



THE ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT • 2009

Charter Schools

An Overview

As our nation endures the challenges of an economic crisis and struggles to remain competitive, the cries for accountability across all public sectors are deafening. We are at a crossroads in the American experience where we can either tackle the priorities that will most directly affect our future or simply give in to the status quo and let history repeat itself. There is no greater investment in rebuilding our nation than fixing our public schools. To do so, lawmakers must boldly embrace education reform. Today.

Lawmakers should look no further than the 4,600 charter schools serving 1.4 million students to see these five pillars of reform at work. Charter schools are innovative *public* schools designed by educators, parents or civic leaders open and attended by *choice*, free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools...and succeeding.

Performance-based accountability is the hallmark of charter schools. Unlike conventional public schools that remain open year after year despite their inability to manage a school or raise student achievement, charter schools close if they fail to perform according to their charter. And while opponents claim that charter schools are not being held accountable or that only “responsible” charters should remain open, the data on closed charter schools across the states proves that the performance-based accountability inherent in the charter school concept is working—especially in states with strong and clear charter laws.

This report is the first time the Center for Education Reform has provided a state-by-state analysis of closed charter schools. Previous reports provided only a national overview of the data. Through this in-depth look at each state’s closed charter schools it is evident that strong state laws ensure accountability. We found that those states with multiple and independent authorizers provided stronger, more objective oversight to ensure the successful charter schools remained open and those that failed to perform were closed. The research shows that accountability is lost in states with weak charter laws and poor processes to vet schools and collect student assessment data.

The state-by-state pages within the report offer a clear picture of the states whose charter schools are making the grade and those where there is room for improvement. Knowing where charter schools are achieving and the reasons why 12 percent of the nation’s charter schools have closed is important to understanding what makes a school successful. Success starts with creating strong policy environments in states that provide educators with the flexibility to innovate while holding them accountable for student results.



GEORGIA

Success in serving disadvantaged and minority students

Though Georgia charter schools educate students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, they have made great gains. In the 2007–08 school year, 75.9 percent of charter schools made AYP compared with 68.8 percent of public schools statewide, though both sectors experienced a slight decline due to more rigorous testing. Charters continue to display higher levels of achievement, however.²¹ According to state test data, students in the Peach State’s public charter schools outperformed their peers in conventional public schools in grades three through eight on the math and reading tests. In a measure of math and reading proficiency, 61 percent of charter schools outperformed the comparable district average, while 64 percent of charter schools actually outperformed the surrounding two conventional public schools from which they drew their students.²² Charters also boasted a graduation rate of 89.9 percent in 2007 while their conventional public school counterparts only graduated 72.3 percent of students.

Filling a huge niche for students, 56 percent of Georgia charter school students qualify for the federal free or reduced price lunch program, whereas only 50 percent of those in conventional public schools are eligible. Minorities make up 61 percent of charter school students in Georgia.

Since Georgia’s charter school law passed in 1993, only five schools have closed. None of these closures were a result of poor academic performance. Early on in Georgia’s charter school history, many local school districts chose to convert their schools to charters. Eighteen of these conversions ended up becoming conventional public schools again between 1998 and early 2000. Some schools struggled with hostile districts. For example, the Achieve Academy was forced to close its doors in 2007 when Atlanta Public Schools failed to adequately fund the school, providing approximately half of what the law intended. Such inequities may be resolved when the new Georgia Charter Schools Commission is fully operational.

Fast Facts

- ☺ There are 83 public charter schools in Georgia serving close to 41,000 students.
- ☺ Seventeen new schools opened this year, for the largest increase in charter schools since the Georgia law was passed in 1993.
- ☺ Currently the state’s law is graded a “B” and ranked 18th strongest in the country.

21. “Georgia’s Charter Schools Continue to Lead the Way in Achieving AYP,” Georgia Charter Schools Association, July 30, 2008.

22. “Charter Schools: 2006–2007 Annual Report,” Georgia Department of Education, www.doe.k12.ga.us/pea_charter.aspx.