



DEMOCRATIC  
GUIDE TO  
PUBLIC  
CHARTER  
SCHOOLS  
*3<sup>RD</sup> EDITION*

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# INTRODUCTION

## PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Public charter schools have a long history of bipartisan support and that includes, from their very beginnings, support from key Democrats and progressives. The relationship between Democrats and public charter schools, however, is currently a complicated one.



On one hand, Democratic voters, especially voters of color, continue to rate public charter schools favorably in most major polls. Moreover, public charter schools are concentrated in communities represented, by and large, by Democrats at all levels of government and show their most dramatic positive results for students of color and those from low-income families, constituencies for whom Democrats have historically claimed to be champions.

On the other hand, in recent years we've seen some Democratic leaders move to a more anti-charter stance. During the 2020 Democratic Presidential primary, Senators Bernie Sanders (D-VT) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) both called for policies that would end federal support for new public charter schools. And in blue states from coast to coast, we've seen Democratic governors and state legislatures slow or freeze charter school expansion: In 2019, laws aimed at slowing charter growth or reducing charter access to funding and other resources passed in California, Illinois, Maine, New Mexico, and Nevada.<sup>1</sup>

Some of this is certainly due to the fact that former President Donald Trump and his extremely unpopular Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos portrayed themselves as charter advocates, which

resulted in the same polarization and drawing of partisan lines we saw on virtually every issue during the Trump Administration. The reality, however, is that the Trump/DeVos vision of charter schools was diametrically opposed to the principles that guide progressive support for public charter schools, and Trump actually proposed eliminating the federal Charter School Program (CSP) in his final year in office.

President Biden has thus far forged a middle path on public charter schools, short of full-throated support, but a far cry from the anti-charter rhetoric espoused by Sanders and Warren during the 2020 campaign. During National Charter Schools Week this May, the Biden Administration broke a tradition extending back to the Clinton Administration by not issuing a proclamation, although no public statement was made as to why. In fairness, President George W. Bush also failed to issue a proclamation in his first year in office, so it's possible that Biden's oversight was due to his Administration not yet running at full speed.

In his FY 2022 budget, Biden also staked out middle ground. While proposing a 40% increase overall for education, Biden called for level-funding for CSP at \$440 million and did not attach any of the new policies, such as giving school districts more control over public charter schools—a move that would effectively stall charter growth and stifle innovation—that he proposed during the campaign.

If Democratic lawmakers want to be the champions of public education excellence and equity, they need to do some serious soul searching on how they position themselves on public charter schools. Charter schools, as we discuss later in this guide, aren't all created equal, and some models are better than others, so not all criticisms should be summarily dismissed. But the idea that charter schools are anathema to the idea of public education and that they should be defunded or unconditionally curtailed is misguided and misinformed.

*“If Democratic lawmakers want to be the champions of public education excellence and equity, they need to do some serious soul searching on how they position themselves on public charter schools.”*

To the contrary, public charter schools continue to give millions of students access to a public school other than the one to which they would have been assigned.

Millions more students are on charter school waiting lists. Public school choice—including, in addition to public charter schools, magnet schools and career academies—gives parents the opportunity to choose a school within the public system that they feel provides the best education experience for their child.



**In this 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Democratic Guide to Public Charters School, we:**

- Set the record straight on public charter school facts.
- Trace the history of support for public charter schools by Democrats and progressives.
- Present public opinion data showing strong support for public charter schools from key Democratic constituencies.
- Review data showing high concentrations of public charter schools and students in Democratic strongholds.
- Analyze research on public charter school performance in advancing student achievement.
- Review federal and state policies key for sustaining, improving, and expanding public charter schools.



## DID YOU KNOW?

*Darnella Frazier, who at age 17 bravely captured the murder of George Floyd on video, was a student at Augsburg Fairview Academy, a charter high school in Minneapolis?*

# PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

## SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

### #1

#### Are charter schools public schools?

Yes. Charter schools are public schools created by state law and overseen by authorizing boards that are accountable to state and/or local government. In fact, public charter schools are arguably more public and fundamentally democratic than traditional public schools because any group of people—such as educators, parents, or community leaders—can write a plan for a proposed school and submit it to a public authorizing entity, set up by state law, for approval.

### #2

#### Are charter schools free?

Yes. Public charter schools, like all public schools, are free and are barred from charging tuition.

### #3

#### Are charter schools open to all students?

Yes. While critics contend that charter schools can “cherry pick” the students they’d like, in reality charter schools must have a fair and open admissions process and conduct outreach and recruitment to the communities they serve. Charter schools must enroll all students that apply, unless more students apply than seats are available, in which case, a charter school must hold a random lottery to determine enrollment. Unlike public magnet schools or “exam schools,” charter schools cannot set admissions criteria like tests.

