

How to Choose a Charter School

Get to know the differences, as well as a child's needs, then shop around to find the best fit.

By *Jessica Rettig*

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Parents seeking options when it comes to educating children without the cost of private school will find good news in the charter school movement. And with the Obama administration's commitment of \$4.35 billion to the Race to the Top program, which will reward states for embracing school reform, they can expect even more charters and choices.

Charter schools, publicly funded but independently operated, are a large part of the government's plan for education reform. These schools cost nothing for parents and have open enrollment, meaning no child can be denied entry as long as space is available. Also, they are often more autonomous, tend to be smaller than mainstream schools, and may have a particular focus, such as business or science. They are distinct from conventional public schools, but that doesn't necessarily mean they will be better or worse for your children. "Putting the name 'charter' on the front of a school doesn't actually, in the end, tell you very much about it," says Chester E. Finn, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education think tank. "It's really hard to generalize across 4,000—almost 5,000 now—charter schools."

[\[Interactive map of charter schools' expansion in the United States.\]](#)

When comparing the academic achievement of charter schools with that of mainstream public schools, research can get messy, says Finn. Variables like socioeconomic status, neighborhood, or children's special needs can skew results, and test scores in a given year don't always provide the best indicator of a child's learning. Still, Finn says, "the better the study—that is, the more sophisticated the methodology—the better charter schools end up looking."

Charters function outside the auspices of state school boards and are held accountable instead by self-written charters, which must be approved by a state authority.

Proponents say this autonomy lets charters avoid the bureaucracy of a typical school system and try new educational methods, like longer school days or years, and new teaching models.

Moms and dads are encouraged—and often required—to volunteer at school events, work in the office, or help in classrooms. Many schools offer weekend options for busy working parents. "It's definitely a community builder," says Jennifer Fish, mother of two children at [Pacific Collegiate Charter School](#) in Santa Cruz, Calif. "You expect to see parents there all the time."

Charters' typically smaller size can be beneficial for students who need more attention. But small schools can lack the facilities or extracurricular resources that a conventional public school has. If your child wants to play a large team sport like football or be in an orchestra, a mainstream school might be a better fit.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to choosing among charters. "Parents should always shop," says Jeanne Allen, president of the nonprofit Center for Education Reform.

A few key steps can make the shopping a bit easier.

Identify Your Child's Needs. Josephine Robinson of the District of Columbia chose a different school for each of her kids. Victoria, 18, attended a private Christian school for a year and a half before transferring to the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, a charter. The poet-singer-songwriter found Ellington spoke better to her interests and abilities. She graduated in May.

Son Jordan, 16, tested extremely well in every subject, Robinson says, but was a lazy student and "didn't get the time and attention that is afforded to kids in smaller settings." She says that his performance has improved dramatically at Washington Mathematics Science Technology, a charter.

Son Ezekiel, 9, attends Watkins Elementary, a public school. Robinson says she's likely to consider a charter for him later.

With children of kindergarten or preschool age, it's hard to pinpoint how they learn or in which environment they would thrive. Some parents start their children in a traditional public school and monitor their development.

For middle schoolers and high schoolers, identifying children's needs might be an easier task because parents have a sense of their interests and priorities. Do they like history or math and science? Are they athletes? Artists? "What you need to figure out is, if you had the choice to craft an educational program all by yourself, what would it be?" says Tom Nida, president of D.C. Public Charter Schools.

Narrow the Options. The Center for Education Reform compiles an [accountability report](#) on charter schools in the 39 states that have them, plus D.C. States are graded on such overall factors as the number of charter schools allowed, whether these schools receive as much funding as traditional schools, the number of charter authorities, and the level of school autonomy.

The Center for Education Reform's site has a helpful [database by state](#). You can also call the local school district or visit its website to find a list of charter schools. Start researching options closest to home and work your way out, because charters generally require that a child live within the same district. The mission statement on the school's website can offer parents a basic understanding of a school's principles and goals for a child's education, says Nelson Smith of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Other parents can be a valuable resource, too. Mittida Raskanaves, a Tucson, Ariz., orthodontist, learned about the reputation of [Basis Tucson](#), the charter school her two children attend, by chatting up parents who came to her office.

Caroline Hoxby, an economist at [Stanford University](#) who specializes in education policy, recommends the academic report cards found on each state's Department of Education website as another preliminary tool. Because charter students take the same

standardized tests as those at traditional public schools, independent charters also receive a performance assessment based on scores.

Visit the Schools. Once you've narrowed your options to two or three schools, make an appointment to visit each one with your child. Tamu Wright says she knew E. L. Haynes Public Charter in Washington was right for her daughter when the 8-year-old declared after meeting the faculty, "I want to go to school with that teacher!"

Ask tough questions. Is the school independently run, or is it part of a larger charter management organization? Where does the school get its funding? Is its financial situation stable? And expect answers, says Tom Loveless, former director of the Brown Center on Education at the Brookings Institution.

Be Patient. Open enrollment means there are no admissions tests. If there's space for your child at the school, he's in; if not, a lottery usually decides who makes it. A waiting list is not the worst thing. "It's like driving past a truck stop with no trucks," says Nida. "You want to go where everybody wants to be."

Or at least to have that choice.