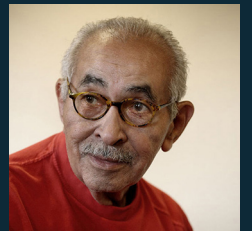
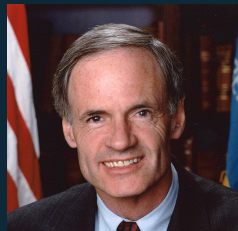
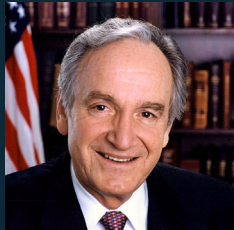
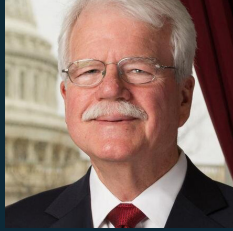


A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

By Charles Barone and Marianne Lombardo

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EDUCATION
REFORM NOW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From their origins in the 1980's all the way up until the present day, public charter schools have enjoyed support from elected officials, thought leaders, and constituencies across the political spectrum. Recently, however, we've seen a split emerge on charter schools among individuals and organizations on the left.

This issue brief offers a reminder that throughout their history, public charter schools have had strong roots in progressivism and that the current public charter school sector, on the whole, reflects Democratic values of equalizing opportunity and empowering local communities.

IN THIS ISSUE BRIEF, WE SHOW THAT:

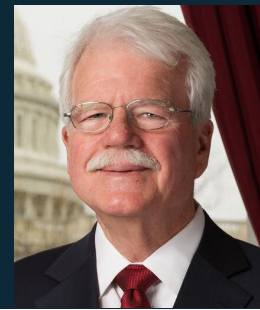
- **PART 1.** Civil rights and labor leaders advanced the ideas and principles underlying the charter school model;

- **PART 2.** Democratic and progressive leaders have been, and remain, among the strongest proponents of high-quality public charter schools;

- **PART 3.** A solid majority of Democrats supports public charter schools; support is particularly high among Black, Hispanic, and low-income voters and parents;

- **PART 4.** Charter enrollment is highest in Democratic strongholds;

- **PART 5.** Public charter schools serve the Democratic goals of equalizing educational opportunities.



INTRODUCTION

Charter schools are public schools that have more decision-making authority than do most traditional public schools. The chartering process begins when a group of people (e.g., educators, parents, or community leaders) writes a plan for the proposed school. A public authorizing entity, set up by state law, approves or disapproves the plan. The authorizing entity can sanction, and ultimately close if necessary, schools that do not meet fiscal and performance standards, usually in a much more efficient and timely manner than is possible with traditional public schools.

Since their inception in the 1980's, charter schools have enjoyed support from leaders across the political spectrum, including many centrists and progressives: President Bill Clinton; President Barack Obama; 2016 Democratic Presidential nominee Hillary Clinton; Children's Defense Fund Founder Marian Wright Edelman; former President of the American Federation of Teachers Al Shanker; former Governor of Vermont and Head of the Democratic National Committee Howard Dean; former Chair of the House Education and Labor Committee George Miller; and, the late-Democratic Senator from Minnesota, Paul Wellstone.

Progressive support for public charter schools stems in part from key principles and policies underlying the charter school model. By law, charter schools must have a fair and open admissions process, conducting outreach and recruitment to all segments of the communities they serve. Unlike, for example, public magnet schools or "exam schools" that can set admissions criteria based on test scores or other student characteristics, charter schools cannot pick and choose which students to admit but rather must enroll students by lottery when the number of applicants exceeds available slots. By law, like other public schools, charter schools are nonsectarian and nondiscriminatory in employment practices and cannot charge tuition.

There are some, particularly on the right wing of the political spectrum, that support charters based only on their being a "market-based" policy solution. Progressives, however, are unencumbered by that kind of strict orthodoxy. Being a progressive charter school supporter does not mean that choice or school autonomy are "magic bullets" for improving public education. It does not mean having to unqualifiedly defend the charter school sector in states or districts where public charter schools underperform or in cases where individual charter schools misuse public funds. It allows debate and criticism where individual charter schools engage in questionable practices.

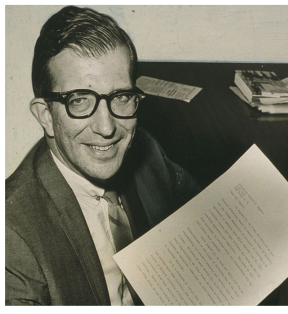
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PART 1

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Public Charter Schools — Union and Progressive Leaders on the “Original Idea”



“Why shouldn’t every school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?”

— Former President of the American Federation of Teachers, Al Shanker

In 1974, Ray Budde, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, published a paper titled “Education by Charter.”¹ Budde’s proposal, which received very little attention at the time, was to trim down educational bureaucracy at the district level such that school boards would enter into charter compacts directly with teachers at each school. The proposal was rooted in Budde’s beliefs that teachers should have more autonomy in the daily operations of their schools and that they then, in turn, should be held accountable for results.

