

## **Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) about Charter Schools**

### **What are Charter Schools?**

Charter schools are public schools that operate under a written contract with either a local board of education or the State Board of Education. They are freed from many of the rules that govern other public schools, allowing them to select their teaching faculty, choose a different curriculum, lengthen the school day or year, and direct their school budget based on the needs of the students they serve. Charter schools can either be new public schools or existing public schools that convert to charter status. Adopting a charter law will allow for a more innovative approach to education and provide a critical tool to address the needs of our lowest performing schools.

### **How many other states allow Charter Schools?**

The first charter law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia now allow charter schools, which serve over 1.5 million students in nearly 5,000 charter schools nationwide. Most Southern states also allow charter schools, including Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

### **How are Charter Schools held accountable for results?**

Like other public schools, charters must follow all state laws related to accountability, student testing, content standards, health, and safety. But, with increased flexibility comes higher accountability. If they do not meet the performance measures laid out in their charter contract, they can be closed.

### **Can Charter Schools be selective about which students attend?**

Absolutely not. Charter schools must serve all students who wish to attend, regardless of race, income level, disability, academic achievement, or athletic ability. If the number of students wishing to attend a charter school exceeds the capacity of the school, a random selection process must be used to ensure fairness.

Nationally, charter schools also serve a higher percentage of minority students and students in poverty. 62% of charter students are minority, compared to 47% in other public schools. 48% of charter students are in poverty, compared to 45% in other public schools.

### **How are they different from magnet schools?**

Magnet schools can be selective about which students they admit, and they still fall under the same bureaucratic regulations as traditional public schools. Charter schools must serve all students who wish to attend and are given additional flexibility in exchange for higher accountability to serve the needs of their students.

### **Can private schools become public Charter Schools?**

Absolutely not. Charter schools are public schools. Alabama's legislation specifically prohibits a private, parochial, or home-based school from becoming a public charter school.

### **How would Charter Schools help our lowest performing schools?**

Despite strong education reform efforts, Alabama still has some chronically underperforming schools that traditional efforts have not been able to improve. Charter school legislation would empower local school boards and the State Board of Education to take a fundamentally different approach that pulls out all the stops to ensure those students receive a quality education. Under traditional school turnaround efforts, a team goes into the school, makes changes, and leaves; but the same problems creep back in. In a charter school, the focused mission of improving student learning is there to stay because the school has ownership of the change taking place.

### **What does the research tell us?**

Being one of 11 states without a charter law allows Alabama to take best practices from successful states, which will ensure that charter schools are held accountable for results. After all, results are the reason for their existence.

The most recent study of charters, a January 2010 Stanford study of charter schools in New York City, showed that on average, charter students significantly outperformed their counterparts in other public schools in both reading (+2 scale points) and math (+5 scale points). In addition, black students outperformed their counterparts in both reading (+1 scale points) and math (+5 scale points), as well. After the third year in a charter school, students have a 4-point advantage in reading and a 15-point advantage in math when compared to their counterparts in other public schools.

In a 2009 study by Stanford, charter students in poverty outperformed their counterparts in other public schools such states as Arkansas, Georgia, Texas, and North Carolina.

A 2004 Harvard study shows that charter school students are more likely to be proficient in math and reading than students in the nearest comparable public school. Overall, charter students have proficiency rates that are 5.2 percent higher than their public school counterparts in reading and 3.2 percent higher in math. The same study shows that many charter schools in minority and high-poverty areas show even greater achievement gains. For example, students of charter schools in Hispanic areas have a 7.6 percent advantage in reading, and charters in African-American areas have a 4.5 percent advantage, compared to a 4.2 percent advantage for students in charter schools in other areas. Similarly, students at charters in high-poverty areas have a reading proficiency advantage of 6.5 percent, compared with a 2.6 percent advantage for students in other charter schools.

This suggests that charter schools have the most promise in the areas that have the greatest need for innovative educational reforms.

A 2005 Hoxby/Rockoff study comparing students in Chicago charter schools and students that were not selected in the charter school lottery showed that the students in charter schools scored significantly higher in both reading and math than their counterparts.

A 2003 Manhattan Institute study found that charter schools tended to serve a disproportionate number of poor, struggling students at risk of dropping out. When measured against those public schools with similar demographic and geographic characteristics, charter schools produced higher gains in math and reading over a one-year period.

### **What is "Race to the Top" and how are Charter Schools related?**

Race to the Top is a \$4 billion grant competition from U.S. Department of Education – the largest competitive education grant in history. It offers states the chance to apply for federal education funds that encourage school innovation and reward states that are implementing successful education reforms. If successful, Alabama stands to receive nearly \$200 million from this program. That's money that would expand successful programs like the Alabama Reading Initiative; the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative; ACCESS Distance Learning; and First Class Pre-K. On the Race to the Top application, charter schools are worth 40 points out of a total of 500. 39 other states have a charter school law. That means Alabama starts with a 92% before even applying for one of the most competitive grant programs in history.

While Alabama has innovative schools, they don't meet the federal descriptions of a "charter school" or an "innovative school." In order to be competitive for Race to the Top, Alabama must pass charter school legislation.