

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS: SUPPORT FROM DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

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DEMOCRATIC AND PROGRESSIVE LEADERS HAVE BEEN, AND REMAIN, AMONG THE STRONGEST PROPONENTS OF HIGH-QUALITY PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Democratic support for public charter schools stems, in part, from key principles and policies underlying the charter school model. By law:

- Charter schools must have a fair and open admissions process, conducting outreach and recruitment to all segments of the communities they serve;
- Unlike public magnet schools or public “exam schools” that can set admissions criteria based on test scores or other student characteristics, public charter schools cannot pick and choose which students to admit;
- Charter schools must enroll students by lottery when the number of applicants exceeds available seats;
- Charter schools are free; they cannot charge tuition;
- Charter schools are nonsectarian and nondiscriminatory in employment policies;
- Most states require performance-based contracts that hold charters accountable for academic outcomes and operational controls;
- Public oversight of charters also occurs through annual financial audits, explicitly called for in all but four states, that are the same or similar to financial audit procedures and requirements of traditional public districts;
- Charter authorizers vary by state, but can be a local school board (39%), a state school board (28%), a statewide charter school board or commission (15%), a non-profit agency (10%), a college or university (7%), or a mayor’s office (1%);¹ and
- Students at charter schools take the same state assessments, and charter schools are evaluated on the same school report cards as traditional public schools in the state.

Both centrist and progressive Democrats were, and remain, integrally involved in shaping charter school policy. To be clear, charters enjoy bipartisan support, one of the key reasons for their success and longevity. However, the purpose of this report is primarily to highlight the centrist and progressive Democrats who support this sector.

Here are some other key Democratic public charter school supporters from their inception to the present day:



PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

During his time in the White House, President Bill Clinton was one of the earliest proponents of charter schools from either political party. He spearheaded passage of the first federal charter school law in 1994 when there were charter school laws in just two states (Minnesota and California). The federal Charter School Program is a major source of funding for charter start-ups and for replicating and expanding high-performing schools.

“The idea behind charter schools is that not all kids are the same—they have different needs; they have different environments—but there is a certain common level of education that all kids need, no matter how different they are, and that it would be a good thing to allow schools to be developed which had a clear mission, which could reach out to kids who wanted to be a part of that mission, who could achieve educational excellence for children who otherwise might be left behind.”

— Remarks at the City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota, May 2000²



PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

As president, Barack Obama led a new generation of Democrats to realize the value in the charter school model.

“Charter schools play an important role in our country’s education system. Supporting some of our Nation’s underserved communities, they can ignite imagination and nourish the minds of America’s young people while finding new ways of educating them and equipping them with the knowledge they need to succeed.”

— Presidential Proclamation, National Charter Schools Week, April 2016³



OBAMA'S INVESTMENTS

IN HIGH-PERFORMING
CHARTER SCHOOLS HAVE
A HUGE PAYOFF

Public Charter Schools Program Grants
for the Replication and Expansion of
High-Quality Charter Schools



621

new schools created thus far



957

total new schools to be created as a
result of grant awards

Barack Obama was the first president in
history to use federal investments to grow
high-quality, non-profit
public school options for low-income students.



366,278

additional seats created for
students thus far



543,564

total new seats to be created for
students as a result of grant awards



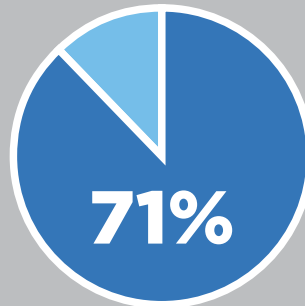
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Charter Management Organizations
expanding

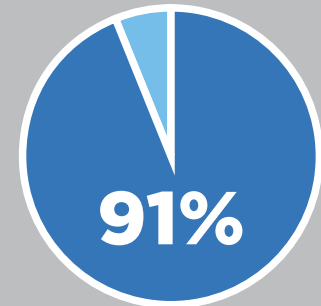
REAL INVESTMENTS. President Obama increased funding for the federal Charter Schools Program more in his first year in office than George W. Bush did over his entire eight years as President.