Budde’s proposal received very little attention until it was republished in 1988 and caught the eye of Al Shanker, then-President of the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker, who was equal parts political hardballer and a thoughtful policy wonk, cited Budde’s idea favorably in a column that he penned as part of a regular series in the *New York Times*. Shanker’s column brought the charter discussion out of the confines of academia and took it national. Shanker saw charters as a vehicle for advancing a proposal that AFT members had recently approved to allow teachers to set up their own autonomous schools:

“The main idea that gripped the [AFT] delegates was the prospect of having hundreds, even thousands of school teams actively looking for a better way – different methods, technologies, organizations of time and human resources – to produce more learning for more students.”²

No one can know for certain what Shanker would think about the charter sector today, but it’s important to review some of the reasons he liked the original concept in part because some observers, especially those on the left, cite Shanker as the go-to source for defining the “original idea” behind charter schools. In a piece entitled “Restoring Shanker’s Vision for Charter Schools” Richard Kahlenberg and Halley Potter wrote:

“Originally conceived as laboratories with which traditional public schools would collaborate, charters became a force for competition, with some suggesting they replace regular district schools.”³

“If schools are to improve, they’ll have to support a constant inquiry and search for new and better ways to reach youngsters. If they don’t, the public will look for something other than the public schools to educate our children.”

— Al Shanker

Current AFT President Randi Weingarten also subscribes to that version of history:

“Unfortunately, some charter proponents have shifted the intent of charters from incubating ideas and sharing successes to competing for market share and taxpayer dollars.”⁴

What Shanker actually said, however, is quite the opposite. Shanker liked the idea of choice and competition:

“A charter implied both the ideas of a franchise and competition. A school system might charter schools distinctly different in their approach to teaching. Parents could choose which charter school to send their children to, thus fostering competition.”⁵

Shanker also saw charters as having a role far beyond being “laboratories” and, in fact, argued against setting artificial limits on their growth:

“What we really need – at the very least – are statewide curriculum frameworks and statewide assessments systems. Then, students and teachers in every school will know what kids are responsible for learning and whether or not they have learned it. And we should add statewide incentive systems that link getting into a college or getting a job with achievement in high school. Once those things are in place, why limit charter schools to five or ten or a hundred? Why shouldn’t every school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?”⁶

Far from fearing seeing charter schools as means of privatizing education, Shanker actually advocated for charters in part as a way to protect the public school system:

“Millions of students fail because they are given education ‘cures’ that should have been labeled failures long ago. If schools are to improve, they’ll have to support a constant inquiry and search for new and better ways to reach youngsters. If they don’t, the public will look for something other than the public schools to educate our children.”⁷

**The “original idea”
included:**

Public school choice;

Competition;

Autonomy;

**Statewide
accountability;**

**No artificial caps
on growth.**

We wouldn't go as far as Shanker did on all schools being charters, nor are we going to cover all his writings on the subject, some of which were critical of particular charter school approaches and practices. But that's not the point.

Rather, it's that his writings are quite contrary to the revisionist history proffered by Weingarten, Kahlenberg, and others regarding the “original idea” of public charters. The original idea, as put forth by a union leader who was one of the most prominent progressive voices on education in the past 50 years, among others, sprung both from very thoughtful policy and political motivations and included: 1) giving parents a wider array of choices in the public system; 2) having schools compete for students; 3) charter autonomy, coupled with statewide accountability; and, 4) no artificial caps on growth: charters exist not just for the purpose of testing new ideas but as providing conditions for school success.

GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE

In 1968, Kenneth Clark (pictured below left), a prominent black psychologist, called for what he referred to as “Alternative Public School Systems.”⁸ Clark and his wife Mamie were well known for their studies on racial identity that were cited repeatedly in favor of school desegregation cases in the 1950’s and 60’s, including *Brown v. Board of Education*.

“Alternatives – realistic, aggressive, and viable competitors – to the present school system must be found. The development of such competitive public school systems will be attacked by the defenders of the present system as attempts to weaken the present system and thereby weaken, if not destroy, public education. This type of expected self-serving argument can be briefly and accurately disposed of by asserting and demonstrating that truly effective competition strengthens rather than weakens that which deserves to survive.”



“A system which says that the public has no competence to assert that a patently defective product is a sign of the system’s inefficiency and demand radical reforms is not in the public interest.”

“I would argue further that public education need not be identified with the present system of organization of public schools. Public education can be more broadly and pragmatically defined in terms of that form of organization and functioning of an education system which is in the public interest. Given this definition, it becomes clear that an inefficient system of public systems is not in the public interest... a system which says that the public has no competence to assert that a patently defective product is a sign of the system’s inefficiency and demand radical reforms is not in the public interest.”

Models that Clark suggested included: “Regional schools financed by federal and state governments, some of them boarding schools; schools attached to universities or colleges as part of their education laboratories but not restricted in enrollment to children of faculty and students; demonstration schools financed by industrial, business and commercial firms for children of their employees and others; schools sponsored by labor unions for members’ children and others; and Army-sponsored schools for dropouts and draft rejects.”⁹

PART 2

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Democratic and Progressive Leaders for Public Charter Schools

Democratic support for public charter schools stems in part from key principles and policies underlying the charter school model. By law:

- Charter schools must have a fair and open admissions process, conducting outreach and recruitment to all segments of the communities they serve;
- Charter schools are free; they cannot charge tuition;
- Charter schools cannot pick and choose which students to admit unlike, for example, public magnet schools or public “exam schools” that can set admissions criteria based on test scores or other student characteristics;
- Charter schools must enroll students by lottery when the number of applicants exceeds available slots;
- Charter schools are nonsectarian and nondiscriminatory in employment practices and cannot charge tuition;
- The majority of states require performance-based contracts that define the academic and operational performance expectations by which the school will be judged;
- Public oversight also occurs through annual financial audits, explicitly called for in all but four states, that typically use the same financial audit procedures and requirements as districts;¹⁰
- Authorizers vary by state, but can be a local school board (39%), a state school board (28%), a statewide charter school board or commission (15%), a non-profit agency (10%), a college or university (7%), or a mayor’s office (1%);^{11, 12}
- Students at charter schools take the same state assessments, and charter schools are graded on the same report cards as all other public schools in the state.

