

Public Charter Schools: The Basics

In April 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the District's charter school law to serve as a tool to help reform public education in the Nation's Capital. The basic premise of the charter school movement is that a critical mass of effective, independently operated public schools that combine increased local school autonomy with high levels of public school accountability will provide both greater opportunities for students and competition for traditional public schools that will force the latter to improve their performance. Currently, twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have charter school laws, and almost 700 public charter schools are operating throughout the United States.

Charter schools are independently-managed public schools which are open to all students in the District of Columbia. **All charter schools are public and non-sectarian. They may not charge tuition, nor may they impose discriminatory admissions tests. Charter schools must follow all applicable health, safety, and financial accounting/reporting regulations.**

Unlike traditional public schools, **charter schools are schools of choice; no one is assigned to them and they must be actively selected by students, teachers, and administrators.** The schools receive public funds based upon the number of students who opt to attend the school. Charter schools that are oversubscribed must hold a lottery to determine who will be enrolled. Persons currently teaching in a D.C. public school may take a leave of absence to teach in a charter school. These teachers retain their seniority and may continue to participate in the District's retirement system.

Charter schools are accountable for the academic results of their students.

Accountability is based on a performance contract that is entered into between the chartering authority and the sponsors of the charter school. The contract spells out the student outcomes that are to be achieved, and the continued existence of the charter school depends upon whether those outcomes are achieved. Charter schools trade bureaucracy for accountability, regulation for results.

In return for this unusually high level of accountability, charter schools are granted equally high levels of autonomy. There is an up-front waiver from rules about curriculum, management, and teaching. Charter schools also have control over their entire education program, the entire staff and faculty, and 100% of their budget. While the chartering agency may specify student outcomes (through the performance contract with the charter school), it may not determine how the school operates; those decisions are left to the persons who establish and operate the charter school. Each charter school is governed by an independent board of trustees.

Charter schools can be organized by teachers, parents, or other community members.

An existing program or an entire existing public school can convert to charter status if 2/3 of teachers and parents in the program or school wishes to do so. In addition to parents and/or teachers, a new charter school could be sponsored by other entities, such as a college, university, or other non-sectarian group.

Charter schools will receive a per pupil allocation that is based on the annual budget of D.C. Public Schools. In the case of students with special disabilities, the standard per pupil allocation will be supplemented by extra funds.

As many as twenty (20) charters can be approved each year in the District. Both the D.C. Board of Education and the Public Charter School Board can review and approve up to ten (10) charter school applications annually.