Because some parents may not be aware of all their options, some districts, including Denver and Washington DC, have **opted to facilitate access to public schools of choice by creating a citywide open enrollment system**, integrating charter schools and traditional public schools into a single application.

*“Charter schools must have a fair and open admissions process and conduct outreach and recruitment to the communities they serve...unlike public magnet schools or “exam schools,” charter schools cannot set admissions criteria like tests.”*

# #4

## Do charter schools serve “high-need” students?

Yes. Nationally, **public charter schools enroll larger shares of traditionally disadvantaged students**, with a higher proportion of Black and Hispanic students and students in poverty enrolled in charter schools than traditional public schools<sup>2</sup> and English Learners enrolled at similar rates in both public charters and district schools.

Much of the criticism around charter enrollment has centered on students with disabilities. The most recent federal data finds that charter schools enroll about 2 percentage points fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools, at 10.79% and 12.84% respectively, though the gap has been steadily declining since 2008.<sup>3</sup> But these national averages mask variations by state and disability type.

For instance, charter schools actually enroll larger proportions of students with specific learning disabilities, speech and language impairment, other health impairments, emotional disturbance, and autism.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, evidence from Boston<sup>5</sup> suggests enrollment figures could differ as public charter school students are more likely to be declassified, or disenrolled from special education services, while still seeing significant gains in learning outcomes. Similar results on declassification were recently found in Newark charter schools, where students with disabilities were also 11% less likely to transfer out of their schools than students with disabilities in Newark’s traditional public schools.<sup>6</sup>

*“Nationally, **public charter schools enroll larger shares of traditionally disadvantaged students, with a higher proportion of Black and Hispanic students and students in poverty enrolled in charter schools than traditional public schools, and English Learners enrolled at similar rates in both public charters and district schools.**”*

# #5

## Are public charter schools more or less segregated compared to traditional public schools?

*“Charter schools, in many places, are concentrated in communities of color because they were created to provide an alternative for children from historically disadvantaged groups to the low-performing traditional public schools they were previously forced to attend.”*

About the same, although there are variations. Charter schools, in many places, are concentrated in communities of color because they were created to provide an alternative for children from historically disadvantaged groups to the low-performing traditional public schools they were previously forced to attend. The reality is that the majority of students in urban areas, in both charter and district public schools, attend school in intensely segregated settings.<sup>7</sup>

Some studies have misleadingly claimed that charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools using flawed methodology<sup>8</sup> that compares charter school demographics to those of the larger district or state in which they are located.

Obviously, that’s an apples-to-oranges comparison. The only valid comparison is between a public charter school and the traditional, neighborhood school a student would have otherwise attended.

One recent analysis<sup>1</sup> did find that charter schools have contributed, slightly, to increasing within-district segregation. However, even in this study, the overall impact is small; eliminating all charter schools would only reduce overall segregation by 5 percent. Additionally, the study finds that within metropolitan areas, charter schools actually reduced between-district segregation through cross-district enrollments, largely offsetting differences within districts.

There are three additional points to consider as it relates to public charter schools and segregation:

- **First, segregation resulting from public school choice should be viewed fundamentally differently than systemic segregation through which Black and Brown students are relegated to schools with fewer resources.**

Instead, Black and Brown families are choosing public charter schools that they believe will better serve their children, including culturally-affirming charter schools led and staffed by Black and Latinx educators, such as Ember Charter School in Brooklyn, NY.

- **Second,** although attending an integrated school increases the odds, all other things being equal, of success for students of color, **we see high-achieving schools across the country that comprise a majority of Black and Brown students.** CREDO has found that across public charter schools in all urban regions, Black students in high-poverty communities receive the equivalent of 59 days of additional learning in math and 44 days of additional learning in reading, *every year*, compared to their peers with similar demographics in traditional public schools.<sup>9</sup>

- **Finally, a growing number of public charter schools are being created to deliberately attract racially and economically integrated student bodies.<sup>1</sup>**

While charters, like district schools, cannot select who will attend, “diverse-by-design” charter schools can signal to families their commitment to diversity through their mission and actively seek out a diverse pool of applicants. As these types of charter schools continue to expand, we may see a change in the role charter schools play in segregation.

*“‘Diverse-by-design’ charter schools can signal to families their commitment to diversity through their mission and actively seek out a diverse pool of applicants.”*







## TEACHER DIVERSITY

While the proportion of students of color continues to grow across the country, the diversification of the teacher workforce lags behind: though nearly half of American K-12 students are students of color, less than 20%<sup>10</sup> of the nation's teachers are teachers of color.

**Recent research suggests that public charter schools are leading efforts to diversify the teacher workforce.** A 2019 study<sup>11</sup> in North Carolina found that charter schools have 35% more Black teachers than district schools and that Black students were 50% more likely to have a Black teacher than their district school counterparts. According to federal data<sup>12</sup>, charter schools also have a larger proportion of Black and Hispanic principals than district schools. And these principals are more likely<sup>13</sup> to hire and retain teachers of color.