Both centrist and progressive Democrats were, and are, integrally involved in shaping charter school policy. To be clear, charters enjoy bipartisan support that is surely one of the reasons for their success and longevity. However, our purpose here is to primarily focus on centrist and progressive Democrats. Here are some other key Democratic public charter school supporters from their inception to the present day.



PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

Bill Clinton was one of the earliest proponents of charter schools from either party. He spearheaded passage of the first federal charter school law in 1994 when there were charter school laws in just two states (Minnesota and California). The federal Charter School Program is a major source of funding for charter start-ups and for replicating and expanding high-performers.

“The idea behind charter schools is that not all kids are the same—they have different needs; they have different environments—but there is a certain common level of education that all kids need, no matter how different they are, and that it would be a good thing to allow schools to be developed which had a clear mission, which could reach out to kids who wanted to be a part of that mission, who could achieve educational excellence for children who otherwise might be left behind...”¹³

— Bill Clinton, May 2000.

“I wish there were 10 times or 100 times as many KIPP schools because you have proved that you have solved the No. 1 challenge in American education. As a laboratory of democracy, you have proved that you can replicate excellence. Innovation is not just coming up with a good idea. Innovation is rapidly replicating excellence....There are still people in the public school establishment who fight charter schools, which I think is a mistake.”¹⁴

— Bill Clinton, August 2012.

“The charter school movement is one of the [Clinton] Administration’s most important legacies. ... The dramatic expansion of charter schools from one State and one school to 36 States and 1,700 schools is a direct result of the Administration’s vigorous efforts.”¹⁵

— Joe Nathan, Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Social Change, Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota



PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

Barack Obama has led a new generation of Democrats to see promise in the charter school model.

“Charter schools play an important role in our country’s education system. Supporting some of our Nation’s underserved communities, they can ignite imagination and nourish the minds of America’s young people while finding new ways of educating them and equipping them with the knowledge they need to succeed.”

Presidential Proclamation, National Charter Schools Week, April 2016.¹⁶

Real Investments. Obama increased funding for the federal Charter Schools Program more in his first year in office than George W. Bush did over his entire eight years as President.

Focusing On What Works. As part of the largest increase in federal education funding in history, via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, Obama launched the first-ever federal program to replicate and expand high-performing public charter schools. Almost 300,000 students will be able to secure seats in high-performing charter schools under grants awarded between 2010 and present (see infographic at right).

Changing State Policy. Obama used Race to the Top Funding as an incentive for states to lift charter school caps. More than a dozen states – Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Utah – altered laws or policies to create or expand the number of public charter schools.



Barack Obama was the first president in history to use federal investments to grow **high-quality, non-profit** public school options for low-income students.

Public Charter School Program Grants for the Replication and Expansion of high-quality charter schools

400

new schools created thus far



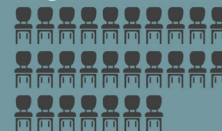
72,000

additional seats created for students thus far



278,000

total new seats to be created as a result of grant awards



32

Charter Management Organizations expanding



STUDENTS IN THE NATION'S HIGH-PERFORMING CMO'S



75% are from low-income families



90% are students of color

“Quality public charter schools can provide parents with real choices for their children. In fact, many of the country’s best public charter schools are opening doors to opportunity for disadvantaged students. That’s why I have long been a strong supporter of public charter schools and an unflinching advocate for traditional public schools.”

“The Washington Post asked Clinton, Trump for their education vision. Here’s what they said,” Valerie Strauss, Answer Sheet, Washington Post, October 13, 2016



(Above) Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visits the Manhattan Charter School in September, 2009¹⁸

2016 PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE HILLARY CLINTON

Hillary Clinton was a key player in her husband’s efforts to expand school choice and increase access to public charter schools throughout the 1990’s — empowering families to make decisions that fit their unique needs and fostering a culture of innovation and accountability within our educational system.

1999: “I also hope that you will continue to stand behind the charter school/public school movement, because I believe that parents do deserve greater choice within the public school system to meet the unique needs of their children... When we look back on the 1990s, we will see that the charter school movement will be one of the ways we will have turned around the entire public school system.”
NEA National Convention, 1999.¹⁷

2015: “[The Every Student Succeeds Act] authorizes critical resources to support teacher development, increase access to early childhood education, and expand high-quality public charter schools.”¹⁹

xviii

2016: “When schools get it right, whether they’re traditional public schools or public charter schools, let’s figure out what’s working [audience boos]... no, let’s figure out what’s working and share it with schools across America. We can do that. We’ve got no time for all of these education wars.” NEA National Convention, 2016.²⁰



The late Senator and liberal icon Paul Wellstone: “I say this as someone who was a teacher for 20 years before becoming a senator. I think that schools within schools, magnet schools, alternative schools, and charter schools within the public system all contribute toward more creativity and more exciting education.”²¹



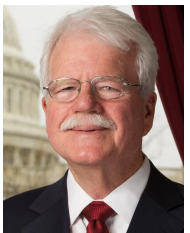
Howard Dean, former Governor of Vermont, Democratic National Committee Chairman, and Presidential candidate: “I do believe charter schools are the future, especially for the inner cities...Charter schools in this country are being started by young kids who probably voted for Barack Obama...The charter school

movement is transforming inner-city education. It is getting kids through high school with diplomas that never would have had a chance even five years ago.”^{22, 23}



