Autonomy & Achievement
How public charter schools can help close the achievement gap
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| THE ISSUE |

Charter schools are independent public schools of choice allowed the freedom to be more innovative, while being held accountable for improved student achievement. The vast majority of gold-standard research studies on charter student achievement published since 2010, including three national studies and 10 regional studies, show positive results for students who attend public charter schools. In its 2013 national study, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University found that public charter school students in 25 states along with New York City and the District of Columbia are outperforming their traditional public school peers in reading while making significant gains in math. For example, the breakout for low-income students—regardless of race—showed that charter students gained 14 days of additional learning in reading and 22 days of learning in math. The gains in learning days are a significant step toward closing the achievement gap—especially when students from disadvantaged backgrounds are showing the greatest positive impact from attending a public charter school.

How can we best leverage these positive research findings? A foundational idea behind charter schools is that they will serve as the research & development branch of public education—testing new strategies and sharing what works with the traditional school system. While there’s no “secret sauce” to charter schools’ success, the following steps can raise the quality of charter schools, and ultimately all public schools.

| POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS |

Charter schools are at their best when given the autonomy to innovate, while being held to a high standard of academic and operational performance. To ensure this environment, we should:

- **Work within quality frameworks.** Charter school authorizers hold the key to opening and renewing high quality charter schools and closing those that are not performing well. The National Association of Charter School Authorizers’ “principles and standards for high quality authorizing” offers a comprehensive framework.

- **Create equitable funding.** A study by Ball State University found that, on average, charter schools receive one-third less in funding per student than other public schools. Considering many charter schools serve only disadvantaged children, this funding inequity is unacceptable.

- **Remove artificial barriers to growth and autonomy.** Many states have barriers to charter school growth in their laws. Massachusetts, for example, caps charter school growth. A handful of other states, like Virginia, mandate that charter schools remain part of district collective bargaining agreements, which create restrictive personnel policies that can limit a charter school’s ability to innovate.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are showing the greatest positive impact from attending a public charter school.

| WHAT YOU CAN DO |

- **Pass legislation to improve your state’s charter law and ensure proper implementation.** NAPCS’s annual model law rankings provide analysis to compare state charter school laws and spotlight areas of legislative strength and weakness. Once enacted, keeping a watchful eye on implementation is the key to the successful growth of charters in your state.

- **Encourage the replication of high quality public charter schools.** Federal and state laws should reward and help scale charter school models that are effectively closing the achievement gap.

- **Encourage collaboration.** In order for charter schools to live up to their R&D potential, we must encourage sharing of best practices with the traditional school system to benefit all public school students. Inviting public officials to visit charter schools is a first step in creating this collaborative environment.

The author, Nina Rees, is President & CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, the leading national nonprofit organization committed to advancing the charter school movement.