There is also evidence that some of the largest, high-performing charter school networks are strongly committed to increasing the diversity of their staff: in the 2020-21 school year, KIPP reported that 70% of their teachers and 55% of their schools' leaders identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, over half of Uncommon Schools' teacher workforce are people of color<sup>15</sup>, and 56% of new teachers at Success Academy in 2020 were BIPOC, an increase of 4 percentage points from the previous year<sup>16</sup>.

All this matters because having a same-race teacher—something White students take for granted—is associated with stronger student outcomes<sup>17</sup>, including increased academic achievement, better attendance, fewer suspensions, and reduced chances of dropping out.

# #6

## Do charter schools siphon resources or funding from public schools?

This misleading contention is occupying an increasing share of anti-charter rhetoric.

**Charter schools are public schools, so the claim that charter schools siphon resources out of public schools is categorically false.** Many families already make choices about their children's schools based on where they choose to live, and the money follows those students to their new schools just as it does when families who lack the means to move to a more expensive home choose a public charter school.

*“Many families already make choices about their children’s schools based on where they choose to live, and the money follows those students to their new schools just as it does when families who lack the means to move to a more expensive home choose a public charter school.”*

That being said, the research on whether public charter schools result in lost funding for traditional public schools is decidedly mixed. There is a small body of evidence that shows the presence of public charter schools does result in a net loss of funds for district-run public schools. Studies of districts in New York<sup>18</sup> and North Carolina<sup>19</sup>, in particular, show that charter schools can result in lower spending in district schools by as much as \$1,000 per pupil, driven by “fixed” administrative costs and difficulties in quickly reducing more variable costs in response to changes in enrollment. A similar study of California schools<sup>20</sup>, also found overall declines in per-pupil spending, but declines were smaller than in previous studies and declines were less steep as the proportion of charter schools in a district increased.

Conversely, a study<sup>21</sup> of charter expansion in Massachusetts found that per-pupil spending in district schools actually increased during a period of charter expansion, with money

shifting from support services to instruction. **These findings suggest that state charter policies can have a strong influence on lessening fiscal impacts.**

When one looks at student outcomes rather than inputs, recent evidence suggests that **high-quality, urban public charter schools not only improve the achievement of students who attend them but also spur district schools to improve achievement.** For instance, in New York City,<sup>22</sup> students in district schools co-locating with charter schools saw 2.9 months of additional learning in math and 2.2 additional months in reading. Gains for district students were even stronger if nearby charters had high-achievement rates or were from an established, high-profile CMO, such as KIPP or Uncommon Schools.

**While the conservative response to district fiscal impact is that districts should simply learn to do more with less, progressive public charter school advocates do not need to make the same, soulless claim. Instead we should acknowledge any short-term consequences and work in partnership with district schools to create long-term financial stabilization.**

These policies should include short-term solutions like hold-harmless provisions—such as those that exist in California and Massachusetts—which provide short-term relief from enrollment-related funding declines, as well as longer term solutions, such as a shift to student-based—rather than personnel-based—funding, paired with greater school-level budget autonomy to allow schools to be more nimble as enrollment fluctuates, more adequate and equitable funding across the entire public school system, and increased collaboration between district and charter schools to address the local needs of students. We should invest in all public schools—including public charter schools—so they have the resources they need to provide the children they serve a quality education.

*“We should invest in all public schools—including public charter schools—so they have the resources they need to provide the children they serve a quality education.”*



# HISTORY

## GREAT MOMENTS IN DEMOCRATIC AND PROGRESSIVE SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

• 1974

**Ray Budde, professor at the University of Massachusetts**, published a paper titled “Education by Charter.” Budde’s proposal was to trim down educational bureaucracy and was rooted in his belief that teachers should have more autonomy in the daily operations of their schools and be held accountable for results.<sup>23</sup>

• 1988

**Al Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers**, cited Budde’s ideas in his New York Times column, bringing the charter discussion out of the confines of academia and taking it national.<sup>24</sup> Shanker saw charters as a vehicle for advancing an AFT proposal that would allow teachers to set up their own autonomous schools.



• 1991

**Democratic state senator Ember Reichgott Junge** authored Minnesota’s first-in-the-nation charter school law. Her top allies, state representatives Ken Nelson and Becky Kelso, were also both Democrats.



• 1994

**Al Shanker:** “What we really need —at the very least—are statewide curriculum frameworks and statewide assessments systems. ... And we should add statewide incentive systems that link getting into a college or getting a job with achievement in high school. Once those things are in place, why limit charter schools to five or ten or a

hundred? Why shouldn't every school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?"<sup>25</sup>

**Bill Clinton** spearheaded passage of the first federal charter school law to incentivize states to pass charter school laws and fund charter start-ups, when there were charter school laws in just two states (Minnesota and California). The federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) continues to be a major source of funding for new and existing charter schools and for replicating and expanding the highest performing public charter schools.



