



POLICY BRIEF

FEBRUARY 2025



Helistockter/shutterstock

EXPANDING CHARTER SCHOOLS THROUGHOUT MISSOURI

By Susan Pendergrass

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Charter schools are public schools that operate independently of a school district school board. They are authorized (sponsored) for a limited period of time during which they must demonstrate success if they are to continue. They offer families a public school option other than their assigned public school.
- One out of every 12 U.S. public schools is now a charter school, and these schools enroll 3.7 million public school students.
- While charter schools may be sponsored by universities, state charter school boards, or state departments of education, approximately half of them are sponsored by local school districts.
- Last year, there were over 2,100 suburban charter schools and over 1,400 in rural and small-town school districts across the United States. Missouri is the only state with charter schools that has no suburban or rural charter schools.

ADVANCING LIBERTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI PUBLIC POLICY

- A high-quality 2023 study by Stanford University found that charter school students have higher academic growth in reading and math than they would have had if they had attended their assigned traditional public schools. A 2021 study by researchers at Northwestern University found that competition from the opening of a new charter school improves reading performance and decreases absenteeism among students who remain in their traditional public school.

BACKGROUND

Charter schools were first proposed in the late 1980s as a way for teachers to become education entrepreneurs. The idea was to give those with innovative education proposals a charter to run a school for a limited period of time while freeing them from many state and local regulations. It was up to the operator and board of the chartered school to fill the seats and meet specified performance goals or face closure. Since the first charter school opened in 1992, this sector of the public education system has grown to nearly 7,850 schools serving 3.7 million students.

Charter schools are, by definition, unique. In a recent study, about one third were found to have a specialized curriculum, such as STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), STEAM (STEM plus arts), classical, language immersion, or career and technical education.¹ Another third of charter schools were found to have a specialized approach to teaching and learning, such as personalized learning, “no excuses,” project-based learning, or Montessori. A third type of charter school was identified as serving a specific student population, such as dropout recovery, single sex, or students with disabilities.

In every state other than Missouri that has charter schools, they can be found in all community types. In the 2022–23 school year, there were over 2,100 suburban charter schools and over 1,400 charter schools in rural and small-town school districts.² A study of rural charter schools found that the number of schools grew by 22 percent in the decade between 2007 and 2017,

while the number of students attending rural charters grew by 64 percent.³

Key factors for successful charter schools, according to this research, are strong ties to the local community, filling a gap in the education offered, and consistent school leadership.

Research has found that curriculum really matters to suburban parents, and suburban charter schools often offer a curriculum that is more rigorous or open and creative than in traditional public schools.⁴ As an example, BASIS Charter Schools offers a “STEM-infused, liberal arts curriculum.” All 11 of its high schools are nationally ranked, with 10 in the top one percent of high schools, according to US News & World Report in 2022.⁵ Over 86 percent of BASIS high school students passed an Advanced Placement exam in 2021, compared to just 12 percent of all Missouri high school students, and they have a 100 percent college acceptance rate.

Because of the wide variation among charter schools in instruction methods and subject specialties, it can be difficult to determine if charter schools outperform traditional public schools. However, the Stanford Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) has been studying this issue for over 15 years. Their approach is to create a “virtual twin” for each charter school student by matching their characteristics and academic achievement to several students from the traditional public school to which the charter student would otherwise be assigned. Differences in academic growth can then be attributed to the type of school attended. The most recent study found that, on average, charter school students gained an additional six days of learning in math and 16 days of learning in reading (based on a typical 180-day school year) over what they would have received if they had attended their assigned public school.⁶ This finding applies to the entire sector of charter schools, not just those in low-performing districts.

Equally important is the impact that opening a charter school can have on traditional public schools. In a 2021 study of Florida conducted by researchers at Northwestern University, it was found that opening a

charter school significantly improved reading scores and decreased absenteeism in the traditional public schools in the same district.⁷

A second study on the competitive effects of charter schools found that once charter schools enroll 10 percent of a district's students, graduation rates along with math and reading scores in all schools, charter and traditional, improve.⁸ The authors of this study tested and confirmed that the opening of a charter school may lead to the closing of a traditional public school. Not surprisingly, it is most likely that low-performing schools will close, as those are the ones that students are most eager to leave. When a low-performing district school is replaced by a higher-quality charter school, overall performance of the students in the district improves.

