

# Charter Schools

## *What is a charter school?*

A charter school is “a publicly funded school that is typically governed by a group or organization under a contract or charter with the state.”<sup>1</sup> Each school forms a charter, which is essentially a performance contract detailing the school’s goals, programs, and methods of assessment. In exchange for meeting the set goals, the school is granted an exemption from many traditional public school regulations. Charters typically last for 3-5 years, and at the end of the contract period, the overseeing authority (usually a state or local school board) reviews the school’s performance and determines whether to renew the charter.<sup>2</sup> Although in some ways, charter schools operate similarly to private schools, they are still public schools because they are funded by taxpayer dollars (including both state and federal funds).

There are two types of charter schools:

- 1) **Brick and Mortar (“Traditional”):** These charter schools are built and maintained like traditional public schools. Since the first two charter schools opened in Minnesota in 1991,<sup>3</sup> the number has steadily grown to reach 5,000 in 2009.<sup>4</sup> Over 1.5 million students are now enrolled in such schools.<sup>5</sup> Since 1994, the U.S. Department of Education has provided grants to support states’ charter school efforts, starting with \$6 million in fiscal year 1995.<sup>6</sup> Since 1994, the U.S. Department of Education has provided grants to support states’ charter school efforts, starting with \$6 million in fiscal year 1995.<sup>7</sup>
- 2) **Virtual:** These are the online counterparts to traditional charter schools. Like brick-and-mortar schools, these programs vary from state to state, but they all provide courses online and access to computers and licensed teachers. (It should be noted that while virtual *charter* schools and virtual *public* schools often offer similar programs, they are distinct from one another.) As of 2008, 185 virtual charter schools existed in 25 states.<sup>8</sup>

## *Why are charter schools so popular?*

Proponents praise charter schools as bastions of school choice and freedom, and many people believe that traditional charter schools increase the quality of education due to their smaller size (average enrollment is 250), their use of innovative teaching practices, their independence from some public school curriculum regulations, and their increased parental involvement. Traditional charter schools are most popular among parents who want higher quality public education, those who live in at-risk communities, or those with children who have special needs.<sup>9</sup>

Virtual charter schools claim many of the same benefits of traditional charter schools, as well as heightening parental involvement. They also advertise flexibility for parents who want to conduct schooling at home and do not feel comfortable doing so without government curriculum, direction, and funding.

## *Is there a downside to charter schools?*

Despite the arguments of its proponents, the charter school movement is not a panacea for the ills of the public school system. Studies on whether charter schools heighten academic performance are inconclusive; however, critics point out that accurate comparisons between charter and traditional public schools are difficult to make.<sup>10</sup> Many virtual charters specifically contract with for-profit companies.<sup>11</sup> Some critics also point out that charter schools accept government and tax payer dollars without promising adequate accountability.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the above concerns, many homeschoolers have an even broader slate of worries. Virtual charter schools have been aggressive in targeting homeschoolers, sending multiple mailings and marketing materials to persuade them that this form of public education qualifies as “homeschooling.” In reality, virtual charter school administrators are competing with traditional public schools for the thousands of dollars per student in state funds that they receive if they bring more homeschoolers into the public school system.<sup>13</sup> Some new homeschoolers may lack the confidence to educate their children without professional supervision or government money, and the virtual charter school programs seem like a dream come true. However, children who are enrolled in virtual charter schools must follow all of the program’s policies and procedures, which include restrictions such as exclusion of religious educational materials as part of the formal curriculum. Parents who choose these programs must realize that in accepting virtual public schools into their homes, they are also accepting the bureaucracy and government supervision that is linked to accepting tax dollars.

## *What is HSLDA’s position on charter schools?*

HSLDA believes that a distinction between virtual charter schools and homeschooling is vital. While charter schools provide parents with another choice, we emphasize that they are still public schools in every sense of the word.

HSLDA also strongly cautions homeschoolers against enrolling in virtual charter schools. Many homeschoolers are seduced by attractive marketing and forget that virtual charter schools are actually controlled by the public school system. HSLDA does not represent students enrolled in full-time charter school programs.

HSLDA is also concerned that virtual charter schools will negatively impact the public and American lawmakers’ understanding of what it means to homeschool. For nearly three decades, we have worked to define homeschooling as privately led and parent-directed education within the home. If virtual charter schools are accepted as “homeschools,” it will be much more difficult for traditional homeschoolers to separate the two in the minds of lawmakers and to obtain legal protections for their “class” of homeschooling. We thus advocate strict adherence to a narrow definition of the word “homeschooling.”

In addition, virtual charter schools still suffer from multiple accountability challenges. Having that group of schools lumped with homeschools can lower the homeschool “average” academic scores and undo much of our effort to demonstrate homeschoolers’ academic excellence.

Finally, we caution homeschoolers that participation in virtual charter schools counts as participation in public schools, and invites increased government regulation over the inner workings of their homes.

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<sup>1</sup> IES National Center for Education Statistics. Fast Facts. Published by the US Department of Education. Accessed 2010 February 22. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>; Research Center. (2004 September 10). Charter Schools. Editorial Projects in Education. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/charter-schools/>.

<sup>2</sup> US Charter Schools. Overview. Accessed 2010 February 22. Retrieved from [http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs\\_docs/o/index.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/index.htm).

<sup>3</sup> National Educators' Association. Charter Schools. Accessed 2010 February 18. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/16332.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Charter Connection. (2009). What is a Charter School? Center for Education Reform. Retrieved from: [http://www.edreform.com/Issues/Charter\\_Connection/](http://www.edreform.com/Issues/Charter_Connection/).

<sup>5</sup> IES National Center for Education Statistics. Fast Facts. Published by the US Department of Education. Accessed 2010 February 22. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>; US Charter Schools. Overview; Center for Education Reform. (November 2009). National Charter School & Enrollment Statistics. [http://www.edreform.com/\\_upload/CER\\_charter\\_numbers.pdf](http://www.edreform.com/_upload/CER_charter_numbers.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> History. US Charter Schools Website. Accessed 2010 February 18. Retrieved from: [http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs\\_docs/o/history.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/history.htm).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Cavanaugh, Cathy. (July/August 2009). Effectiveness of Cyber Charter Schools: A Review of Research on Learnings. *TechTrends*, 53 (4), 28.

<sup>9</sup> History. US Charter Schools Website; Paulsen, Amanda. (24 May 2004). Virtual Schools, Real Concerns. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0504/p11s02-legn.html>; Charter Schools. Editorial Projects in Education.

<sup>10</sup> National Educators' Association. Charter Schools. Retrieved from: <http://www.nea.org/home/16332.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> (Dillon, Sam. (1 February 2008). Online Schooling Grows, Setting off a Debate. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/01/education/01virtual.html?\\_r=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/01/education/01virtual.html?_r=3).

<sup>12</sup> National Educators' Association. Charter Schools. Retrieved from: <http://www.nea.org/home/16332.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> Paulsen. Virtual Charter Schools, Real Concerns. *Christian Science Monitor*.