

The Accountability of Charter Schools

Supporters and critics weigh in on charter school standards

By Terri Akman

For 20 years, Philadelphia charter schools have offered families an alternative to a traditional public school education. Today, almost 300 charter schools educate about 200,000 students in PA, NJ and DE. Independently operated schools funded with public money, charters often specialize in specific areas of study, from arts to global issues and STEM to maritime studies. They typically boast smaller class sizes and more relaxed learning styles.

But some lawmakers, educators and parents argue that charter schools aren't held to the same standards as traditional public schools. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform studied charter school accountability in 2012-13 and created a list of concerns. A lack of representative governance, transparency and adequate oversight, potential conflicts of interest and instances of fraud and other problems are some of the issues charters face.

Accountability

Philadelphia City Councilwoman Helen Gym is passionate about creating a level playing field in education for all students.

"Pennsylvania's charter law exempts or lowers the standards for charter schools from a host of regulations and responsibilities that every other public school must follow," she says. "Because charter schools are funded by the district — and our district is severely underfunded based on need — this means that charter schools end up cannibalizing district schools for limited funds and resources. Charters are also severely underfunded and many rely on outside support to stay afloat."

Families may find it difficult to compare one charter school to the next or to traditional schools, Gym notes, because of a lack of standardization and no mandate to reveal the same level of information as traditional public schools.

"And charters tend to serve selective populations," she says. "Overall, they are less diverse and have fewer students with particular needs: English learners, students living in deep poverty and students with severe disabilities. So, if you just compare two schools' test scores or attendance or graduation rates without taking into account the differences in the student population due to a school's admission and expulsion practices, you are not looking at equal factors."

Strict standards

Charter school advocates insist current laws and regulations are sufficient. Charter schools unable to demonstrate strong academic performance, and those that do not meet the rigorous accountability measures of the state, are put on probation and/or closed, says David Saenz Jr., press secretary for the NJ Department of Education. "Since 2010, the Department has closed 20 of the lowest-performing charter schools for poor academic performance or organizational and fiscal issues," he says.

All charter schools are required to teach the same minimum academic standards and have the same educational requirements — even those that offer a specialized curriculum. School Performance Reports provide a great deal of information and data regarding factors including proficiency rates on statewide assessments and chronic absenteeism rates.

"By reviewing the reports, parents can see how well a school is performing against other schools that are educating similar students, against district and state-wide outcomes, and against state targets," says Saenz.

Measuring a school's success

Whatever school you are considering, it's important to research all you can about the school, Gym advises. "Review the data on the

school district's website, check out the school itself, observe the student-teacher interactions in the classroom, talk to the staff and parents and get a real feel for what kind of environment the school would be for your child and other children," Gym says. "For parents of children with special needs, it's particularly important that you pay close attention to a charter school's services and its disciplinary practices."

For Kellie Cruz, finding the best education for sons Gabriel, 9, and Jonathan, 7, included research into local schools, both public and charter. She ultimately chose charter school Las Americas Aspira Academy in New Jersey for its bilingual education. Now that her boys are in 4th and 2nd grades, she's confident she made the right decision. In fact, she was so impressed that this school year she started working at the academy.

"Charters offer an opportunity for success with different types of learning."

Andrew Phillips, Director of Design Education, Charter High School for Architecture + Design in Philadelphia

On the difference between charter and public schools ...

"A charter school generally has more flexibility to innovate and to use alternative methods which, in many cases, provide needed opportunities for disadvantaged school districts. ... They also provide the ability for school leaders to create niche schools focused on such interdisciplinary frameworks as STEM or STEAM."

*Max B. Tribble, Senior Vice President and Chief Communications Officer with CSMI Education Management
Chester, PA*



On accountability ...

“Public cyber charter schools like Agora are just as accountable to students, parents and taxpayers as traditional public schools, and in some ways more so. If we fail to do our job, parents and students will simply leave for other options.”

Michael Conti, CEO of Agora Cyber Charter School

Cruz believes it’s her responsibility to keep her children’s school and teachers accountable. “When the report card comes home, if I see something showing my son is struggling, I talk with the teacher to see how I can get him where he needs to be,” she says, pointing out that she would do that in a traditional public school situation as well. “Looking at the management of this school, they’re not happy with the status quo, they want to be above the standards and they hold their teachers accountable.” mk

Terri Akman is a MetroKids contributing writer.

Charter School Resources

PENNSYLVANIA
Pennsylvania Department of Education
Education.pa.gov/K-12/Charter Schools

Keystone Alliance for Public Charters • Keystonecharters.org

Great Philly Schools • Greatphillyschools.org/schools

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