

Background information on charter schools

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As educators, elected officials, and communities struggle to develop policies to strengthen and improve our education system, the role of charter schools has become a major issue. Too often the debate is fueled by outlandish claims, emotionally charged language, and vague promises. Developing sound policy should be based on facts and actual oversight and regulatory experiences.

This list is designed to provide background information and useful policy tools to help communities grapple with how best to fit charter schools into their educational systems. Because there's a great deal of research on charter schools, this is not a complete listing but rather a sampling of useful studies and articles.

Overview of charter schools

1. *NPE Toolkit: School Privatization Explained*
2. *Exploring the consequences of charter school expansion in U.S. cities*

“When cities and school districts are debating whether to expand charter schools in the jurisdiction, decision-makers must look beyond facile claims of miraculous proficiency rates in cherry-picked charter schools (serving cherry-picked or culled populations) and reports of long waiting lists. Policymakers should consider a much longer checklist.”

3. *A Public Interest Primer on Charter Schools*

“While there are certainly effective charter schools (as there are traditional, neighborhood public schools), that original intent has largely been co-opted into a market-based model of providing education with winners and losers. The rapid growth in the number of charter schools, especially in states such as California, Louisiana, and Michigan, amounts to the privatization of public education through the creation of a parallel education system, often times run like a business, and in competition with public neighborhood schools”

Charter school guides

1. *The Public School Accountability Agenda*
2. *Public Accountability for Charter Schools: Standards and Policy Recommendations for Effective Oversight*

“This report hopes to provide guidance to state legislatures, charter authorizers, and other bodies tasked with charter school oversight and to provide communities with concrete

recommendations to take to policymakers as they continue to press for access, equity, and public accountability.”

Financial impact on public schools

1. *Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts*

“In a first-of-its-kind analysis, In the Public Interest has found that public school students in three California school districts are bearing the cost of the unchecked expansion of privately managed charter schools.”

2. *How Charter Schools Impact Public School District Budgets*

“In the Public Interest compiled studies by a variety of institutions and authors nationwide, all which share a similar finding: public school districts and the students they serve are undermined by laws and practices that prioritize charter school growth over educational opportunities for all students.”

Misuse of taxpayer dollars for charter schools

1. *Fraud and Waste in California’s Charter Schools*

“In the Public Interest estimates that the total amount of public money lost and stolen by California’s charter school leaders has reached over \$149 million. But that’s only the tip of the iceberg—the vast majority of fraud and waste likely goes undetected because the state government doesn’t proactively watch for fraud and waste, while school districts lack the statutory authority to effectively monitor and hold charter schools accountable”

2. *Another Day Another Charter School Scandal*

The Network for Public Education keeps a running track of charter school scandals across the country.

3. *Spending Blind: The Failure of Policy Planning in California’s Charter School Facility Funding*

“In the Public Interest reveals that a substantial portion of the more than \$2.5 billion in tax dollars or taxpayer subsidized financing spent on California charter school facilities in the past 15 years has been misspent on: schools that underperformed nearby traditional public schools; schools built in districts that already had enough classroom space; schools that were found to have discriminatory enrollment policies; and in the worst cases, schools that engaged in unethical or corrupt practices.”

4. *Asleep at the Wheel: How the Federal Charter Schools Program Recklessly Takes Taxpayers and Students for a Ride*

“Our investigation found a troubling pattern of insufficient applicant review, contradictions between information provided by applicants and available public data, the gifting of funds to schools with inadequate financial and governance plans, a push-out of large grants to the states with little supervision by the department, and the waste of hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.”

5. *“Why 2020 Dems Should Target the Nonprofit Charter School Industry”*

“The charter was decidedly nonprofit, but as families and preservation advocates would learn from their tenacious, but ultimately unsuccessful, battle to save a beloved, historic church, charter schools, regardless of their tax status, have become powerful players in a lucrative real estate market in urban areas where land values are high and empty lots or school-ready buildings are hard to find.”