Governor Andrew Cuomo: “New York must be the leader when it comes to education reform. This starts with increasing the charter school cap from 200 to 460.” Cuomo is “a strong supporter of charter schools”²⁴ (2010 campaign website). When the cap on charter schools was lifted by the

New York legislature, Cuomo’s statement was “Amen.”²⁵ “We are here today to tell you that we stand with you. You are not alone. We will save charter schools.”²⁶



George Miller, long-serving liberal lion and former Chair of the House Education and Labor Committee: “[Charter schools] are proving that we can address disparities and close the achievement gap when we apply the right reforms and resources. They are proving that low-income and minority children, the

exact populations that too often get left behind, are in fact able to succeed.”²⁷



Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives. In 2014, Congressional Democrats voted almost 5:1 in favor of a bill to reauthorize the federal charter school program. **The final tally: Democrats 158-34,** including all Democratic leadership:

Nancy Pelosi (Democratic Leader); Jim Clyburn (D-SC, Assistant Democratic Leader), Steny Hoyer (D-MD, Democratic Whip), Xavier Becerra (D-CA, Chairman of the House Democratic Caucus), George Miller (D-CA, Ranking Democrat, House Education Committee).²⁸



Ember Reichgott Junge, as a Democratic state senator in 1991, authored Minnesota’s first-in-the-nation charter school law. Her top allies, state representatives Ken Nelson and Becky Kelso, were also both Democrats. In 2013, she authored the book “Zero Chance of Passage,” a firsthand

account of her landmark legislative achievement lauded by, among others, Bill Clinton.²⁹



Martin Luther King III said his father would have supported “anything that lifted up and created opportunities for ‘the least of thee’” and expressed his own support for charter schools: “We certainly have public schools that some will go to and do well, but we also have other options. Some people

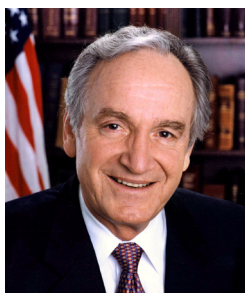
need a targeted kind of learning. They need a different approach, like charter schools. ... The reality is, if there are no options, if there is just one particular standard, then someone is going to fall through the cracks, as we’ve seen.”³⁰



Marian Wright Edelman, President and Founder of the Children’s Defense Fund: “I’m deeply grateful to people involved in the charter school movement. Charters are an important part of the answer to what American children, especially low income and children of color need.”³¹

OTHER DEMOCRATIC AND PROGRESSIVE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL SUPPORTERS

Every year, the National Alliance of Public Schools honors champions “at the federal, state and local level who enrich the lives of students by leading the most impactful charter school initiatives and supporting charters as a high-quality public school option.” Winners include:



U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-California)

Washington State Representative Larry Springer (D-Kirkland)

U.S. Senator Michael Bennet (D-Colorado)

Mayor Michael Hancock (D-Denver)

Hawaii State Senator Jill Takuda (D-24th District)

Mayor Kevin Johnson (D-Sacramento)

U.S. Senator Richard J. Durbin (D-Illinois)

Mayor Karl Dean (D-Nashville)

U.S. Senator Tom Harkin (D-Iowa)

North Carolina Senator Malcolm Graham (D-Charlotte)

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (D-Los Angeles)

U.S. Representative Jared Polis (D-Colorado-2nd District)

Mayor Francis G. Slay (D-St. Louis)

Mayor Daniel McKee (D-Cumberland, RI)

Governor Bill Richardson (D-New Mexico)

U.S. Senator Thomas R. Carper (D-Delaware)

Colorado State Senator Peter Groff (D-Denver-District 33)

U.S. Senator Mary Landrieu (D-Louisiana)

Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, former chief of staff to
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.



