

THE STATE OF THE NYC CHARTER SCHOOL SECTOR

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NEW YORK CITY
CHARTER SCHOOL
CENTER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

***Charter schools were created to change things.** A bold and controversial concept when they came to New York City in 1999, charter schools have had remarkable success in creating choices for families, raising students' academic achievement, and experimenting with innovative ideas for education. Today, New York City's charter school sector is higher-performing and more vibrant than any in the United States, and has grown from two schools in 1999 to 136 schools educating 47,000 students today. The accomplishments reflect the hard work of dedicated school founders and educators, the support of public officials, and, of course, the commitment and trust of the families who have chosen to enroll in these independent and autonomous public schools.*

Having become an established (if at times controversial) part of a larger system of public schools, charter schools will continue to expand, still working to refine their programs and obtain even better results. But as they pursue familiar goals, they will also face a new set of questions about their scale and role. For instance, as charters move to serve ever greater numbers of students, to what extent can the charter school model be adopted (and adapted) to improve traditional district schools? To what extent are charter schools' results shaped by their differences in governance structures or enrollment patterns? And are those differences intrinsic to the charter school model, or simply present-day features of it?

Since the charter school sector was built on a commitment to achievement and accountability, such questions are as important as any the sector has faced—and some early, partial answers have begun to emerge. For instance, charter schools are now required to enroll and retain certain groups of at-risk students at rates comparable to the local district schools, or risk closure, a shift that is likely to narrow differences in charter and district school demographics. Charter schools are also acting collectively to share best practices for students with special needs and make it easier for families to find and apply to charter schools (including through a common online application). And with the signing of a District-Charter Collaboration Compact, charter schools are joining their district colleagues to find new ways to work together and share best practices.

As charter schools adjust to their growing size and the changing public debate, there is too often a key ingredient

missing: meaningful, transparent, and accessible data about the state of the NYC charter school sector. This State of the Sector report attempts to do something about that. Its approach is to offer a descriptive portrait based on data provided by public agencies. While it does not show all the variety among individual charter schools, nor does it predict what may change as these generally small and very young schools continue to grow, it does represent a first step toward a more data-driven conversation.

The report focuses on four pressing questions and presents the following findings.

What choices do NYC charter schools provide?

Charter schools' steady growth over 12 years has been fueled by enormous demand from students and families, many of whom previously had few if any choices. In last year's admissions lotteries, an estimated five students applied for each available seat. Enrolling 47,000 students today, charter schools will in a few years' time educate one in ten public school students. Charter schools have undoubtedly provided additional choices; but it is important to remember that charter schools today are one small part of what has become a vast system of school choice in NYC, including many district schools that require much more than an application form to enroll a student.

Charter schools' freedom to implement new and unconventional ideas about education has also broadened families' choices. Among the most prominent innovations have been

the longer school days and longer school years that allow schools to provide hundreds of hours of additional instruction in core areas while still leaving time for art, music, humanities, and science. Parents have welcomed this innovation as well as charter schools' focused concentration on a purposeful, college-bound culture that permeates every aspect of the school day.

What are NYC charter schools' results?

Even after controlling for student characteristics, rigorous academic research consistently finds significant, positive academic benefits to attending a NYC charter school. In addition, charter school students consistently outperform Community School District (CSD) averages on state Math and English Language Arts (ELA) exams in grades 3-8, although such comparisons do not control for student demographics (and should be used with caution in comparing the two sectors). The same pattern holds among students in all at-risk subgroups.

While the overall results are strong, charter school students' performance in Math is stronger than in ELA (which is also true for district students). At the few charter high schools that have existed long enough to graduate students, rates of college readiness and college enrollment lag those of district high schools. However, trends in Regents completion suggest that high school outcomes will improve as a larger and more representative number of these schools start to graduate students.

Charter schools tend to have higher attendance rates than NYC district schools. On the Department of Education's Learning Environment Surveys, charter school parents, teachers, and secondary students respond more positively to questions in every category: Academic Expectations, Engagement, Safety & Respect, and Communication.

Who are NYC charter schools' students?

Three in four charter school students come from low-income families. Over 60% of charter school students are Black (compared to about 30% of district school students), reflecting the demand from the African-American community.

At present, the charter sector serves a smaller percentage of students in special education than the citywide average, although this difference may partly stem from students being over-identified in district schools. Charter school students in special education are more likely to move toward less restrictive settings.

The charter sector also serves a smaller proportion of English Language Learners (ELLs), but ELLs in charter schools are more likely to pass the English proficiency tests required to leave that category.

The charter school law was amended in May 2010 to require charter schools to enroll and retain comparable percentages of ELLs, students with disabilities and low-income students. That change is likely to result in a narrowing of the present demographic differences between charter schools and district schools.

What is the outlook for the future of NYC charter schools?

Charter schools have a small but growing foothold in NYC, serving about four percent of all public school students, but as much as 25% of students in neighborhoods where charter schools are most concentrated. Those numbers will continue to increase as charter schools add more grade levels, and as more charter schools open each year. Given present levels of demand, there is good reason to believe that parents will seek these new seats out and demand will continue to outpace supply.

Charter schools' physical place in the city is uncertain, however. As a rule, charter schools do not receive public facilities support. A majority of charter schools operate in district buildings, which, given the lack of facility funding, has been a critical factor in charter school growth. Yet it must be remembered that even schools in district buildings have no assurance of continued access.

The report finds that charter schools, on average, have higher rates of teacher and principal turnover compared to NYC district schools. Such rates of turnover are, in part, consistent with a dynamic, growing and still quite new sector, and one which operates with different background labor rules and more varied compensation structures. And while low rates of attrition are not an outcome valuable for its own sake, lower staff attrition could help charter schools sustain or expand their positive influence on academic achievement, while continuing to grow. Charter school leaders are paying close attention to this issue, and seeking ways to improve educator pipelines and keep effective educators on the job longer.

In sum, the present state of the NYC charter school sector is strong and the outlook for the future is very promising. Charter schools as a sector are meant to reach at-risk students, improve their education and life prospects, and provide avenues for improvement for the larger public school system. The available data suggest real accomplishments to date and increasing progress on the path toward that lofty summit. Every indication is that NYC charter schools intend to keep climbing.

To learn more about charter schools and the Data Transparency Initiative, visit www.nycCharterSchools.org/Data.