Charter school education outcomes: Reality vs. rhetoric

1. *Do Choice Policies Segregate Schools?*

“Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that, accounting for differences in population served, charter schools are not, on average, producing student achievement gains any better than TPSs [traditional public schools].”³³ CREDO’s massive work in this area finds some statistically significant differences but not meaningful effect sizes.³⁴ Most troubling is the side effect of contributing to and advancing the resegregation of schools and society. This raises the specter of separate and unequal educational opportunities and is not compatible with the goals of a democratic society.”

2. *What Should We Really Learn from New Orleans After the Storm?*

Bruce Baker debunks study alleging massive improvements in New Orleans as a result of the privatization/charterization of the public school system after Hurricane Katrina.

3. *State Data: Ohio Charter School Graduates Far Less Likely to Earn College Degrees than even Urban District Graduates*

“Looking at these two metrics, it’s remarkable how bad charter school perform. Overall, Ohio school districts have 5 times the rate of students with college degrees that charters have. And Big 8 urban districts (Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown) have twice the rate.”

4. *Report: Tennessee’s Achievement School District is failing students, unlikely to succeed*

“Six years since it began taking over low-performing schools, new research shows Tennessee’s Achievement School District is failing. Despite numerous changes in leadership, practices and support, the Tennessee Education Research Alliance found the ASD hasn’t “produced significant gains in student achievement in any academic subject, intervention year, or cohort of schools.””

5. *“DC Charter School Performance ‘Almost’ Matches Public Schools”*

“Washington DC charter schools did not significantly outperform public schools or even match them on the last two years of PARCC testing. These disappointing results for the charter school industry come almost a quarter-century after Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich teamed up to bring neoliberal education reform to Washington DC. As their “reforms” accelerated, residents were assured that innovative privatized schools would bring better outcomes and performance gaps would close. None of that happened.

6. *Can charter operators turn around district schools? In Atlanta, two are trying and finding extra challenges.*

“You can find examples of places that have successfully turned schools around other district management and you can find examples of places that have successfully turned around using charters,” said Brian Gill, one of the Mathematica researchers. “It’s not as if there is any clear indication that one of these approaches is superior to the other.”

Loss of local control

1. *The Business of Charter Schooling: Understanding the Policies that Charter Operators Use for Financial Benefit*

“To illustrate how charter school policy functions to promote privatization and profiteering, the authors explore differences between charter schools and traditional public schools in relation to three areas: the legal frameworks governing their operation; the funding mechanisms that support them; and the arrangements each makes to finance facilities. They conclude with recommendations for policies that help ensure that charter schools pursue their publicly established goals and that protect the public interest.”

2. *Who Controls Our Schools? Chapter 2.5: How Locally Elected School Boards and Democratic Governance Have Been Destroyed p.16*

“The attack on locally elected and appointed school boards may be the most antidemocratic feature of this privatization movement, even if it is the least discussed.”

2. *Why You Should be Wary of Privatization*

“Privatization occurs under different names, such as “outsourcing,” “contracting out,” and “public-private partnership,” but, ultimately, it’s removing a public good, service, or asset from public, democratic control and placing it under private control by a corporation or other private entity. While the specifics of privatization deals vary, what makes the difference is who controls the public good, service, or asset.”

Charter schools often increase segregation and discrimination

1. *How School Privatization Opens the Door for Discrimination*

“Our review of relevant laws indicates that voucher and charter school programs open the door to discrimination because of three phenomena. First, federal law defines discrimination differently in public and private spaces. Second, state legislatures have largely ignored the issue of non-discrimination while constructing voucher laws and have created charter laws that fail to comprehensively address non-discrimination. And third, because private and charter schools have been given authority to determine what programs to offer, they have the ability to attract some populations while excluding others.”