PART 3

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

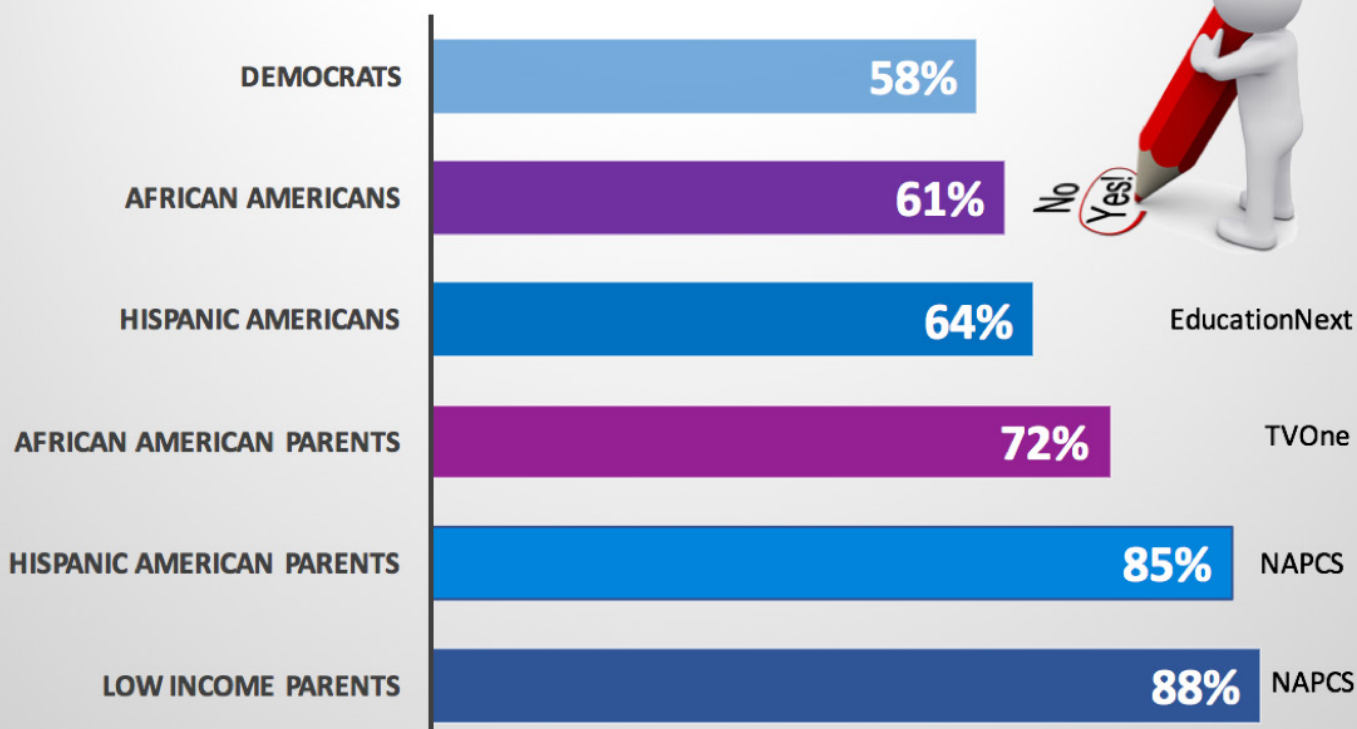
Support for Charter Schools Among Democratic Voters

Democrats. The most recent polling, by Education Next (2016), shows that a solid majority of Democrats – about 6 in 10 - supports public charter schools and that support has been relatively stable over the past several years.³²

Black and Hispanic Voters. Levels of support are even higher among key Democratic constituencies. Education Next (August, 2016)³³ found that 61% of African Americans, and 64% of Hispanic Americans support public charter schools.

Black, Hispanic, and Low-Income Parents. Support is even higher among Black, Hispanic, and low-income parents. A poll by TV One/RolandSMartin.com (September 2015)³⁴ found that 72% of African American parents support charter schools. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools has found that 85% of Hispanic parents (September, 2016)³⁵ and 88% of low-income parents (April, 2016)³⁶ favor having a charter school in their community.

Percent Supporting Charter Schools



PART 4

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Public charter school enrollment is highest in Democratic strongholds

Democrats, much more so than Republicans, represent districts having the highest percentages and numbers of students enrolled in public charter schools. We take a look here at the local and federal level.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ATTENDING CHARTERS — MAYORS

Democratic mayors preside over all 6 cities with districts that have 40% or more of students attending public charter schools.³⁶

Rank	School District	% Charter School Enrollment	City where District is located	Mayor of the City where District is located	Is Mayor a Democrat or leans- Democrat?
1	Orleans Parish School District	93%	New Orleans, Louisiana	Mitch Landrieu	✓
2	Detroit City School District	53%	Detroit, Michigan	Mike Duggan	✓
3	School District of the City of Flint	47%	Flint, Michigan	Karen Weaver	✓
4	District of Columbia Public Schools	44%	District of Columbia	Muriel Bowser	✓
5	Kansas City, Missouri School District	41%	Kansas City, Missouri	Sly James	✓ ³⁷
6	Gary Community School Corporation	40%	Gary, Indiana	Karen Freeman-Wilson	✓

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ATTENDING CHARTERS — MAYORS

Democratic mayors preside over 7 of the 8 cities with districts that have 30% to 39% of students attending public charter schools.

Rank	School District	% Charter School Enrollment	City where District is located	Mayor of the City where District is located	Is Mayor a Democrat or leans- Democrat?
7	The School District of Philadelphia	33%	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Jim Kenney	✓
8 (tie)	Hall County Schools	32%	Gainesville, Georgia	Lauren Poe	✓
	Victor Valley Union High School District	32%	Victorville, California	Gloria Garcia	No Affiliation
9 (tie)	Indianapolis Public Schools	31%	Indianapolis, Indiana	Joe Hogsett	✓
	Grand Rapids Public Schools	31%	Grand Rapids, Michigan	Rosalynn Bliss	✓ ³⁸
10 (tie)	District of Columbia Public Schools	30%	Dayton, Ohio	Nan Whaley	✓
	San Antonio Independent School District	30%	San Antonio, Texas	Ivy Taylor	✓ ³⁹
	Cleveland Municipal School District	30%	Cleveland, Ohio	Frank Jackson	✓

NUMBER OF STUDENTS ATTENDING CHARTERS – MAYORS

Democratic mayors preside over 9 of the top 10 cities with districts having the highest enrollment of students attending public charter schools.⁴⁰

