

Charter Schools 101

October 10, 2017

What is school choice?

School choice is the belief that the best educational environment for a student may not be the public school closest to his or her house. Instead, school choice breaks the one-size-fits-all model of education and empowers families with the freedom to choose the school that fits their individual needs.

What types of choices exist for parents and students?

Whether it is a traditional public school, charter school, private school, online school, magnet school, homeschool or other educational model, we believe that our education system works best when families are not held back from choosing a school that works best for them.

What are charter schools?

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools open to all students. They are publicly funded and held to state academic and financial standards. Unlike traditional public schools, however, charter schools are run independently of school districts and, instead, operate under a performance contract with an authorizer (a district, the state, or another approved entity).

Why should we advocate for charter schools?

We advocate for schools and education policies that work for families and students. According to *US News & World Report*, 34 of the top 100 high schools in the country are charter schools - even though districts schools outnumber charter schools ten to one.

In 2015, the National Charter School Resource Center, an organization funded by the U.S. Department of Education, reviewed five major studies of student achievement and found they paint a picture of charter school students who perform as well as or better than the comparison group. Student performance in charter schools is, in general, higher than student performance in the comparison group for three groups that have historically lagged behind: low-income students, urban students, and students with low prior achievement levels.

Later that year, Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that students in urban charter schools gained the equivalent of 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 days in reading compared to traditional district public school peers. This is important to note, since more than half of charter schools are located in urban areas, with some cities seeing a significant share of students attending charter schools.

How do charter schools effectively support student success?

Charter schools are able to break the one-size-fits-all mold of the traditional public school system by adapting to the needs of students. They are able to innovate by creating unique school cultures and methods of teaching, which can sometimes be as simple as teaching more effectively in a safe environment. Charters hire their own teachers, can require things like school uniforms, and can experiment with longer school days and school years. A charter school can be focused on college or career prep, STEM education, the arts, education for children with autism, and many other areas. They can be cutting edge high-tech schools that are completely wired with technology or they can provide a classical education centered around the great books of history.

How many charter schools exist in Virginia?

Virginia currently has nine, while about 7,000 total charter schools operate around the United States.

Why do we need charter legislation in Virginia?

We would love for more families to have high-quality educational options that could include more charter schools. However, it is incredibly difficult to establish charter schools in Virginia. The reason is obvious: only school divisions can open charter schools, which they usually consider to be competitors. This is akin to putting Burger King in charge of where McDonalds can open. The legislative proposal establishes a way by which the Virginia Board of Education may create regional public charter school divisions that can authorize charter schools to be an option for parents in areas where struggling schools exist. This removes the conflict of interest that has kept charters from opening to serve more students.

Could these regional divisions be created anywhere in Virginia?

A regional public charter school division may only include divisions with more than 3,000 students that contain one or more schools that have an "accreditation denied" status for at least two of the last three years. This ensures they will be created in areas of high need where students need these options the most. Most charter schools in the U.S. are in urban or suburban areas.