



GUIDE TO THE ISSUES

Educational Options in Alabama: Public Charter Schools

Background

Many students in Alabama's public education system are mired in failing schools. In the last five years, almost half of all public schools in Alabama have had at least one year in which they failed to make their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.¹

According to the latest data from the National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP), only 28 percent of Alabama's 4th graders are proficient or better in math,² 30 percent in science,³ and 32 percent in reading.⁴ Proficiency scores on NAEP exams for 8th graders are equally dismal: 34 percent are proficient or better in math,⁵ 26 percent in reading⁶ and 29 percent in science.⁷ Many of these students would benefit from attending high-quality public charter schools.

Charter schools are independent public schools authorized through an agreement with a sponsor—usually a school district, state governmental body, or university. Unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are overseen by a governing board of parents and members of the local community.

Policy Consideration

Public charter schools have greater autonomy over daily operations, academic programs, and human resources than traditional public schools. They have considerable discretion over how they hire, train, evaluate, compensate, and retain employees. Public charter schools oversee their own budgets including capital construction and maintenance costs. In exchange for the increased flexibility, public charter schools often have heightened accountability standards.

Like other public schools, charter schools must adhere to state and federal laws regarding civil rights, testing, students with disabilities, reporting and other accountability measures, and building and safety codes.

ISSUE SNAPSHOT

Since 2007, more than 48 percent of all public schools in Alabama have had at least one year in which they failed to make their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

Alabama is one of only nine states without public charter schools. Every southern state except Alabama and Kentucky has public charter schools.

Among districts with high percentages of minorities and low-income homes, students in public charter schools tend to make greater academic progress than their peers.¹

Alabama is one of only nine states without public charter schools. Every southern state except Alabama and Kentucky has public charter schools. For the 2011-12 school year, there are more than 5,500 public charter schools nationwide, over 500 of which were added in the past academic year.¹⁰ Together, these schools have more than two million students enrolled.¹¹

One of the most important aspects of public charter schools is that they are schools of choice. Many families are drawn to public charter schools because of their unique program of study. Likewise, public charter schools enable teachers to choose a school that matches their skills and preferred teaching methods. Authorizing legislation has enabled education leaders and educators to create innovative learning environments tailored to community needs.

Students in public charter schools generally perform better than students in traditional public schools. According to a 2011 meta-analysis of studies on public charter school achievement conducted by the University of California San Diego, public charter schools outperform traditional public schools in elementary reading and math, middle school math,