## • 1996

**California State Senator (D-Los Angeles) and former 60's anti-war and civil rights activist Tom Hayden** sponsors CA legislation to lift the state's charter school cap.<sup>26</sup>

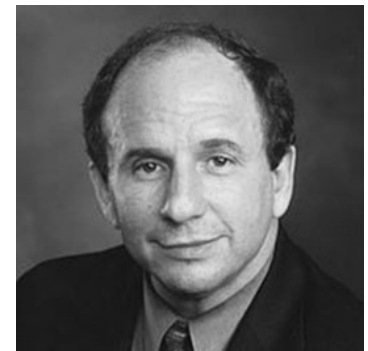
## • 1997

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, a public charter school modeled after an after-school program she established to teach children "quiet strength" and self-paced study.<sup>27</sup>



## • 1998

**The late Senator and liberal icon Paul Wellstone:** "I say this as someone who was a teacher for 20 years before becoming a senator. I think that schools within schools, magnet schools, alternative schools, and charter schools within the public system all contribute toward more creativity and more exciting education."<sup>28</sup>

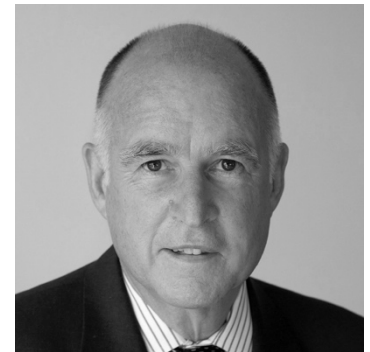


## 2000

**Bill Clinton:** “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.”<sup>29</sup>

## 2002

**As mayor of Oakland, then-former and -future Governor Jerry Brown** founded his second charter school, Oakland School for the Arts. During his tenure as governor, Brown also fought against caps on charter school growth.



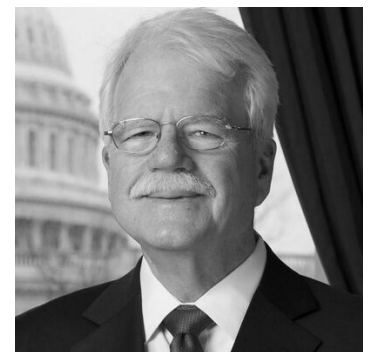
## 2009

**President Barack Obama** launched the first-ever federal program to replicate and expand high-performing public charter schools under the already existing federal Charter Schools Program (CSP). Over 500,000 students have been able to attend high-performing charter schools under CSP grants awarded since 2010. Obama also used Race to the Top Funding as an incentive for states to lift charter school caps.



**George Miller, long-serving liberal lion and former Chair of the U.S. House Education and Labor Committee:**

“[Charter schools] are proving that we can address disparities and close the achievement gap when we apply the right reforms and resources. They are proving that low-income and minority children, the exact populations that too often get left behind, are in fact able to succeed.”<sup>1</sup>



## 2012

**Bill Clinton:** “I wish there were 10 times or 100 times as many KIPP schools because you have proved that you have solved the No. 1 challenge in American education. As a laboratory of democracy, you have proved that you can replicate excellence. Innovation is not just coming up with a good idea. Innovation is rapidly replicating excellence...There are still people in the public school establishment who fight charter schools, which I think is a mistake.”<sup>30</sup>

## 2014

**Congressional Democrats** voted almost 5:1 in favor of a bill to reauthorize the federal Charter Schools Program. The final tally: Democrats 158-34. Every Democratic leader voted in favor, including: **Nancy Pelosi (Democratic Leader); Jim Clyburn (D-SC, Assistant Democratic Leader), Steny Hoyer (D-MD, Democratic Whip), Xavier Becerra (D-CA, Chairman of the House Democratic Caucus), and George Miller (D-CA, Ranking Democrat, House Education Committee).**



## 2015

**NYC Council Member (now U.S. Rep. D-NY) Ritchie Torres:** “I believe that charter schools can coexist with a traditional public school system. I reject flatly the notion of an inherent conflict between the two. A system that contains both charter and traditional public schools is one that combines equity and innovation, and I see no reason to cap either one.”<sup>31</sup>



**Marian Wright Edelman, President and Founder of the Children’s Defense Fund:** “I’m deeply grateful to people involved in the charter school movement. Charters are an important part of the answer to what American children, especially low income and children of color, need.”<sup>32</sup>