Rank	School District	Charter Students	City where District is located	Mayor of the City where District is located	Is Mayor a Democrat or leans- Democrat?
1	Los Angeles Unified School District	151,310	Los Angeles, California	Eric Garcetti	✓
2	New York City Department of Education	84,310	New York City, New York	Bill de Blasio	✓
3	The School District of Philadelphia	64,090	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	Jim Kenney	✓
4	Chicago Public Schools	57,520	Chicago, Illinois	Rahm Emanuel	✓
5	Miami-Dade County Public Schools	55,590	Miami, Florida	Thomás Pedro Regalado	Republican
6	Detroit City School District	52,420	Detroit, Michigan	Mike Duggan	✓
7	Houston Independent School District	51,400	Houston, Texas	Sylvester Turner	✓
8	New Orleans Public School System	42,860	New Orleans, Louisiana	Mitch Landrieu	✓
9	Broward County Public Schools	41,550	Fort Lauderdale, Florida	Jack Seiler	✓
10	District of Columbia Public Schools	37,680	District of Columbia	Muriel Browser	✓

MEMBERS OF CONGRESS REPRESENTING LOCATIONS WITH THE LARGEST CHARTER STUDENT ENROLLMENT

DISTRICTS WITH THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Democrats make up 62.5% of those members of Congress representing all or part of the 14 school districts with the highest *percentage* of students enrolled in public charter schools.

District	Percent of Charter Students	Percent Democratic Members of Congress
New Orleans	93%	50%
Detroit	53%	100%
Flint	47%	100%
District of Columbia	44%	100%
Kansas City	41%	100%
Gary (Indiana)	40%	100%
Philadelphia	33%	100%
Hall County (Georgia)	32%	0%
Victor Valley (California)	32%	0%
Indianapolis	31%	50%
Grand Rapids	31%	0%
Dayton	30%	0%
San Antonio	30%	50%
Cleveland	30%	100%

Sources: MABLE/GeoCorr14, Missouri Census Data Center, mcdc.missouri.edu and govtrack.us

DISTRICTS WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Democrats make up 82% of those members of Congress representing all or part of the 10 school districts with the highest *number* of students enrolled in public charter schools.

District	Number of Charter Students	Percent Democratic Members of Congress
Los Angeles Unified	151,310	92%
New York City	84,310	92%
Philadelphia	64,090	100%
Chicago	57,520	100%
Miami-Dade	55,590	40%
Detroit	52,420	100%
Houston	51,400	50%
New Orleans	42,860	50%
Broward County, Florida	41,550	83%
District of Columbia	37,680	100%

Sources: MABLE/GeoCorr14, Missouri Census Data Center, mcdc.missouri.edu and govtrack.us

PART 5

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Public Charter Schools Serve the Democratic Goal of Equalizing Educational Opportunities

Democrats have historically been the party of equal opportunity and civil rights. So it's important to address whether or not public charter schools help students from historically disadvantaged groups, particularly students of color and those from low-income families.

WHAT ARE THE STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS?

“[The] broad claim that ‘most charter schools’ don’t accept or don’t keep the hardest-to-teach kids is not supported by the evidence.”

FactCheck.org, Annenberg Public Policy Center

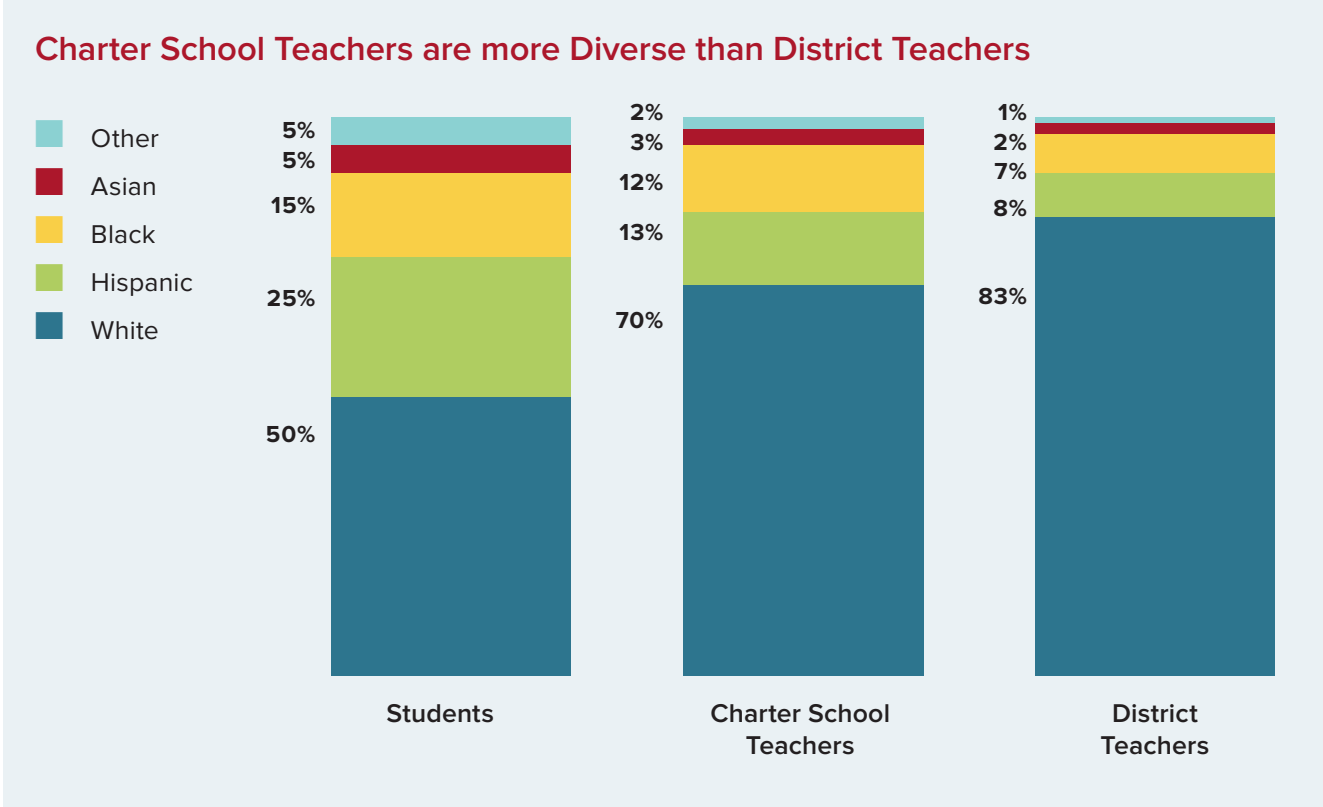
Some critics claim that charter schools “cream” the best students and fail to serve low-income and minority students, who tend to lag academically behind their more advantaged peers. Others claim the opposite: that charter schools are more segregated and have a higher concentration of minority students than neighboring traditional public schools do. The facts, however, show that both these claims are false.

