



# Why Charter Schools?

*Because competition makes schools better*

Charter schools, it seems, are in the news every day. President Obama says he'd like to create thousands more across the U.S. Every year, more of them open, and more than 1.4 million students in the U.S. now attend a charter school. Yet for all the chatter about charters, many still know very little about what charter schools actually are.

How do charter schools work? And why do parents choose to send their children to these schools?

Put simply, charter schools are public schools, funded with public dollars, that compete with local school districts for students. Charter schools give parents options about where to send their child to school, no matter how much money they make or how pricey (or not) their neighborhood is.

In order to better understand this concept, let's look at another major family decision: buying a car. Let's say you know what car you want. The dealer a few blocks from your house offers a sub-par warranty and a high sticker price. The financing terms are onerous, and the car drives poorly. In this case, you'll probably go to the next dealer, because that's how competition works. Car dealers compete for your business by providing better service and offering higher value to attract you as a client.

Now imagine if you had to buy your car from the local dealer, no matter how poor a deal they offer you. This is essentially the way our education system has been run for decades. If you don't like the school in your neighbor-

hood, you basically have two options. Pay for private school, or move to a different school district. If you can't afford either of these options, well, tough.

In the 1990s, with the passage of the nation's first charter school laws, this monopoly system began to change. Charter schools have no students assigned to them; they must compete for every student they get. If the school doesn't perform well, parents can stop sending their kids there and the school will close. It really is that simple.

With 4,600 charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia, and 350,000 students on waiting lists for these schools nationwide, it is clear that many are eager for this type of competition. In Pennsylvania, 40,000 students are enrolled in public charter schools, with an additional 26,000 on waiting lists. In less than a dozen years, 12 charter schools have opened in Allegheny County, with combined enrollments of 3,500 students. More than 60 percent of students enrolled in charter schools in the U.S. are non-white, and almost half are economically disadvantaged. Parents of all backgrounds are finally getting the opportunity to send their children to schools of their choosing, schools where their children can flourish.

**So, why charter schools?** Because competition makes everyone try harder. And when schools compete, parents and students win.

*This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.*



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