide non-sectarian instruction.<sup>43</sup>

**MYTH:** “Charter schools aren’t the incubators of innovation that they claim to be.”

**FACT:** Public charter schools are using their autonomy to push boundaries to better serve students, generating lessons that can be refined and shared throughout the broader public school system.

For example, charter schools are developing next-generation learning models that rethink the meaning of the word “classroom.” Blended learning schools use technology to change the dynamics of the classroom, combining virtual classroom time with classroom time in a physical school building. By using online instruction, students can learn from experts located anywhere in the world.

Several school districts across the country such as Boston, Denver, Hartford (CT), New York City, and Philadelphia are also creating compacts or portfolio strategies to strengthen the ties between traditional and charter schools—with the ultimate goal of increasing collaboration among all public schools.<sup>44</sup> These districts have chosen to focus on streamlining and sharing what works between traditional and charter public schools.<sup>45</sup> For example, Houston, which showed more student growth than nearly all other large urban school districts in recent years, empowered many of its lower-performing schools to employ strategies used by some of the nation’s most successful charter schools.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, we should not lose sight that the charter model itself is an innovation. Time and time again, charter schools are proving that a school governance structure that provides autonomy from politics and bureaucracy can yield outstanding results for students.<sup>47</sup>

# Endnotes

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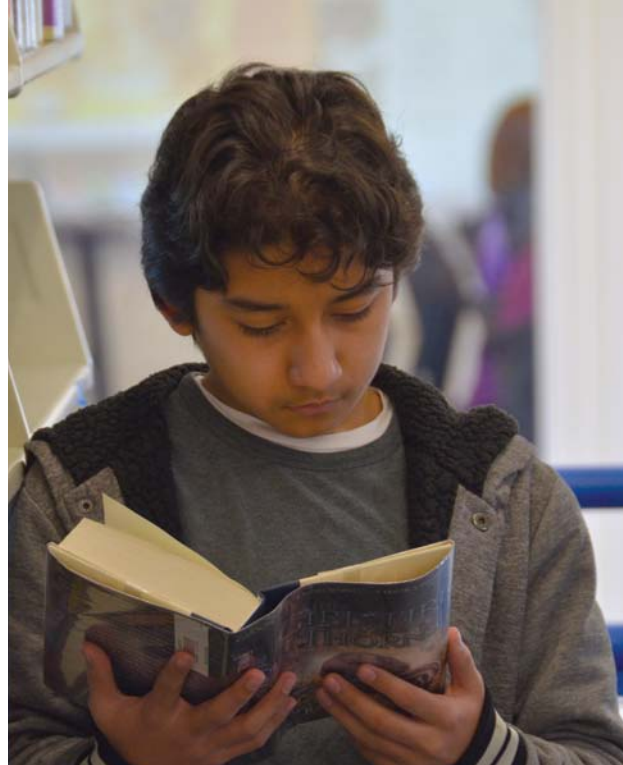
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