2. *How Some California Charter Schools Illegally Restrict Enrollment*

“All across California, charter schools are implementing admissions policies that exclude students from enrolling...These admission policies threaten to turn public schooling into a two-tier system where the students who need the most resources receive the fewest.”

3. *The Minnesota School Choice Project: Part 1: Segregation and Performance*

“The result has been a region in which 45 of the 50 most segregated schools are charters. The Twin Cities region contains 78 schools that are more than 95 percent nonwhite; of these, 59, or 76 percent, are charter schools. Unsurprisingly, children of color at charters are vastly more likely to attend a segregated school than children of color at traditional public schools.”

4. *Choice without Inclusion?: Comparing the Intensity of Racial Segregation in Charters and Public Schools at the Local, State and National Levels*

“Nationally, we find that higher percentages of charter students of every race attend intensely segregated schools. The highest levels of racial isolation are at the primary level for public and middle level for charters. We find that double segregation by race and class is higher in charter schools. Charters are more likely to be segregated, even when controlling for local ethnoracial demographics.”

5. *State of Denial: California Charter Schools and Special Education Students*

“Not only is the charter industry in LAUSD, OUSD, and SDUSD enrolling a smaller share of students with disabilities, but our analysis also uncovered that, of those students enrolled, charter schools were serving a significantly smaller share of students with the most severe—and typically most financially costly—disabilities (moderate to severe). Thus, of the students with disabilities who were enrolled within privately operated charter schools, the vast majority were concentrated in the mild to moderate eligibility categories.”

Tools for messaging

Here is some polling information that can help shape messaging:

1. *Charter School Reform Poll Memo*

“A new survey shows that Americans overwhelmingly favor a series of proposals to reform charter schools. Proposals garnering broad support include initiatives to strengthen charter school accountability and transparency, improve teacher training and qualifications, prevent fraud, serve high-need students and ensure that neighborhood public schools are not adversely affected.”

2. *National Poll Shows Overwhelming Support for Reining in Charter Schools*

3. *Many other polls from In the Public Interest—some state specific from ITPI*

4. *Findings from a National Survey of Public-School Parents conducted for the AFT*

“Parents want access to a good neighborhood public school much more than increased choice of schools. Their highest priorities for these schools are providing a safe and secure environment, developing their children’s knowledge and skills, and ensuring equal opportunity for all kids.”

Explainer videos

These short videos are examples of different ways to move your message on social media:

1. *“Charter Schools are Draining California’s Education Funding”*

“Charter schools are draining funding from neighborhood public schools in many districts nationwide, leading to cuts in core services like counseling, libraries, and special education. Watch as California’s public school officials, teachers, and students speak out about the growing crisis caused by the state’s unlimited charter school growth. See more at HowMuchChartersCost.Org #HowMuchChartersCost”

2. *“The Bizarre Law That’s Overcrowding California Public Schools”*

In California, traditional, neighborhood schools are forced to give space to charter schools, which are publicly funded but privately operated. This is causing all kinds of headaches for students and parents. Learn more at: <https://medium.com/in-the-public-inte...>”

Privatization/Contracting out of school staff

1. *Making the Grade? Questions to Ask About School Services Privatization*

“This guide provides examples of important questions that decision makers should consider when faced with a proposed privatization effort. Advocates, including school service personnel, teachers, parents, and members of the community can use these questions to ensure that decision makers keep students’ and the broader district’s best interest at the heart of these conversations”

2. *The High Costs of Privatization*

“Contracts related to health and human services, municipal services, information technology, school support services, prisons, and transportation are just a few of the areas where rampant cost overruns and vastly overstated cost savings projections have been documented.”

3. *“The Drivers on the Bus Go...Where?”*

“Around the country, schools desperate to free up funds are outsourcing their bussing services—and dealing a blow to students and workers alike.”

4. *How privatization increases inequality*

“As this report shows, privatization has threatened the very goals and missions of many public goods and services, especially those that the poor interact with the most”

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