What Does This Mean for Missouri?

The law allowing charter schools in Missouri was passed in 1998 and focused on providing options for students in our lowest-performing districts beyond transferring to another district. The original law was amended in 2012 to allow charter schools to open in any district, but there was a condition attached: in fully accredited districts, the local school board had to be the sponsor of any charter schools. Unfortunately, the first decade of charter schools in Missouri created a mindset that the purpose of charter schools is to punish low-performing schools or to provide a way for students to escape them. Twenty-five years later, Missouri finally amended the law to allow charter schools to open in Boone County (only) without local school board sponsorship. It's time to drop any geographic restrictions and allow all Missourians, regardless of where they live, to take advantage of the benefits and opportunities that charter schools can provide.

Ideally, this mindset change would happen within the existing law by breaking the entrenched attitude toward district sponsorship. Imagine a suburban Missouri district that is slowly bleeding students, as most districts in the state are. Bringing in a high-quality charter operator with a proven track record, such as a classical school or a STEM school, could provide a whole-school

setting, not just a program within a school, that attracts families to the community. A forward-thinking school board could see the opportunity to be a leader in its region.

Surprisingly, this has not yet happened. Unfortunately, education entrepreneurs, including local parent groups, who want to open a charter school must ask their local school board to sponsor the school. While that is the most common arrangement nationwide, the early approach to charter schools in Missouri rendered this a non-starter. The need to apply only to the local school board in order to open a charter school in an accredited district should be eliminated from the law.

CONCLUSION

In the past two years, dozens of states have expanded education options for parents. Several of Missouri's neighbors, including Iowa, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, have extended school choice to nearly every family in these states. Yet Missouri continues to stand on the increasingly lonely hill of "assigned school only." Missouri families can choose a full-time virtual option, and a few thousand students can now get publicly funded scholarships to private schools. However, 99 percent of Missouri children outside of Kansas City and St. Louis continue to have exactly one in-person option, whether it's a good fit for them or not.

To be clear, this is not a discussion of whether a school is "good" or "not good." Rather, the issue is whether that school is a good fit for a particular student. One can easily imagine a school that is too big, too small, too impersonal, has the wrong social environment, or doesn't offer the needed coursework for a given child.

Charter schools offer a way to expand options within the public school system. They can be an addition to a traditional school district's offerings, not a competitor. In many districts, charters share transportation, special education, and other services. Missouri can help change the perspective on charter schools by allowing applicants outside of the lowest-performing districts to go around the local school board for sponsorship.

*Susan Pendergrass is the director of research for
the Show-Me Institute*

NOTES

1. Jamison White and Lifei Huang. A Census of All Specialized Charter School Foci and Models; Journal of School Choice 16 (1) 2021; <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15582159.2021.1995692>.
2. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Common Core of Data (CCD), 2021–22: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd>.
3. Kelly Robson. Three Factors Critical to Rural Charter School Success. Education Next, September 11, 2019; <https://www.educationnext.org/three-factors-critical-rural-charter-schools-success>.
4. Susan Pendergrass. “Charter Schools 101: Why Would We Need Charters in Suburban, Rural, or “Good” Districts?” Show-Me Institute, March 15, 2018.
5. USNews & World Report. Find the Best High Schools; <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools>.
6. Margaret Raymond et al. As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III 2023. Stanford CREDO, June 19, 2023; <https://ncss3.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Credo-NCSS3-Report.pdf>.
7. David N. Figlio et al. Competitive Effects of Charter Schools. Institute of Labor Economics, July 2021, https://conference.iza.org/conference_files/edu_2021/karbownik_k7512.pdf
8. Douglas Harris and Feng Chen. The Bigger Picture of Charter School Results. Education Next, April 18, 2022; <https://www.educationnext.org/bigger-picture-charter-school-results-national-analysis-system-level-effects-test-scores-graduation-rates>.



5297 Washington Place | Saint Louis, MO 63108 | 314-454-0647

Visit Us:
showmeinstitute.org

Find Us on Facebook:
Show-Me Institute

Follow Us on Twitter:
@showme

Watch Us on YouTube:
Show-Me Institute