# 2016

**Barack Obama:** “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.”<sup>33</sup>

**Martin Luther King III:** “We certainly have public schools that some will go to and do well, but we also have other options. Some people need a targeted kind of learning. They need a different approach, like charter schools. ... The reality is, if there are no options, if there is just one particular standard, then someone is going to fall through the cracks, as we’ve seen.”<sup>34</sup>

**Hillary Clinton:** “Quality public charter schools can provide parents with real choices for their children. In fact, many of the country’s best public charter schools are opening doors to opportunity for disadvantaged students. That’s why I have long been a strong supporter of public charter schools and an unflinching advocate for traditional public schools.”<sup>35</sup>



# 2017

**U.S. Senator and then ranking member (now Chairwoman) of the HELP Committee Patty Murray (D-WA):** “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.”<sup>36</sup>





# 2018

In Colorado, **Democratic Governor John Hickenlooper (now U.S. Senator)** and then 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.

In Washington, D.C., **Mayor Muriel Bowser** and the D.C. City Council passed the largest charter funding increase in a decade.

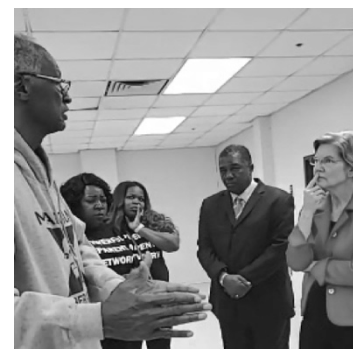


# 2019

In Colorado, **Representative Shannon Bird and Senator Rachel Zenzinger**, both Democrats, led the passage of HB19-1055,<sup>37</sup> which provided critical facilities funding, not otherwise available, to the state's public charter schools.

“Easy to be against charters if you are White. Harder if you come from a community which has had bad education outcomes and are finally seeing better results with public charters.” – tweet from **former Governor of Vermont, Presidential candidate, and Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean** on May 21, 2019

**Civil rights activist Howard Fuller** and pro-charter Black charter school advocates confronted Presidential candidate Senator Elizabeth Warren over her opposition to public charter schools.



# 2020

In a letter to Presidential candidate Joe Biden, a **coalition of civil rights and education advocacy groups** prioritized expanding public school choice, including public charter schools, as one of ten policy recommendations:

“Access to high-quality choices among different pre-K-12 public education providers is needed now more than ever as evidenced by the severe impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the way schools deliver learning to students. Congress and the next Administration should promote high-quality public education options so that all students

can attend a school that meets their academic and social-emotional needs. These public options include magnet schools, charter schools, career academies, language immersion schools, traditional district-run schools, and dual enrollment programs.”

## An Education Policy Agenda for the 117th Congress & Administration



# 2021

**U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona:** “There are excellent examples of charter schools. I have seen many in Connecticut... I also know there are phenomenal examples of neighborhood schools that are also doing great work. My passion is to ensure quality schools, period.”<sup>38</sup>



### **Congressional Black Caucus Institute’s 21st Century**

**Committee Report:**<sup>39</sup> “Charter schools are an integral part of a healthy education ecosystem, particularly for African-American K-12 students...[C]harter schools help low-income African American students in urban areas reach higher levels of academic achievement than do district-operated schools....In addition, 35% more African American teachers are employed by charters than district-operated schools... which has a profound impact on students.”

**House Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-SC):** “Every child deserves access to a high quality education and charter schools have been helping make that a reality since 1991.”<sup>40</sup>



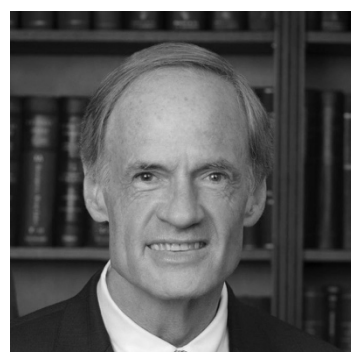
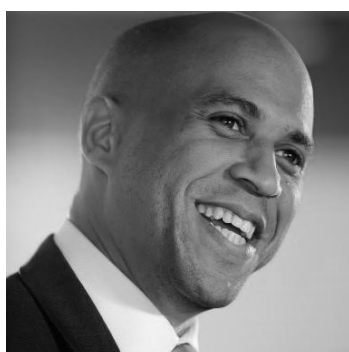
Bipartisan resolution co-sponsored by **Senators Michael Bennet (D-CO), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Tom Carper (D-DE), and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA).**<sup>41</sup>

*S. RES. 230*

*Congratulating the students, parents, teachers, and leaders of charter schools across the United States for making ongoing contributions to education, and supporting the ideals and goals of the 22nd annual National Charter Schools Week, to be held May 9 through May 15, 2021.*