Charter schools reflect the demographics of the geographic areas in which they're located. Fifty-seven percent of public charter schools are in cities, as opposed to just 25% of traditional public schools. Thirty-nine percent of charter schools have 75% of their students from low-income families, as opposed to just 24% of traditional schools. For charter schools, the percentage of students who are black or Hispanic is 27% and 30%, respectively; in traditional schools, 15% of students are black and 25% are Hispanic.⁴¹

57% of public charter schools are in cities, as opposed to 25% of traditional public schools.

Claims that charter schools are more segregated – i.e., have higher percentages of minority students – than traditional schools within the same communities have been thoroughly debunked.⁴² Claims that charter schools are less likely to enroll English Language Learners (ELLs) and students with disabilities are also misguided: 9.8% of charter students are ELLs as compared to 9.1% of students in traditional public schools. In charter schools, 9.9% of students have an identified disability compared to 11.7% in traditional schools, a 1.8 percentage point difference.⁴³ These are national averages, which means that there is of course some variation across specific states and school districts. Nonetheless, however, these national numbers clearly refute what has become conventional wisdom among charter critics.

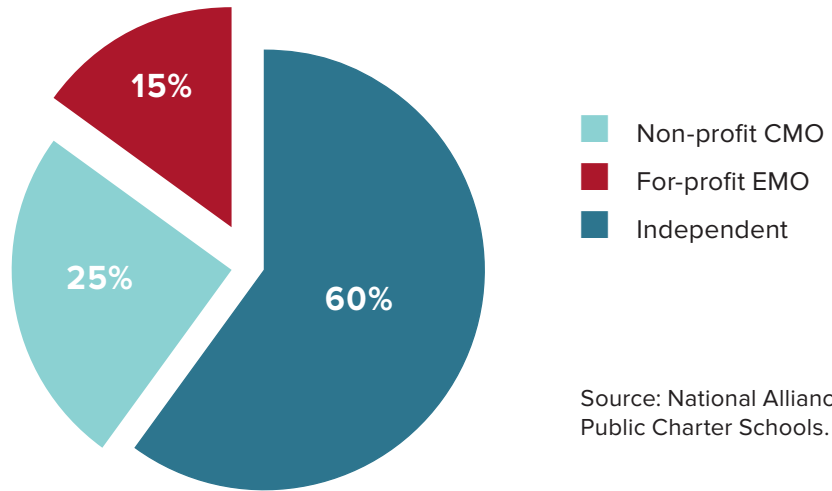
Looking across all the accusations made about charter school demographics — that they do not accept low-income and minority students, ELL’s, and students with disabilities; or, that they push them out — FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters based at the Annenberg Public Policy Center concluded: “we find that [the] broad claim that ‘most charter schools’ don’t accept or don’t keep the hardest-to-teach kids is not supported by the evidence.”⁴⁴



Source: National Center for Education Statistics⁴⁵

Readers who have heard that public charter schools are an effort to “privatize” education may also be interested to know that, just like Head Start programs, childcare centers, and other government-subsidized providers prized by progressives, charter schools are run by a mix of government agencies, non-profit organizations, and for-profit companies. But relatively few are for-profit. The vast majority of public charter schools – 85% – are run by non-profit organizations. Just 15% of charter schools contract with a for-profit management company.

CHARTER SCHOOLS BY MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE



DO CHARTER SCHOOLS HELP EQUALIZE EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY?

One often hears the claim that, “according to research,” public charter schools do no better a job of educating students than do traditional public schools. For example, in an April op-ed AFT President Randi Weingarten said: “the charter industry has a mixed record of student achievement...hardly a record that justifies the massive expansion. A well-regarded Stanford University study found that charter school students were doing only slightly better in reading than students in traditional public schools, but at the same time doing slightly worse in math.”⁴⁷

Weingarten is right about one thing. The Stanford study – known as CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes) is “well-regarded.” This is in part because CREDO compares demographically matched sets of students enrolled in charter schools with their peers who are enrolled in traditional schools. CREDO compares students in charter schools to students in traditional schools with the same gender, race/ethnicity, level of English proficiency, family income, and baseline test scores.

Weingarten is wrong about what CREDO says about how students in public charter schools are doing compared to their peers in traditional public schools. In a rebuttal, the CREDO study’s director Margaret Raymond stated:

If Weingarten is right in asserting that mixed results for charters is “hardly a record that justifies the massive expansion” of charters, then it stands to reason that where results are clearly beneficial, expansion *is* justified.

