

Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools that are directed by autonomous boards. As a result, charter schools compete with traditional public schools run by school districts to attract students, creating choice and accountability within the public school system.

Minnesota achieved widespread success after becoming the first state to experiment with charter schools in 1991. Since then, 45 states have passed laws allowing charter schools. Nevada passed its first charter-school law in 1997, although that law limited the number of charter schools statewide to 21 and forced charters to first obtain the support of their would-be competitors – school district boards.¹

Over time, Nevada lawmakers have gradually liberalized the state’s charter school laws. The statewide cap was relaxed and then removed and landmark legislation in 2011 created the State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA) to sponsor new charter schools. In 2013, lawmakers gave charter schools bonding authority to meet capital needs.²

In 2015, lawmakers established an “Achievement School District” (ASD) responsible for transitioning a limited number of failing public schools each year into successful charter schools.³ Similar innovations in Louisiana and Tennessee have proven extremely effective at elevating school quality and student performance. Additional legislation in 2015 made it easier for established operators of charter schools in other states to receive charter contracts in Nevada and to operate multiple schools.⁴ Each of these changes had been recommended in previous editions of this volume.

In 2019, Nevada lawmakers abolished the ASD following a change in legislative control.⁵ The district’s existing four schools were transferred to the SPCSA despite opposition testimony from those schools’ directors. The schools overwhelmingly served disadvantaged students and had dramatically elevated achievement levels. Teacher unions testified in support of the change and for additional spending in traditional schools.

Key Points

Charter schools encourage innovation. The concept of charter schools is that, by operating free of strict district-level policies, these schools can experiment with better approaches to education. Indeed, research shows that charter schools are more than five times likely to offer innovative merit-pay incentives.⁶ Charters are also more likely to hire alternatively certified teachers.⁷

Charter schools serve high proportions of at-risk students. A national report on charter schools commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education shows that charter schools attract higher concentrations of low-income, minority, and low-performing students than traditional public schools and that charters generally serve these populations well.⁸

Empirical evidence shows charter schools elevate student performance. Random assignment studies in Boston, New York and Chicago have all shown that students who won lotteries to attend charter schools performed significantly better than students who did not win these lotteries.⁹ In Chicago, for instance, lottery-winning students performed about five percentile points higher in both reading and math.¹⁰

Recommendations

¹Geoffrey Lawrence, “33 Ways to Improve Nevada Education without Spending More,” NPRI policy study, July 2014.

²Ibid.

³Nevada Legislature, 78th Session, Assembly Bill 448.

⁴Nevada Legislature, 78th Session, Senate Bill 509.

⁵Nevada Legislature, 80th Session, Senate Bill 321 and Assembly Bill 78.

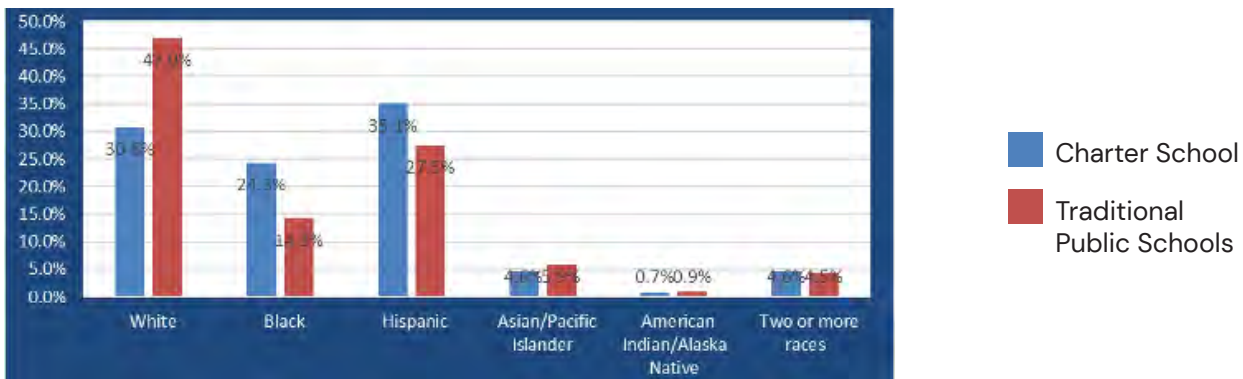
⁶Julie Kowal et al., “Teacher Compensation in Charter and Private Schools,” Center for American Progress, 2007.

⁷U.S. Dept. of Education, “Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program, Final Report,” 2004.

Revive the ASD. Nevada’s ASD had barely gotten off the ground when it was abolished. Students at one school had exceeded expected growth in reading by 48% and math by 64%.¹¹

Create a charter school incubator. In Arizona, Louisiana, Minnesota and Tennessee, charter school incubators have been instrumental in developing the talent to lead successful new charter schools and helping get these schools off the ground with funding and technical support.¹²

Racial Distribution of Students in Charter and Traditional Public Schools, 2020–2021



Charter School Enrollment as a Percentage of Total Public School Enrollment



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2023.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Lawrence, note 1.

¹⁰ Caroline Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff, “Findings from the City of Big Shoulders,” Education Next, 2005.

¹¹ Testimony of Futuro Academy Charter School Executive Director Ignacio Prado to Assembly Committee on Education, February 8, 2019.

¹² CEE-Trust, “Charter School Incubation,” 2011.