

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE NEXT FRONTIER OF URBAN EDUCATION



The concept of charter schools was born out of the realm of school reform. Charter schools were conceptualized to be self-governed and be provided with greater autonomy to operate free from school system constraints. In exchange for greater autonomy, charter schools are held more accountable for meeting student achievement goals because their charter can be revoked for non-performance. As a result of this granted autonomy, charter schools are more flexible to be innovative and creative in their educational philosophies. They are also expected to be laboratories and vanguards in improving and expanding opportunities within public education. Reformers suggest that a recent new study of New York City charter schools “should spur states to change policies that inhibit charter-school growth” and “cause traditional schools to emulate practices that produce these remarkable results.” This study found that charter school students outperformed peers that had applied for charter school spots but ended up in traditional schools. The *Post* called one finding “stunning”: charter schools shrank the achievement gap between urban minority and suburban white students. Advocates state the while some of the resistance to charter schools is the mistaken belief that public education is synonymous with the traditional public schools system, they believe that public education can be delivered differently — where individual, autonomous schools operate with the flexibility and creativity that comes with management decisions being made at the school level.” It is also believed that the self-governing nature of charter schools has created a newfound sense of ownership among the families and staff involved in charter schools.

This collection of opportunity and independence has translated into some of the most high-achieving public charter school across the country. The nation is experiencing a resurgence of support for charter schools on the reform front. This is evident in President Obama's endorsement of charter schools and his quiet upheaval in the nation's approach to education from preschool through college. An example of this can be seen in what resulted from his administration's insistence that states must remove restrictions on the number of charter schools in order to compete for \$4.35 billion in federal grants, resulting in seven states that have already changed such laws. More evidence that charter schools are on the reform front comes from the recent naming of John King, the former director of the charter school network Uncommon Schools, who was been tapped to become second-in-command at the state's education department, where he will head school reform efforts.

Besides actions on the national politic scene, many events are taking place in moves that endorse the popularity of charter schools as labs of innovation and success. SNBC showed a live event featuring Bill Cosby which discussed poverty in America, focusing on parenting, education and health issues. The piece highlighted several charter schools, including KIPP Austin Collegiate in Texas, the American Indian Public Charter School in Oakland, California, and the Harlem Village Academies in New York City. The *Boston Globe* reported that hundreds of charter school students, parents and teachers rallied at the state house in Boston in favor of legislation which would create at least 27,000 new charter school seats in Massachusetts. The first proposed law would double the percentage of a school district budget which can go to charter school spending. The second proposal would allow the state to take over 30 of the worst-performing schools, which might then be run by charter school operators. “It's the right thing to do - to give each and every child access to a quality education,” said Paul Reville, the state's secretary of education.

Charters are being lauded with the ability to break down the protective barriers of district bureaucracies (which reformers feel restrain innovation and change) and by holding improvement efforts together. The inspiring future of school reform lies in less bureaucracy and more democracy; in collaboration more than competition; in innovation and inspiration, more than data-driven intervention; in the fear factor giving way to the peer factor as the driver of reform. Because charter schools are laboratories of innovation and provide smaller more personalized learning environments parents feel that they provide greater choices to families seeking alternatives to what public education offers.