

RESEARCH BRIEFS

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Research on Charter Schools

The Rationale for Charter Schools

Charter schools were formally proposed in the late 1980s as an alternative to traditional public schools. The term, charter school, was first used at that time; however, the concept of a different type of public school can be traced back to the 1960s when alternative schools, schools within a school, and magnet schools began to appear.

A charter school is a publically funded, nonsectarian school that is free of many of the regulations that apply to public schools in this country. Because charter schools are given this autonomy, supporters claimed that they would develop innovative and successful teaching methods and academic programs that could serve as models for improving traditional public schools.

Laws regulating the creation and operation of charter schools differ among the states. Across this country a variety of entities have the authority to create and operate charter schools, including local school districts, state governments, parents and community groups, universities and other government agencies, and non-profit organizations. Nationally, there are more than 5,000 charter schools.

Charter Schools in Wisconsin

Wisconsin passed legislation in 1993 allowing ten districts to establish as many as two charter schools each, for a total of twenty charter schools. Since then, the law has been expanded, and at the completion of the 2010-11 school year there were 206 charter schools in the state.¹

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Requirements for Charter Schools in Wisconsin

Charter schools are exempt from many of the requirements that must be met by traditional public schools in Wisconsin; however, they must meet a number of requirements, including the following:

- Teachers must be licensed by the Department of Public Instruction.
- Charter schools must operate under a contract (charter) for a period not to exceed five years. There are no limits on the number of contract renewals.
- Charter schools must adhere to federal laws regarding special education and civil rights policies. Further, charter schools may not discriminate on the basis of sex, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation, or physical, mental, emotional, or learning disability.
- Students in charter schools must take the same Wisconsin Knowledge & Concepts Examinations that are taken by traditional public school students in the state.

Types of Charter Schools in Wisconsin

There are two types of charter schools in Wisconsin: (1) those which are authorized by local school districts—often described as instrumentalities of local school districts—and (2) 2R independent charter schools.

The 2R charter schools are those that can be authorized by the city of Milwaukee, UW – Milwaukee, the UW – Parkside, and the Milwaukee Area Technical College. Currently, the Milwaukee Area Technical College has not authorized any charter schools.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction notes that all 2R charters are non-instrumentality schools because the governing board has the authority to make decisions that normally are made by local school boards.²

When a school board authorizes a charter school, members of the board must decide if the school (including a virtual charter school) is an instrumentality of the district. If it is an instrumentality, then those who work in the charter school are employees of the district. If the charter school is not an instrumentality, the personnel are employees of the charter

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school.³ The vast majority of charter schools authorized by a school board are instrumentality-chartered schools.

Virtual Charter Schools

Virtual charter schools are a “subset” of charter schools. Currently, there are 27 virtual charter schools in Wisconsin,⁴ all of which have been authorized by local school boards. Under current law, the City of Milwaukee, UW-Milwaukee, UW-Parkside, and Milwaukee Area Technical College cannot authorize virtual charter schools.⁵

Research on Charter School Effectiveness

In 2009 the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University reported the results of the largest study of charter schools ever undertaken in the United States. The authors of this study compared charter and traditional public schools based on students’ test scores in reading and mathematics. The students in the two systems were matched so that they had similar demographic backgrounds (e.g., family, income, etc.). In all, data were collected for 70 percent of students attending charter schools.

It was found that there are some very successful charter schools. However, the authors report that “. . . in the aggregate, students in charter schools [are] not fairing as well as students in traditional public schools.”⁶

More specifically:

- 46 percent of charter schools showed no difference from public schools;
- 37 percent were significantly worse than their traditional public school counterparts; and
- 17 percent of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools.

Charter schools are proposed as a major educational reform, even though research on charter schools shows that fewer than one-in-five outperform traditional public schools on standardized tests in mathematics in reading. Eighty-three percent perform about the same or worse.

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Endnotes

¹ For a complete list of charter schools in Wisconsin (including a description of each) see the Wisconsin Charter Schools Yearbook, available online: <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/sms/pdf/2010-11yearbook.pdf>

² See <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/sms/csindex.html>

³ What is and is not an instrumentality can be confusing. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction states the following: Although some charter schools are identified as instrumentalities of the district, the word “instrumentality” is not defined in the charter school law and has had limited use in Wisconsin. The word was initially included in the charter law to ensure continuing eligibility of charter school teachers in the Wisconsin Retirement System. Instrumentality as used in the retirement law defines the employer, making it clear that the employing school district is the entity responsible for worker’s compensation, insurance, unemployment compensation, employee insurance and benefits, liability for acts of school staff members, and so forth. A charter school in Milwaukee that receives its charter from the Milwaukee Common Council, UW–Milwaukee, or MATC is not an instrumentality of the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS), and the MPS school board may not employ any personnel for the charter school. However, if the Milwaukee Common Council contracts with an individual or group operating a charter school for profit, then that charter school is an instrumentality of the Milwaukee Public Schools. The MPS board of education will then employ all personnel for the charter school. If the chancellor of UW–Parkside contracts for the establishment of a charter school, the board of regents of the University of Wisconsin System may employ instructional staff for the charter school. See Wisconsin Charter Schools Yearbook, p. 4. Available online: <http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/sms/pdf/2010-11yearbook.pdf>

⁴ For a complete list of virtual charter schools, see:

http://www.dpi.state.wi.us/sms/pdf/cs_2012VirtualSchs.xls

⁵ As of August 2011, legislation is pending that if passed will affect chartering agencies and the number of charter schools and virtual charter schools allowed.

⁶ Available online: http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/National_Release.pdf