

Charter school system put to test

Opponents are calling for increased oversight

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The first charter school opened in Nevada – I Can Do Anything High School – is set to close this spring.

Ohio’s largest charter, which has 12,000 online students, shut down last winter after a crackdown on its suspicious attendance figures. To help pay state fines, the school auctioned off everything from ballpoint pens to a singing Big Mouth Billy Bass wall plaque.

In New Jersey, the charter system is making real estate investors rich. They use federal money to build school buildings, then rent them to charter schools for a hefty profit. The IRS has stepped in, reviewing the scheme.

Across the U.S., charter schools face a reckoning.

After charters spread rapidly for a generation, under few rules or little oversight in many states, the pace of growth is slowing. Politicians are calling for more regulation for the schools, which use taxpayer money but have private operators. The political winds have shifted as well, killing the kind of bipartisan agreements that allowed charter schools to blossom.

When schools experiment, some will fail, said Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, a champion of charter schools.

“Charter schools are great options for thousands of students, and the demand for more of them remains very high,” DeVos said Tuesday during a congressional hearing. “We need more of them, not fewer.”

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., who chairs the House subcommittee where DeVos testified, shot back that DeVos’ office had been “asleep at the wheel” when it came to looking after how states oversaw their charter schools.

“It seems to me that charters have enormous flexibility, and there seems to be no one overseeing how that flexibility translates into federal dollars,” DeLauro said.

Charter schools are public schools that are privately managed, usually by nonprofit companies. The schools are given freedom from some state rules in exchange for meeting performance targets spelled out in their contract, or charter.

Many charters choose to operate longer school days and employ stricter rules around student behavior and academics than traditional schools can legally enforce.

In a number of cities, charters have outperformed their public school counterparts, research shows.

In other cases, the schools have opened, then closed a couple of years later – or even in the middle of the academic year. Vulnerable students hop from school to school, losing the stability they need.

New rules and accountability measures seek to stop that instability. But the rules stifle people who want to start new schools, some charter proponents say, thwarting the very innovation the schools were designed to foster.

“That’s contrary to the original idea of charter schools, which was to allow citizens or teachers or parents to solicit expertise or develop their own idea, and then we’d give them flexibility to pursue that idea,” said Jeanne Allen, founder of the Center for Education Reform, a procharter group. Other charter supporters welcome efforts aimed at increasing quality.

Todd Ziebarth, a senior vice president at the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, noted that lawmakers in Ohio, Arizona and Texas have taken steps to close chronically underperforming charters. Charter schools always had built-in opposition from public school teachers and their unions. As part of their contracts, the independent schools receive freedom to hire their own staff. Most charter schools are not unionized.

This year, opposition from unions exploded in walkouts and strikes. Los Angeles teachers forced their district’s procharter- school board to vote to oppose the expansion of charters. West Virginia teachers derailed plans to open the state’s first charter schools. In Chicago, unionized teachers staged the nation’s first strike at a charter.

Outside Washington, the rollback on charters is well underway.

The Los Angeles school board, the nation's second-largest, called for a statewide moratorium on new charter schools. In Minnesota – the first state to legalize charters, in 1991 – charter school enrollment is declining. In Nashville, Tennessee, the school board hasn't approved a new charter in two years, since anti-charter officials swept into office.

Just 355 new charter schools opened nationwide in the 2016-17 school year, the fewest in a decade, according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, an advocacy group.

Charters enroll a small proportion of the nation's public school students: just 6 percent.

But the schools have always received outside attention because they pledged to succeed where other schools failed, particularly in urban centers. They were designed to foster innovation and to offer parents more options beyond traditional schools.

“Charters were horribly messianic in their narratives about how they were going to change the world and make it more equitable,” said Tim Knowles, former head of the Urban Education Institute at the University of Chicago. “In reality, some were great, and some were about the same as regular public schools, and some were much worse.”



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