



GUIDE TO THE ISSUES

Charter Schools in Alabama

Introduction

While the state of Alabama has seen incremental reform in the realm of public education in recent years, one major component of the national education reform movement has remained elusive. Despite rapid and often successful growth nationwide over the last twenty-five years, Alabama has been slow to embrace charter schools.

One of the reasons for this reluctance may be a fundamental misunderstanding by lawmakers and the public of the nature of charter schools. Just like traditional public schools, charter schools are schools that are funded by the public and offered free of tuition. They are granted permission—or, a charter—to operate from a sponsoring body such as a local school board or state body. Where charter schools begin to differ from traditional public schools is that they are largely free from state education regulations and are able to create their own structure for everything from teacher hiring to class curriculum and organizational structure. These schools are evaluated on a regular basis to ensure they are in compliance with their charter.

Wherever innovation and growth is to be found in education around our country, charter schools are part of that process. The same changes should be embraced in Alabama, for the betterment of our students and our state.

This *Guide* discusses charter schools, their purposes, and school choice reform proposals.

Where Alabama Stands Today

With the signing of the *Alabama School Choice and Student Opportunity Act* in 2015, Alabama became the forty-third state to make possible the authorization of charter schools. While this legislation was a welcome step in the right direction, the state has been slow to enact charter

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

- ★ A Charter schools program is a form of public school choice that allows families another option in education outside of the traditional zoned school model.
- ★ Despite passing charter schools legislation in 2015, Alabama has been slow to embrace all of the potential benefits of charters.
- ★ Charter schools have been particularly adept at working in low income communities, making them an excellent tool in both Alabama's rural and inner-city areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Converting older schools into charters allows local systems to make adequate use of their buildings, while providing new options for students and parents.
- A growing number of successful charters in our state would improve education for all students—charter, public and private.
- The state of Alabama should continue to eliminate the remaining barriers to school choice.

schools, and there is much work to be done to ensure that charter schools grow and create better educational opportunities for Alabama students and parents.¹

Current legislation allows for two types of charter schools in Alabama, both of which must apply to a local school board.² The first type of charter school is a start-up charter—one that is created new within the system. These are limited to ten per year statewide. The second type is a conversion charter school wherein an existing

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public school is converted to a charter. If a start-up charter has its application denied by the local school board, it may appeal to the Alabama Public Charter School Commission. Conversion charter schools, however, can only be approved at the local level, and have no room for appeal under current state law.

Three Purposes in Advancing Charter Schools

Certainly, many Alabamians have a deep and meaningful attachment to their local public school districts, and it would be unwise to dismantle those systems. Nevertheless, the demonstrated benefits of charter schools in other states have shown the growth of charter schools would benefit students in Alabama in the following ways.

Charter Schools Give Parents Additional Choice, Children a Chance

First, parents should have additional choices in terms of how to best educate their children. For the vast majority of working Alabamians, educational options are limited to the local public school and perhaps a nearby private school. It is imperative that parents and students be freed from the burdens of attending a school based solely on their zip codes. The growth of charter schools would create a middle space between traditional public education and private school. In this space, parents and students could take advantage of a free public education, but one structured towards a more specific goal such as fine arts, science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), or vocational training. Many public systems are already moving resources in this direction; easing the burdens on the creation of charter schools would prevent public schools from taking on too many responsibilities and thereby running the risk of watering down their core mission.³

The Traditional Public System Is Changing

Second, while the hard work done by countless public school teachers and administrators should be lauded, the traditional public system simply cannot be all things to all people. Larger systems are already utilizing magnet

schools, International Baccalaureate programs and schools for students with special needs. Many charters specialize in these very areas; others go on to specialize in STEM curriculum, fine arts, vocational training and more. Allowing charter schools to fill this space would free up existing public systems to focus on the needs of the majority of their students without feeling constant pressure to devote money and other resources to these needs.

Charter Schools Have a Record of Success Nationwide

Third, charter schools have a proven record of success nationwide. To be certain, some charter schools have struggled in much the same manner as their traditional public school peers. Yet the success of charter schools has drawn bipartisan support nationwide from the Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. A recent study by the Florida Department of Education notes that the state's charter schools regularly outperform their traditional public school peers on a variety of standardized tests.⁴ The success of Basis Charter Schools in Arizona has led five of the state's charters to be considered among the nation's ten best by *US News and World Report*.⁵ Charter schools have been particularly adept at working in low-income communities; in turn helping otherwise disadvantaged young people receive a quality education that helps them rise out of poverty. This is especially powerful to note because, as one commentator has remarked, these schools go out of their way to serve communities in need.⁶ The most recent example within the state is the ACCEL Day and Evening Academy in Mobile, a charter school that seeks to serve a diverse group of students from a variety of backgrounds. ACCEL is in its first year of operation, and will bear close watching as it fleshes out its mission to serve students in the coming years.⁷

Reform Proposals

Given the localized nature of public education in our state, any discussion of reform raises understandable concerns. The purpose of charter school expansion is not to upend traditional public school systems, but to create

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additional opportunities for parents and students to find the best education possible. It is the belief of many that charter schools can accomplish this goal.

1. Many have raised concerns about the logistics of charter schools—where and how to set up facilities for a school building. To be sure, this is a major concern. Simply put: start-up costs are a major barrier. Yet there are many districts in our state that have seen a severe decline in their enrollment numbers, leading to empty classrooms and in some cases, empty buildings. The opportunity is there to convert these buildings to charter schools. Charter schools fill a need. Converting older schools into charters allows local systems to make adequate use of their buildings while providing new options for students and parents. Current legislation should be altered so that conversion charter schools are allowed to make appeals to the Alabama Public Charter School Commission should their initial plans be denied at the local level.⁸
2. The objection is often raised that existing public systems would lose out on funding as students moved out of the traditional public system. The reality is that public school systems are funded on the basis of the number of enrolled students. If a family determined that a charter school is the best fit for their children, that money should follow the student. While there is certainly no intention to harm a public system, ultimately education dollars should follow the students such money is intended to serve. Such a situation may place new pressure on traditional public systems, but that competition will in time prove to be an effective means of improving education for traditional public systems, as well. As charters are granted under the auspices of a local district, students would still count towards a district's enrollment, thereby keeping the money in the district.⁹ Additionally, charter schools fill other needs—the University Charter School on the campus of the University of West Alabama is taking the place of Sumter Academy, and its location on a uni-

versity campus grounds it close to a strong group of educators.

3. Finally, media reports and opponents of charters often argue that many charter schools have failed and eventually close their doors. While some charter schools have struggled to meet their goals and have even closed their doors as a result, many public schools face the exact same struggle—failing test scores, poor teacher performance and eventually, an empty building as student populations dwindle and the remaining students are bused to other schools. Yet allowing and welcoming charter schools in Alabama would go a long way towards creating additional educational opportunities. Successful charters have already provided an example for traditional public systems in terms of organizational structure, leadership development and teacher retention. A growing number of successful charters in our state would improve education for all students—charter, public and private.¹⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, the state of Alabama should continue to eliminate barriers to school choice. Charter schools remain a proven method of increasing achievement among disadvantaged students and the state would do well to encourage and support their growth. This growth would not be detrimental to existing traditional public systems and evidence suggests that the presence of successful charters may in fact spur those traditional schools on to greater success.

Alabamians deserve the best options in education. State leaders should free up charter schools to join traditional public systems, private schools, and home schools in working to educate a new generation of Alabamians prepared for the hard, yet rewarding work of leadership and citizenship.



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