FOCUSING ON WHAT WORKS. As part of the largest increase in federal education funding in history, via the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, President Obama launched the first-ever federal program to replicate and expand high-performing public charter schools. More than half a million students will be able to secure seats in high-performing charter schools under grants awarded between 2010 and present (see left infographic).⁴

The vast majority of students in the nation's high-performing charter management organizations are low-income students and student of color.⁵



are students from
low-income families



are students
of color

Source: Charter Management Organizations: Diverse Strategies and Diverse Student Impacts

CHANGING STATE POLICY. President Obama used Race to the Top funding from the U.S. Department of Education as an incentive for states to lift charter school caps. More than a dozen states—Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Utah—altered laws or policies to create new or expand existing public charter schools.

SENATE DEMOCRATS

Support for public charter schools goes well beyond Democrats formerly in elected office. In the face of attempts by some in the education establishment to misleadingly tie Democrats who support public charter schools to President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, dozens of Democrats from coast to coast have spoken up to make crystal clear that their position on public school choice and innovation is diametrically opposed to the Trump/DeVos agenda.

Here are some quotes culled from U.S. Senators from across the political spectrum who explained, during the fight over Betsy DeVos' nomination for U.S. Secretary of Education, how their support for public charter schools and choice differs from hers, especially when it comes to high standards and accountability for producing results.⁷



Senator Dick Durbin (D-IL):

“I have supported high-performing successful charter programs. I think about the KIPP program here in the District of Columbia, in Chicago, and other places, consistently producing some of the highest results, the best results, and

the highest standards for students. Is there a lesson to be learned from the KIPP model for all schools? Of course there is. You have to be blind to ignore it.”



Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO):

“I support parents' choices on high-quality schools and charter schools, and I think it plays a critical role in education. The goal for me has never been in school choice for its own end. The goal is high-quality public schools for

every kid in every neighborhood to receive a great education.”



In a March 2017 memo to the Democratic Caucus, Senator and ranking member of the HELP committee **Patty Murray**

(D-WA) made a necessary and critical distinction between the Trump Administration's privatization agenda for schools and the role of public charter schools, writing:

“Public charter schools are meant to offer educators flexibility in how they meet the needs of their students in exchange for strong accountability. In addition, charter school developers are to share the best practices they learn from experimenting with additional flexibility with other public schools in order to improve the entire public school system for all students. Charter schools can be viable options for some parents and students, but as with every school, parents need to be able to make an informed choice and have access to high-quality, accountable schools.”⁶



Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-CA):

“While Mrs. DeVos is also a proponent of school choice, I believe we have very different philosophies on this issue. Personally, I can only support schools when there is accountability. Schools should be accredited, well managed with proper fiscal controls, and transparent in regard to student performance for all of the students they serve.”



Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT):

“In my experience, the supporters of charter schools have tended to be the loudest champions of accountability because for many charter school proponents, they go hand in hand. Accountability gives you sort of a clearer sense of the outcomes in public schools, which for charter school advocates tends to be an advertisement for an alternative way of education.”



Senator Maggie Hassan (D-NH):

“I come from a state with and have been a strong supporter of public charter schools strategically deployed, accountable public charter schools. They are a critical component to a strong public school system.”

STATE LEADERS

After the 2018 mid-term elections, some observers made sweeping proclamations that the “Blue Wave” in the U.S. House of Representatives was a repudiation of school reform in general and public charter schools in particular. This could not be further from reality, as evidenced by the resounding re-election of New York’s governor, Democrat Andrew Cuomo. Cuomo has been one of the biggest charter school champions at the gubernatorial level. Governor Cuomo also beat back a primary challenge in a race in which his support of charter schools was a central issue. Similarly, former Democratic Congressman Jared Polis who, like Cuomo, was challenged in the primaries for his education positions in his successful 2018 run for Governor of Colorado is one the most vociferous and active supporters of public charter schools, from either party, both in his time in Congress and now as Governor of Colorado.

