



STRONG CHARTER LAWS PRODUCE BETTER RESULTS A SPECIAL REPORT

Charter schools depend on strong laws for success. That is the conclusion of the most recent analysis of charter school laws released by the Center for Education Reform. This

Across the States, 2004 and the fact that, for the first time, there is enough achievement data to make conclusions about the conditions needed to foster the educational excellence charter schools are designed to provide.



conclusion was endorsed by a panel of state leaders at a February 12 National Press Club briefing.

The impetus for this event was the release of CER's eighth edition of *Charter School Laws*

“Laws matter,” said **Jeanne Allen**, President of The Center for Education Reform, “but what laws actually do matters more. The mission of charter schools is to educate children well – better than what the traditional system has been able to do. We must acknowledge what works and positively affects student outcomes. Only strong laws do that.”

Allen was joined by a nationally recognized independent researcher, four top state leaders, and a high-level education department official. Together, they presented compelling evidence that the level of student success is determined by the conditions that charter school laws create.

“Ownership and Attitude”

Following his deep interest in charter school reforms, **Acting Deputy Secretary of Education Eugene Hickok** stopped by to contribute his thoughts on why strong laws for charter schools are an important national priority. “Those who create and run charter schools have something at stake in the success of the charter school movement. They have an attitude that doesn’t accept mediocrity - ‘we’re not going to accept failure, we’re going to take kids, sometimes the kids nobody else wants, and we’re going to get the job done without whining and complaining.’”

“America’s public schools,” he said, “used to have a greater sense of ownership but go to a school board meeting or a PTA meeting today, and you’ll find that ownership isn’t as strong as it used to be. If you want to see ownership and attitude energized, go to a charter school.” He emphasized “ownership and attitude” as “the two ingredients I see in America’s charter schools that are really going to make a huge difference. If we can learn that lesson for traditional public education as we try to change that traditional public education, I think the possibilities are endless.”



Charter Achievement is on the Rise



Tom Loveless, Director of the Brown Center on Education Policy and Senior Fellow in Government Studies at The Brookings Institution, outlined his group's findings about the achievements of charter schools in the ten states that have hosted the largest number for the

longest time. Based on state data on both charter schools and traditional public schools, Loveless found that charter schools produced higher year-to-year gains than traditional public schools within the same district. He also stated that while charter schools are over-represented on states' failing schools lists, that number is decreasing from year-to-year while the same number is increasing for traditional public schools. Loveless said that to ensure that charter schools get off to a good start and succeed, two very common restrictions found in state laws must be removed. "Caps don't make sense," he said, and restricting authorizers doesn't make sense." Loveless' remarks on these specific factors endorse key findings highlighted in CER's state rankings report. Loveless emphasized that while the diverse nature of charter school operations made them challenging subjects of study, it was clear that charter schools were meeting AYP faster than traditional public schools. Among charters, those run by education service providers were seeing the strongest gains in student achievement.

Accountability Means Being Willing to Close Schools



New York's law demands excellent performance from its charter schools. The same law that gives

them a wide degree of autonomy requires them meet high standards imposed by their authorizing institutions – the "accountability bargain." It's no surprise that New York State's leading authorizer finds it necessary to recommend closure when a school's not meeting the performance requirements of its charter. When James Merriman, Executive Director of the Charter Schools Institute said, "Flexibility and autonomy are necessary preconditions for charter school success," he could have added, "and success is a precondition for renewal." Merriman also suggested that strong laws allow charter administrators the flexibility to make necessary and immediate changes if data show that kids are not doing well. School administrators without autonomy have to overcome numerous regulatory hurdles before they can make even the smallest adjustments to their educational programs.

“It’ll never work.” (But it did.)

Michigan’s strong law fosters development of highly successful charter schools, even in places where traditional public schools are failing, like Detroit. **Daniel Quisenberry**, President of the Michigan Association of Public School Academies, noted that Michigan charter schools were making a positive contribution to student achievement, particularly in urban settings like Lansing, Flint and Detroit. In Detroit, charter school students outperform their traditional school counterparts in every subject in 7 out of 10 grade levels. Graduation rates at charter schools also compare favorably. The average graduation rate at charter schools in Detroit, Flint and Lansing is 74% compared to 54% in Detroit, 57% in Lansing and 71% in Flint at traditional public schools. He added that the presence of charter schools has also stimulated



improved performance in neighboring non-charter public schools.

A Case Study: the Nation’s Largest Charter School



Donald Hense, founding member of the DC Charter School Association and President and CEO of Friendship House operates a charter school with five campuses in partnership with Edison Schools. The strength of DC’s law lets Hense make and mold his school to meet the particular needs of his kids. Last week, a team of students from Friendship Edison Collegiate Academy came in second place in a NASA Robotics Education Project competition. Without the flexibility Hense’s schools enjoy, these kids never would have been able to engage in such an exciting and skill-intensive team project. Hense said that his schools were showing the fastest improvement in student achievement, as measured by Stanford 9 tests, in the District of Columbia.

Huge Growth Projected in the Golden State

More quality alternatives will be born, thanks to favorable conditions present in California. **Caprice Young**, CEO of the California Charter Schools Association noted that the state legislative analyst’s office has just reiterated the importance of making California’s law work better by calling for more authorizers. She said that after a burst of charter school openings, reflecting pent up demand for public education alternatives, a local school board monopoly on

chartering authority in California was proving to be a bottleneck. With vested interests putting up roadblocks to charter school openings, sponsors are forced to go through an appeals process to the state board. Nevertheless, Young is working to ensure that charter schools will eventually account for 10 percent of California’s public school enrollment, up from 2.5 percent today. Young spoke in detail about Watts Learning Center, one of the top performing charter

schools in California that is situated in one of its least advantaged neighborhoods. She said the keys to its success have been its culturally relevant curriculum, ability to tailor to kids, small size and consequent familiarity of students, parents and staff to each other.



Charters are Doing More With Less and Serve Populations Most in Need

CER released Key Findings from its annual survey of charter schools. Nearly one third of all operating charter schools in 2003 participated, providing a clear and compelling picture of charter schools operations. Among the findings:

- The number of charter schools operating in the United States grew by 10 percent, from 2,687 to 2,996, an increase of 309 from a year earlier.
- Since 1992, only nine percent of the total number of charter schools ever opened have been shut down, in most cases a result of failing to meet rigorous performance contracts, funding inequities and, in a few cases, poor management or programs. Other causes of charter school closings range from political or organized labor opposition to zoning impediments.
- Charter schools are serving disproportionately high numbers of low-income, at risk and minority students.
- Charter schools use a wider variety of innovate curricula, are smaller, give more instructional time, attract more students than they can serve and still receive fewer dollars than non-charter public schools.
- Data on enrollment shows that the nation's charters now serve approximately 750,000 students in 37 states and the District of Columbia.

This and more will be detailed in the next edition of the National Charter School Directory.

For more information about the nation's robust charter movement, go to <http://www.edreform.com/index.cfm?fuseAction=section&pSectionID=14&cSectionID=34>.

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