“First, the results she cites are the average one-year growth, blending brand new charter school enrollees with students with longer persistence. When the length of time a student attends a charter school is taken into account, the results are striking...For students with four or more years in charter schools, their gains equated to an additional 43 days of learning in reading and 50 additional days of learning in math in *each year*.”

“Second, the results showed strong improvement for the sector overall — the proportion of charter schools outperforming their local district schools rose and the share that underperformed shrank in both reading and math compared to performance four years earlier.”

“To be clear, CREDO along with others has repeatedly called out the low performing charter schools. Evidence shows that improvement of poorly performing schools is unlikely so they must be dealt with. We hold the same view about the thousands of district schools that fail to educate their students.”

This last point is key. In the introduction of this white paper, we stated: “Being a progressive charter school supporter does not mean that choice or school autonomy are ‘magic bullets’ for improving public education. It does not mean having to unqualifiedly defend the charter school sector in states or districts where public charter schools underperform or in cases where individual charter schools misuse public funds.” This is where the CREDO study is particularly instructive.

While the CREDO study found modest benefits for *all* charter students, as compared to their peers in traditional schools, in reading but not math, it *did* find marked benefits for disadvantaged students, Black students, students in poverty, and English language learners, all of whom gained significantly more days of learning each year in charters than did their peers in traditional public schools.

Low-income students in charter schools gained 14 additional days of learning in reading as compared to their low-income peers in traditional public schools. The advantage in math for low-income students in public charter schools is 22 additional days of learning as compared to their counterparts in traditional public schools; Within the black and Hispanic student groups, the analysis showed that **students with multiple challenges** – blacks and Hispanics in poverty or Hispanics who were English language learners – **gained a substantial learning advantage** in charter schools compared to similar students in traditional public schools in both reading and math.

If Weingarten is right in asserting that mixed results for charters is “hardly a record that justifies the massive expansion” of charters, then it stands to reason that where results are clearly beneficial, expansion *is* justified.

So, based on CREDO, expansion at the national level is justified:

- At the national level, for **Black students, students in poverty, and English language learners**;
- **In the 9 states** – Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Tennessee – **plus the District of Columbia** – where charter students did significantly *better* than their **matched peers** in traditional public schools in *both* reading and math;
- **In urban charter schools where students** gained, on average, 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days in reading compared to their district school peers as shown in a 2015 CREDO study;
- In the S.F. Bay Area, Boston, D.C., Memphis, New Orleans, New York City and Newark, where public charter schools students significantly outperform their traditional public school peers in math;
- In the S.F. Bay Area, Boston, Memphis, Nashville, and Newark where public charter school students significantly outperform their traditional public school peers in reading.

Where might we want to be cautious about charter expansion and more focused on better oversight and more rigorous authorizing?:

- In the 8 states where, according to CREDO (2013) charter students did significantly *worse* than their counterparts in traditional schools in both math and reading: Arizona, Arkansas, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Utah;
- In cities such as Fort Myers, Florida; Fort Worth, Texas; Las Vegas, Nevada; Mesa, Arizona; and West Palm Beach, Florida where, according to CREDO (2015), charter students had lower levels of academic growth in math and reading each year relative to students in traditional public schools; and,
- With regard to online charter schools, for which a 2015 CREDO study found that students in online charter schools lagged behind their peers in traditional schools equating to a student losing 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in math, based on a 180-day school year.

CHARTER SCHOOL PERFORMANCE INDEX

(with apologies to Harper's)

Additional days of learning nationally, on average, for low-income charter school students in reading as compared to students in traditional schools: 14

Additional days of learning, nationally, on average, for low-income charter school students in math as compared to students in traditional schools: 22

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Illinois in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 14

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Illinois in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 22

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Louisiana in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 50

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Louisiana in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 65

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Massachusetts in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 36

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Massachusetts in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 65

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Michigan in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 43

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Michigan in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 43

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Missouri in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 14

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Missouri in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 22

Additional days of learning for charter school students in New Jersey in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 43

Additional days of learning for charter school students in New Jersey in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 58

Additional days of learning for charter school students in New York in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 36

Additional days of learning for charter school students in New York in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 79

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Rhode Island in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 86

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Rhode Island in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 108

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Tennessee in reading, as compared to students in traditional schools: 86

Additional days of learning for charter school students in Tennessee in math, as compared to students in traditional schools: 72

What we see here is that autonomy and choice are not in and of themselves sufficient to boost student learning. However, when accountability and quality authorizing accompany charter school autonomy and parental choice, students – particularly low-income students, students of color, and English Language Learners – can achieve at much higher levels than in a traditional school setting. We are already seeing this in states like Arizona⁴⁸ and Texas⁴⁹ where, while charter schools still underperform as compared to traditional schools, new charter accountability and authorizing policies are showing early signs of improvement. As Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, has said⁵⁰:

“When choice is unleashed in distressed, high-poverty communities, provider freedom to open schools and parent choice are not enough to accomplish the goals of free and excellent public education for all. Someone must be responsible to create new options for the most disadvantaged, and schools must be called to account when they don’t live up to their promises. That doesn’t happen often enough in places like Detroit and Cleveland, where the many charter authorizers have little incentive to close schools.”

For anyone who cares about equalizing opportunities for students from historically disadvantaged groups, these should be the principles we adhere to in creating school options that put the educational interest of children and youth first and foremost in policymaking decisions. These should be an absolute given for Democrats and progressives. We have, as the current debate shows, a long way to go. But the history of the Democratic Party, progressive principles, and current trends in charter school performance should be our north star in pointing to where we need to go.

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