These are just two examples of politically courageous Democrats who were victorious during this hyper-partisan time in our country, even while defending their pro-charter position in Blue states with strong opposition from union leaders.

In 2018, Democrats also led some of the most successful efforts to support students served by high-quality charter schools:

- In Colorado, Governor John Hickenlooper and State Assembly Speaker Crisanta Duran won the fight for charter school funding equity;
- In Connecticut, Senate Majority Leader Bob Duff reversed Republican attempts to cut charter funding; and,
- In Washington, D.C., Mayor Muriel Bowser and the D.C. City Council passed the largest charter funding increase in a decade.

In addition, Democratic charter school supporters won highly contested school-board races, despite multi-million dollar attacks by teachers' unions, in Los Angeles and Denver. And in New Jersey, Senate Democratic President Steve Sweeney won re-election despite an odd alliance between anti-charter school forces and conservatives in support of his opponent, an avowed Trump supporter.

Our case here is, not all Democrats are public charter school champions. Far from it. Nor are public charter schools the panacea for systemically reforming our public education system. Not even close. The point here is that there are a number of Democrats who are among public charter schools' most vocal and impactful advocates across the country and across the political spectrum.

Rights Hero Presses Plan For School In Detroit

By MALIMAH ABDULLAH

More than 40 years after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus, the opening salvo in what became the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott, she is trying to set up one of the first charter schools in Detroit.

If her proposal for a school name for her and her husband, the Raymond and Rosa Parks Academy for Self Development, is approved by the Detroit Board of Education this summer, Mrs. Parks's school will join some 700 charter schools nationwide. Charter schools are run by managers, including civil rights advocates, and by teachers who have left traditional public schools, and sometimes by private concerns. Proponents view charter schools, which are able to operate autonomously, as alternatives to traditional public schools and private and parochial schools.

The Detroit Board of Education has approved only two of the charter school proposals that have come before it since the state adopted charter school laws in 1993. Mrs. Parks's application is one of 12 such proposals. Mrs. Parks, who lives in Detroit, hopes to open the school in September.

Mrs. Parks already runs an after-school program, the Raymond and Rosa Parks Institute for Self Development, which teaches children "quiet strength" and self-paced study, said Elaine Eason-Steele, the program's co-director. The school would be modeled after the institute and would serve 250 students in kindergarten through the 12th grade.

"We noticed in the youth that we have worked with that there are some things that are missing," Mrs. Eason-Steele said. "Sometimes the

Rosa Parks joins the growing charter school movement.

youth solve things in a hostile manner. We want to help them develop a sense of self-esteem and consist



**NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY,
JUNE 30, 1997**

More than 40 years after her courageous defiance sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rosa Parks' petitioned the Detroit Board of Education to open the Raymond and Rosa Parks Academy for Self Development, modeled after an after-school program she established to teach children "quiet strength" and self-paced study. In a speech at the NAACP's national convention in 1997, President Clinton said: "I am pleased that Rosa Parks, who taught us a lot about dignity and equality, is now working to open a charter school in Detroit. And I urge you to consider doing so in your communities. If you believe it will help, the Department of Education will help you."⁸

