

Charter Schools: An Alternative Option in American Schooling

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Charter schools are educational institutions in the United States funded through taxation but operated privately under a charter or contract with a public entity, providing alternative public education options to families. Charter schools are subject to fewer rules and regulations and have greater autonomy than traditional public schools over operations, curriculum, and instruction, although have greater stakes in school accountability.

charter schools

school choice

public education

economics of education

Charter schools are an alternative to the mainstream traditional public school (TPS) in the United States and fall under the umbrella of school choice options available to families. Charter schools, like TPSs, are tuition-free, but while a TPS typically reserves enrollment for students who live within local boundaries, charter schools are open to all students regardless of residence. Additionally, while a TPS is publicly funded with taxpayer money (rather than tuition dollars, for example) and publicly operated by school districts with school boards and superintendents, who are elected by the citizenry (in some cases, superintendents are appointed by the publicly-elected school board), charter schools are publicly funded and privately operated by organizations, with appointed (rather than elected) school boards, through charters, or contracts, that outline the school's obligations to the entity authorizing the charter (typically the local public school district, state, or another public entity) and without a superintendent. The private operation provides charter schools autonomy over instruction and administration, allowing charter schools to innovate practices. However, charter schools are held accountable for fiscal responsibility and student achievement. If charter schools do not meet the standards of the authorizer, the authorizer can revoke the charter, thereby closing the school.

Charter schools are among a number of school choice options in the U.S., providing families with education options aside from the assigned TPS, based on home location. Magnet schools were established as the first formal school choice option, offering specialized academic programs to incentivize the integration of different-race students from racially segregated residences ^[1]. Since magnet school implementation, the umbrella of formal and informal school choice options has expanded to include charter schools, school vouchers (which allow students to use public funding for privately funded and privately operated schools), parents' incorporation of school decisions into residential choices, and homeschooling ^{[2][3][4][5][6]}. While formal school choice programs have historically focused on integrating students ^[7], nationally, they have shifted towards a focus primarily on increasing academic achievement through their varied programmatic offerings.

The growth of school choice options, including the establishment of charter schools, was imbued within the discourse of educational marketization for increased achievement amid the international rise of neoliberalism,

which emphasizes the efficiency of competitive markets to produce optimal results and protect individuals from exploitation ^[8]. This market promise has spurred the international development of school choice options, including charter schools, which are publicly funded and privately operated institutes ^{[9][10]}, where schools seek to maximize student achievement and operate as “producers” that compete for students.

In the United States, the provision of primary and secondary education is the responsibility of individual states. Due to this governance structure, charter schools are exclusively permitted in states that explicitly allow public funds to be diverted to privately operated schools through legislation. Minnesota was the first state to permit charter schools in 1991, with the nation’s first charter school opening in 1992 ^[11]. Over the following three decades, legislation permitting charter schools has expanded to 45 of 50 states in the U.S. ^[12]. There are now 7800 charter schools, serving 3.7 million students throughout the country ^[13].

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