*Resolved, That the Senate—*

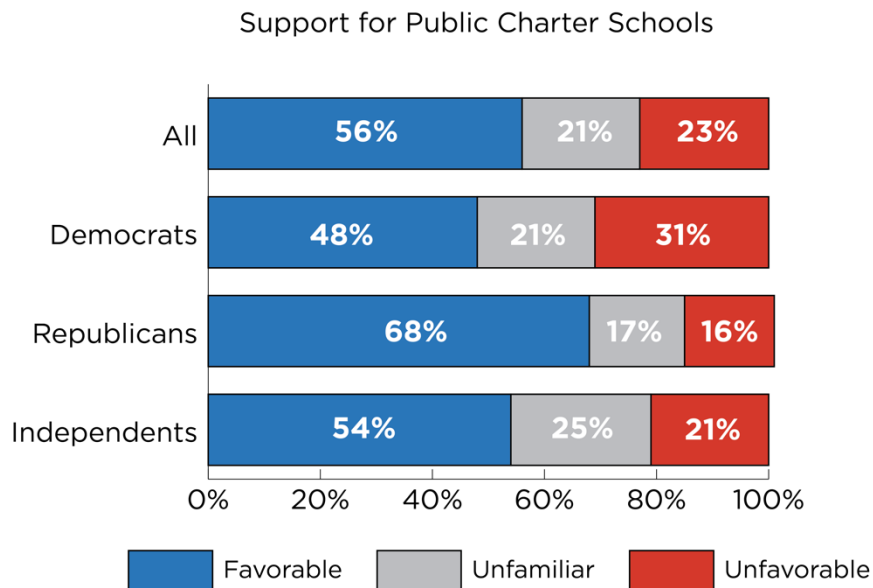
- (1) congratulates the students, families, teachers, leaders, and staff of public charter schools across the United States for—
  - (A) making ongoing contributions to public education;
  - (B) making impressive strides in closing the academic achievement gap in schools in the United States, particularly in schools with some of the most disadvantaged students in both rural and urban communities; and
  - (C) improving and strengthening the public school system throughout the United States;



# DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT FOR CHARTERS

## EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

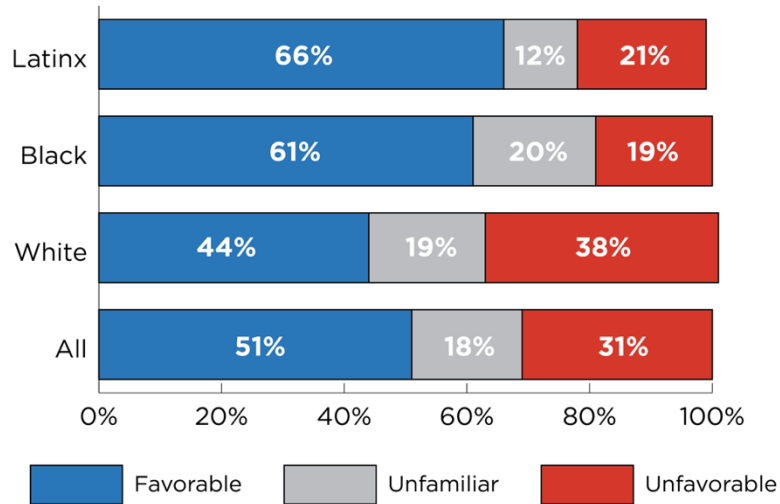
**Our polling shows that a plurality of Democrats supports public charter schools.** According to our own polling, conducted by Benenson Strategy Group in August of 2019, 48% of Democrats view public charter schools favorably and 31% unfavorably with 21% being unfamiliar.<sup>42</sup> And more recent polling from NYC, a district with one of the largest populations of charter school students, found that 65% likely Democratic primary voters supported public charter schools.<sup>43</sup>



Source: BSG Summer 2019 Poll<sup>44</sup>

As we reported in the second edition<sup>45</sup> of this guide, **there are stark differences in charter favorability between White Democratic voters and Democratic voters of color.** Our most recent polling shows that while a plurality (44%) of White likely Democratic primary voters have a favorable view of public charter schools, 61% and 66% of Black and Latinx voters, respectively, have a favorable view of charters. Given that charters disproportionately serve students of color, these findings indicate that opposition to charters within the Democratic party is driven by those who are less likely to benefit from them. Strong majorities of teachers and parents—those most impacted by public schools—also support charter schools: 57% and 67%, respectively.