ENDNOTES

- 1** Rebarber, Ted and Alison Consoletti Zgainer, “The Essential Guide to Charter School Operations: Survey of American’s Charter Schools 2014,” The Center for Education Reform, 2014. Available at: <https://www.edreform.com/2014/01/survey-of-american-charter-schools/>; National Association of Charter School Authorizers, “Types of Authorizers,” Available at: <https://www.qualitycharters.org/authorizer-types/>
 - 2** Wooley, John and Gerhard Peters. “William J. Clinton: Remarks at the City Academy,” The American Presidency Project. St. Paul Minnesota, May 4, 2000. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-city-academy-st-paul-minnesota>
 - 3** The White House Archives. Office of the Press Secretary, April 29, 2016. Available at: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/29/presidential-proclamation-national-charter-schools-week-2016>
 - 4** A recent Network for Public Education (NPE) [report](#) claimed that as much as one billion dollars in federal funds were awarded for schools at never opened or closed soon after opening. However, the claims in this report are misleading and based largely on anecdotal evidence that apply to only a portion of Charter Schools Program (CSP) grants. This infographic is based on the data from the U.S. Department of Education’s CSP Replication and Expansion (R&E) grant awards. The NPE report only notes one CMO from the R&E grant program in relation to closed or never opened schools: Rocketship cancelled the opening of one school in Washington D.C and closed another school in Tennessee due to under-enrollment.
 - 5** Joshua Furgeson, Brian Gill, Joshua Haimson, Alexandra Killewald, Moira McCullough, Ira Nichols-Barrer, Bing-ru Teh, Natalya Verbitsky-Savitz, Melissa Bowen, Allison Demeritt, Paul Hill, and Robin Lake (2012). *Charter Management Organizations: Diverse Strategies and Diverse Student Impacts*. Washington D.C. Mathematica Policy Research and Center on Reinventing Public Education. https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_cmofinal_Jan12_0.pdf
 - 6** Murray, Patty. Memo to Democratic Caucus. March 22, 2017. Available at: https://www.help.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Murray_Privatization%20Caucus%20Memo.pdf
 - 7** See See Democratic Voices for Public School Choice, Education Reform Now, February 15, 2017, available at: <https://edreformnow.org/federal-policy/democratic-voices-public-school-choice/>
 - 8** Abdullah, H. (1997, June 30). Rights Hero Presses Plan For School In Detroit. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/06/30/us/rights-hero-presses-plan-for-school-in-detroit.html>
- Cover Image:** Michelle Obama visits Tina and Rick Caruso Early Education Center, part of the Para Los Niños network in California on November 15, 2018. <https://www.paralosninos.org/michelle-obama/>





State	Reading Impact	Days of Learning
Colorado	0.01**	7
District of Columbia	0.10**	72
Georgia	0.02**	14
Illinois	0.02**	14
Indiana	0.05**	36
Louisiana	0.07**	50
Massachusetts	0.05**	36
Michigan	0.06**	43
Minnesota	0.02**	14
Missouri	0.02**	14
New Jersey	0.06**	43
New York	0.05**	36
North Carolina	0.03**	22
Rhode Island	0.12**	86
Tennessee	0.12**	86

State	Math Impact	Days of Learning
District of Columbia	0.14**	101
Illinois	0.03**	22
Indiana	0.02**	14
Louisiana	0.09**	65
Massachusetts	0.09**	65
Michigan	0.06**	43
Missouri	0.03**	22
New Jersey	0.08**	58
New York	0.11**	79
New York City	0.13**	94
Rhode Island	0.15**	108
Tennessee	0.10**	72

State	Reading Impact	Days of Learning
Arizona	-0.03**	-22
Arkansas	-0.03**	-22
Florida	-0.01**	-7
Nevada	-0.15**	-108
New Mexico	0.00	0
New York City	0.00	0
Ohio	-0.02**	-14
Oregon	-.03**	-22
Pennsylvania	-.04**	-29
Texas	-0.03**	-22
Utah	-0.01	-7

State	Math Impact	Days of Learning
Arizona	-0.04**	-29
Arkansas	-0.03**	-22
California	-0.01**	-7
Colorado	-0.01**	-7
Georgia	-0.02**	-14
Minnesota	-0.01	-7
Nevada	-0.19**	-137
New Mexico	-0.04**	-29
North Carolina	-0.01**	-7
Ohio	-0.06**	-43
Oregon	-0.07**	-50
Pennsylvania	-0.07**	-50
Texas	-0.04**	-29
Utah	-0.06**	-43