



Charter Schools: Six Common Criticisms from Opponents - and Proof That They are Unfounded

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1) Creates Balkanization in Education (The "Charter Schools Segregate" Argument) More than 22 studies demonstrate that charters are overserving those traditionally underserved by failing schools, such as low socio-economic populations and students at risk of dropping out. Three studies suggest that the charters examined serve essentially the same population as the surrounding area. Charter schools either serve the same demographic characteristics as in traditional public schools, or focus on students in danger of failing. Variations, which may exist, depend upon the neighborhood where the schools are located, but in all cases mitigate in favor of serving larger numbers of minority and ethnic populations. The reason for larger service to minority children is not owing to "Balkanization," but to the fact that where traditional schools fail to serve their students, the parents want out, and nowhere is this more prevalent than in failing urban public schools serving mostly African-American and Hispanic students.

2) Competition Has No Impact (The Anti-Ripple Argument) The combined research of five districts by the State University of New York, by University of California scholars and by both state and national institutions finds extensive evidence of changes in programs, approaches, behavior and an increased responsiveness to consumers as a result of charters. In some places the impact is muted by policies advocated by opponents of charter schools that protect districts and schools from harm when children choose to leave. Competition has had the greatest impact where there are strong charter laws; the weakest impact where there are weak charter laws. Prior to the passage of strong charter school laws and the establishment of the resulting charter schools, real reforms moved slowly - or not at all.

3) Innovation Is Lacking (The "Prove It's So Different" Argument) Numerous studies cited show that innovative practices and programs are being implemented in charter schools. The flexibility these schools enjoy has not prompted them to make risky experiments, but rather allows them to use programs that are often not permitted or not extended to teachers because of oversight from distant bureaucracies. Charter schools also prompt traditional school districts to substantively reform classroom instruction. This impact includes such improvements as adopting instruction programs used by charter schools, developing and building thematic schools to meet the community demand demonstrated by charter schools and partnering with community colleges for better instruction and program expansion. The "No Innovation" argument relies on a vague definition that ignores the local variations that exist in public education. Because each charter school responds essentially to local conditions, what may be innovative in one area (i.e., block scheduling or year-round schooling) may be common in another. A charter school offers the opportunity to employ new practices that may otherwise be blocked by bureaucratic or political considerations of the traditional public school district.

4) More Accountability is Needed (The Process Versus Progress Argument) Critics argue that charter schools lack the oversight of publicly accountable boards and institutions. As proof they point to the fact that charter schools close when they do not serve their mission and to personnel policies that do not mandate district oversight. In reality, that is the kind of "accountability" that has long been absent from public schools. In teacher surveys, freedom from procedural rules and related constraints is often cited as what charter teacher's value most. Charter school accountability is based on goals set and the extent to which parents who choose those schools believe the school is meeting their expectations. Traditional public schools that consistently fail to meet goals (in those rare instances when they are set) are propped up and continue to do a disservice to the children attending them. Charter schools that consistently fail to meet goals (which are always set) are closed; this is an important, powerful measure of accountability.

5) No Evidence That They Work (The Double Standard Argument) In his report for the National School Boards Association, Thomas Good argues that there is no achievement evidence and therefore, the claim that charters will be better does not hold up. Later, he says that the research is not credible for purposes of comparing student achievement. In reality, many charter schools are not comparable to similar public schools because of the time in which children have spent there and the benchmarks are not always the same among all schools. However, research is building in states that administer statewide objective tests based on proficiency in key standards. Fifteen studies show positive achievement and gains among charter schools which, while preliminary and not comprehensive, in fact do show that there is evidence that many work. Nearly every study demonstrates that - although the charter schools reviewed focused on "at-risk" students who entered the school performing significantly below grade level - students' progress was at or above the progress recorded by students in surrounding traditional public schools, demographically comparable schools, or the state average.

6) The Common Good Is Undermined, Sort Of (The "Choice Is Bad For Democracy" Argument)



Critics say that the common good of public education is undermined when people choose to associate with people whose values they share. The values most identified by parents as reasons for their choosing charters is the value of a good education. Charters are a response to failing schools and deficiencies in traditional public schools. Therefore charter schools should be judged on how well they satisfy the need and desire for alternatives and not on some larger notion of public good that doesn't necessarily manifest itself in good schools. Charter schools are based largely upon accountability. They must be approved by a state agency designed to review the quality and effectiveness of these schools. If the applications cannot clear the bar, or if the schools do not meet their contractual obligations, the public good is not served and the school will not be approved or will be shut down.

Can traditional public schools make the same claim? Click here for [.pdf version of this paper.](#)

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