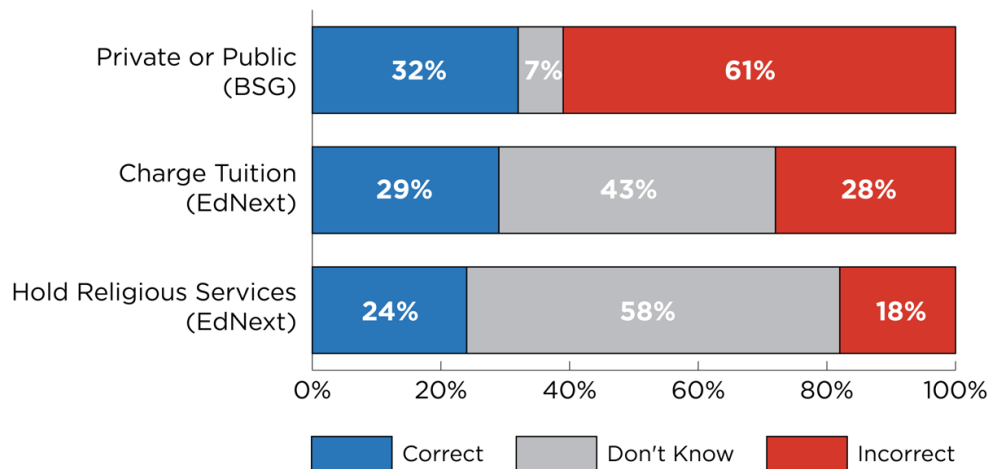
### Democratic Support for Public Charter Schools by Race/Ethnicity



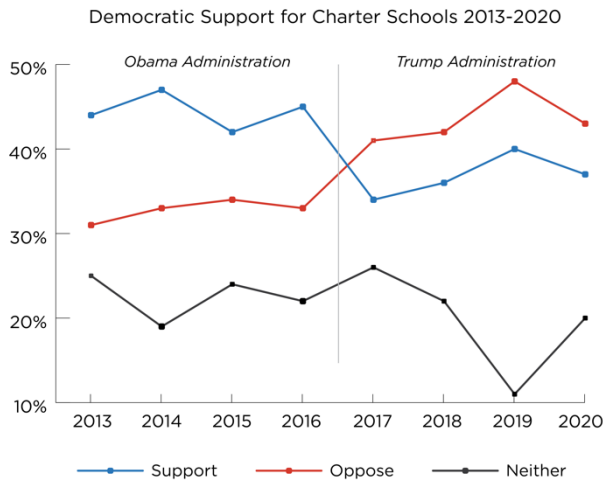
Source: BSG Summer 2019 Poll<sup>46</sup>—Reflects Likely Democratic Primary Voters

**Democratic support for public charter schools may be negatively affected by misinformation.** In one poll, 68% of Democrats were unable to correctly identify charter schools as public schools that operate independently from school districts, and 48% incorrectly believed that charter schools are private schools.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, 71% and 74% of Democrats could not identify that public charter schools cannot hold religious services or charge tuition, respectively.<sup>48</sup>

### Democratic Knowledge of Public Charter Schools



**Support has varied over time.** Polls of Democratic voters' opinion of public charter schools vary somewhat over time and according to which Democratic constituencies are being surveyed. Democratic support peaked during President Obama's second term, with Education Next's annual poll finding the highest Democratic support for charters—47%—in 2014. Support among Democrats dropped substantially during President Trump's first year in office to 34% but has somewhat rebounded, rising to 36% and 40% in 2018 and 2019, respectively, but dropping again to 37% in 2020.<sup>49</sup>

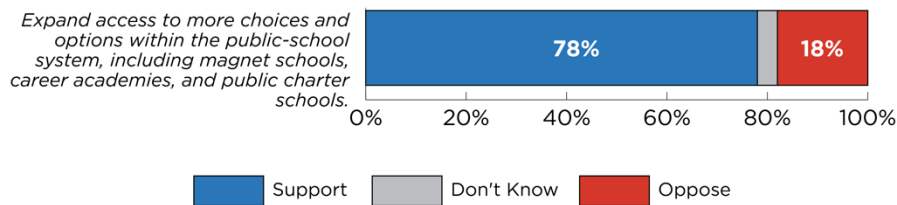


Source: EdNext 2020 Poll<sup>50</sup>

**Strong Democratic support for public charter schools as part of system of public school choice.**

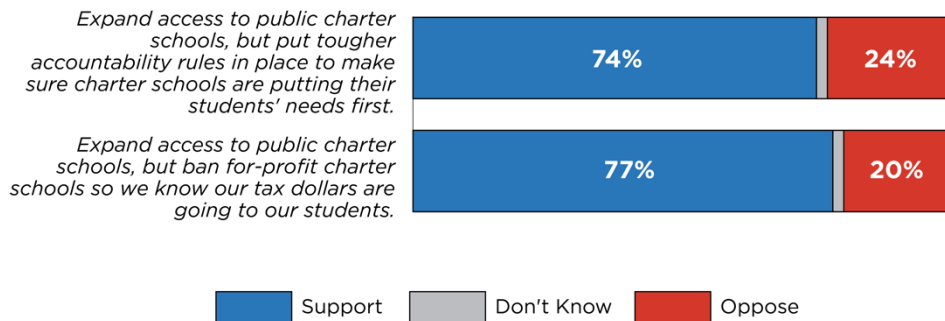
78% of Democrats support public charter schools as a part of a larger system of public school choice including career academies and magnet schools.

