
The Charter School Movement in North Carolina—Positives and Negatives

Positives

1. Supporters say charters are a source of innovation where new models of instruction and teacher-student interaction can be tried.
2. Some charters—most notably Magellan and Exploris, both in Raleigh—perform exceptionally well on state's end-of-grade tests. Magellan has in fact been the top performing school in the state on end-of-grade tests since its inception.
3. Charters serve disproportionate numbers of African-American students who may not have been well-served in the public schools.
4. Charters provide smaller classes within smaller schools, which please both teachers and parents.
5. Charter schools have open admissions and provide greater choice for parents and students who may not be able to afford private schools.
6. In rapidly growing school districts, charter schools may provide a bargain to the taxpayers because they do not receive state construction money.
7. Many charters have done a remarkable job of setting up governance structures and learning how to operate a school in a relatively short period of time.
8. Charters may be able to provide extra attention in a more intimate setting for children with special needs.

Negatives

1. Opponents argue little such innovation has been implemented in state's charter school classrooms.
2. On the whole, charter performance on end-of-grade tests generally lags that of traditional public schools, with the lowest performing charter schools predominantly African-American.
3. The state's charter school evaluation report indicates charter schools do not do as good a job as the traditional schools in educating African-American children; too many of these charter schools are 100 percent minority.
4. Parents and teachers in traditional public schools also would be happier with smaller class size—a key goal of Governor Mike Easley; charters provide these benefits to only a small minority of public school students.
5. If charter schools do not educate well, greater choice may not be a net benefit for the student. Despite open admissions, charter schools are less diverse than traditional public schools—also a function of choice.
6. In local school districts where student populations are not growing, charter schools draw resources away from the traditional public schools that they cannot afford to replace.
7. Fiscal management has been a concern at some charters, with eight of 15 closures due at least in part to fiscal problems.
8. Some charters may not have appropriate facilities to serve children with severe disabilities, and questions have been raised about whether some charters are adequately carrying out Individual Education Plans (IEPs) as required by federal and state law.

Positives

9. Charters have placed teachers in greater leadership roles, including even running some schools. Teachers may be happier with both working conditions and responsibilities.
10. Charter schools have greater flexibility in hiring and firing teachers, in theory giving them the opportunity to go after the best teachers and weed out poor performers.
11. North Carolina's law authorizing charter schools ranks among the top third nationally, according to a study by the Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C. That study cites guaranteed funding levels, multiple points of entry, and number of new starts annually as among the law's strengths
12. Charter schools have become popular with Republican lawmakers who see them as a means of expanding school choice.

charter (or no charters) or several charters with long waiting lists provide no relief for students failing," says Gerber. "You need excess capacity for market reform to work."

Tucker, director of the Office of Charter Schools, generally is pleased. "The Board asked some very tough questions and, certainly, the legislature needs to know about the problems," he says. "I'm pleased that the Board will support an increase after some improvements are made."

Gulley, co-sponsor of the bill that founded the charter schools, is critical of the recommendations. "We have some of the best applicants now that we've ever had, many from parts of the state that have no charters, but we have no charters to give them," Gulley says. "One of the unfortunate things about this experiment is that we have been some-

Negatives

9. Charters can provide a talent drain, with high-performing schools luring teachers out of the traditional public school classroom.
10. Charters have run afoul of state laws regarding teacher certification, with some hiring too many non-certified teachers. This raises questions about how qualified some teachers are to carry out their duties in the classroom.
11. Critics of the law note that charter schools do not receive capital funds, which inhibits their ability to secure facilities, the State Board of Education grants all charters so multiple entry becomes moot, and having reached the cap of 100 charter schools, the number of new starts will be severely limited.
12. The debate around charter schools and school choice is becoming increasingly polarized in the General Assembly, with some Democratic lawmakers fearful that support for charter schools will hurt the traditional public schools.

—Mike McLaughlin

where between half-hearted and totally disingenuous in our support for charter schools. We've said we want them, but we've hampered them from getting the job done. We've given them no money for facilities, no use of bond funds, and nothing from fines and forfeitures or permanent license plates. What we've had in North Carolina is almost a fraud."

Kirk and Dornan are both convinced that charter schools are here to stay, but they lament what they see as an increasing polarization around the issue. "Both the School Boards Association and the Association of School Administrators were fairly sanguine about charters at the outset, not believing they'd be that big a deal," Dornan says. "But seeing how quickly we've reached the cap of 100 schools, those groups are now flat out against them. And the