

Q&A

Here's a primer on charter schools

They've been a force in New York state education since 1998

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What is a charter school?

Charter schools are public schools that are governed by an independent board of trustees, rather than the district school board and administration. They are open to all students in the district where they're based and are free to families, just like traditional public schools. When they were first allowed in New York in 1998, the stated purpose was to provide a chance for innovation in educational practices outside traditional districts. In New York, they must be nonprofit, but other states have for-profit charter schools, including online schools.

How are they funded?

When a student enrolls in a charter school (or obtains a seat through a lottery, if there are too many applicants), his home district sends the charter school most, but not all, of the per-pupil funding it receives from the state. The home district also pays for transportation and some other auxiliary services. Charter schools do not receive public funding for facilities — something they have protested vigorously — and usually need to have some private money to stay afloat, at least at first. Unlike in a school district, there is no public vote on the budget.

How are they assessed?

Charter school students have to meet the same state academic standards as other students, including passing Common Core-aligned Regents exams to graduate. The state education department grants a charter for five years at a time, so if a school is performing poorly, it risks not having its charter renewed; 25 have been forced to close in New York.

How many are there?

There are 248 charter schools currently operating in New York, of which 197 are in New York City and 12 are in Monroe County. Another 37 are approved to open in 2015-16 or later. The state in 2010 raised its cap on total charter schools to 460; advocates are now calling for the cap to be eliminated altogether.

How do you start one?

A state charter can be obtained through two channels: the state Board of Regents or the State University of New York. Either way, the process involves submitting a detailed application, having an interview and responding to feedback and requests for amendments. The majority of initial applicants are not granted charters.

Why do some people like them?

Advocates argue that charter schools provide an alternative to failing public schools (nearly all are located in urban areas with poor-performing districts). They appeal to parents with innovative curriculum, single-gender classes or strict discipline. Some, but not all, have connections to businesses or other local institutions that provide funding, programming and networking that help students — Genesee Community Charter School, for instance, is located at the Rochester Museum & Science Center. Unlike private and parochial schools, they're free for families.

Why do some people dislike them?

Opponents argue that charter schools damage traditional public schools by siphoning off students with dedicated parents (and the state funding that comes with them). There is evidence that charter schools enroll fewer English language learners and students with disabilities, creating a disproportionate burden in traditional public schools. Charters have been accused of boosting their performance by "counseling out" poor-performing students by encouraging them to transfer somewhere else. Some charter school operators, including several locally, have been found lacking in their financial practices and transparency.

Do charter school students get a better education?

As with traditional public schools, there is wide variation in student achievement among charter schools. On the whole, their students score better on standardized tests than their district counterparts, but opponents say this is an effect of teaching to the test and of skimming off higher-performing students with stronger family structures and fewer disabilities.

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