Democratic Support for Progressive Charter School Policies



77% of Democrats support expanding access to public charter schools, if for-profit charter schools are banned, while 74% of Democrats support charter schools with the adoption of additional accountability measures.

Democratic Support for Progressive Charter School Policies



Source: BSG Summer 2019 Poll

Given this, **strong Democratic education and advocacy efforts could result in substantially increased public support for charter schools more generally.**

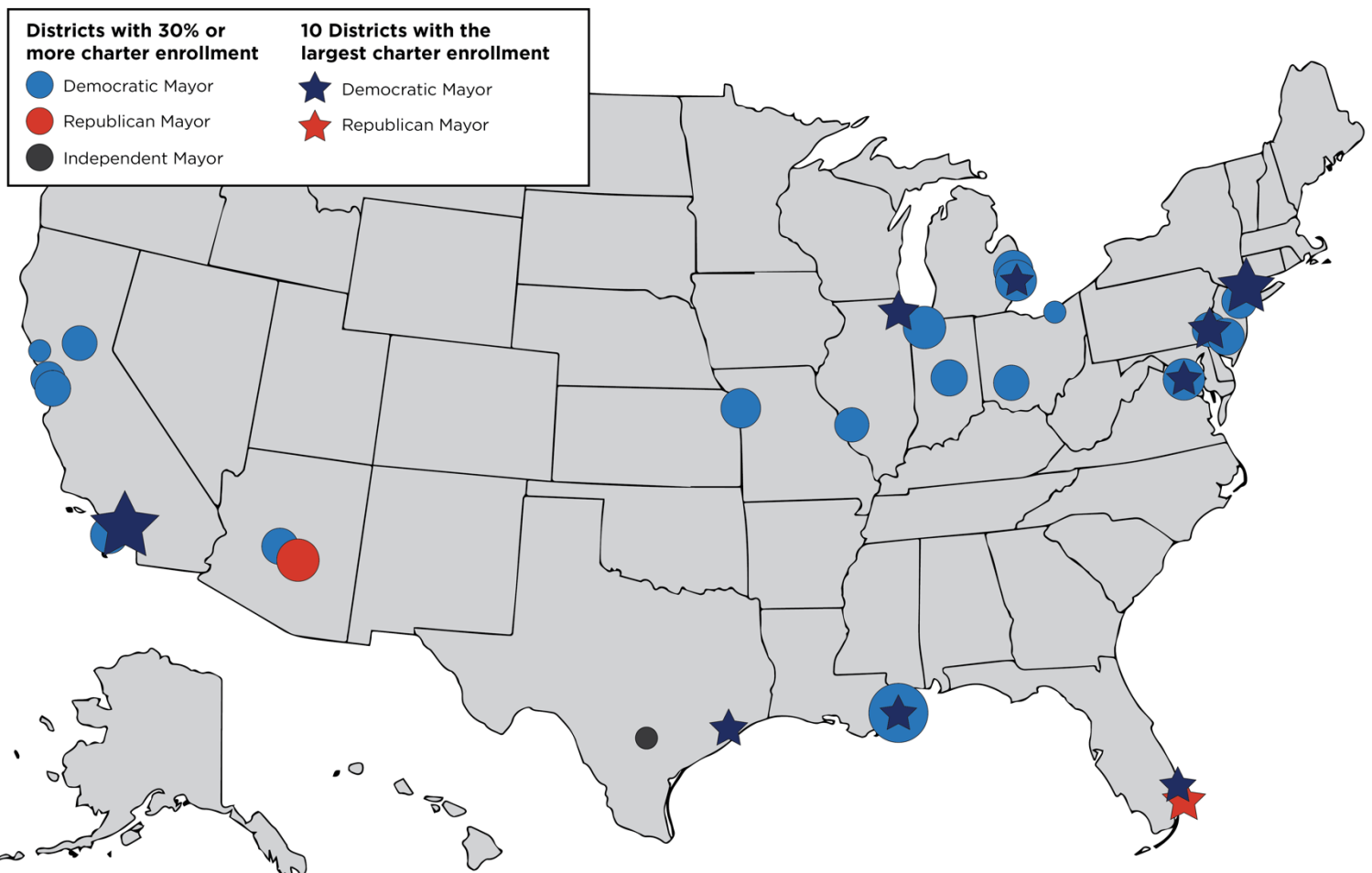
# CHARTER ENROLLMENT

## IN DEMOCRATIC STRONGHOLDS

*Democrats are the Predominant Party in Districts with the Largest Numbers and Concentrations of Charter School Students*

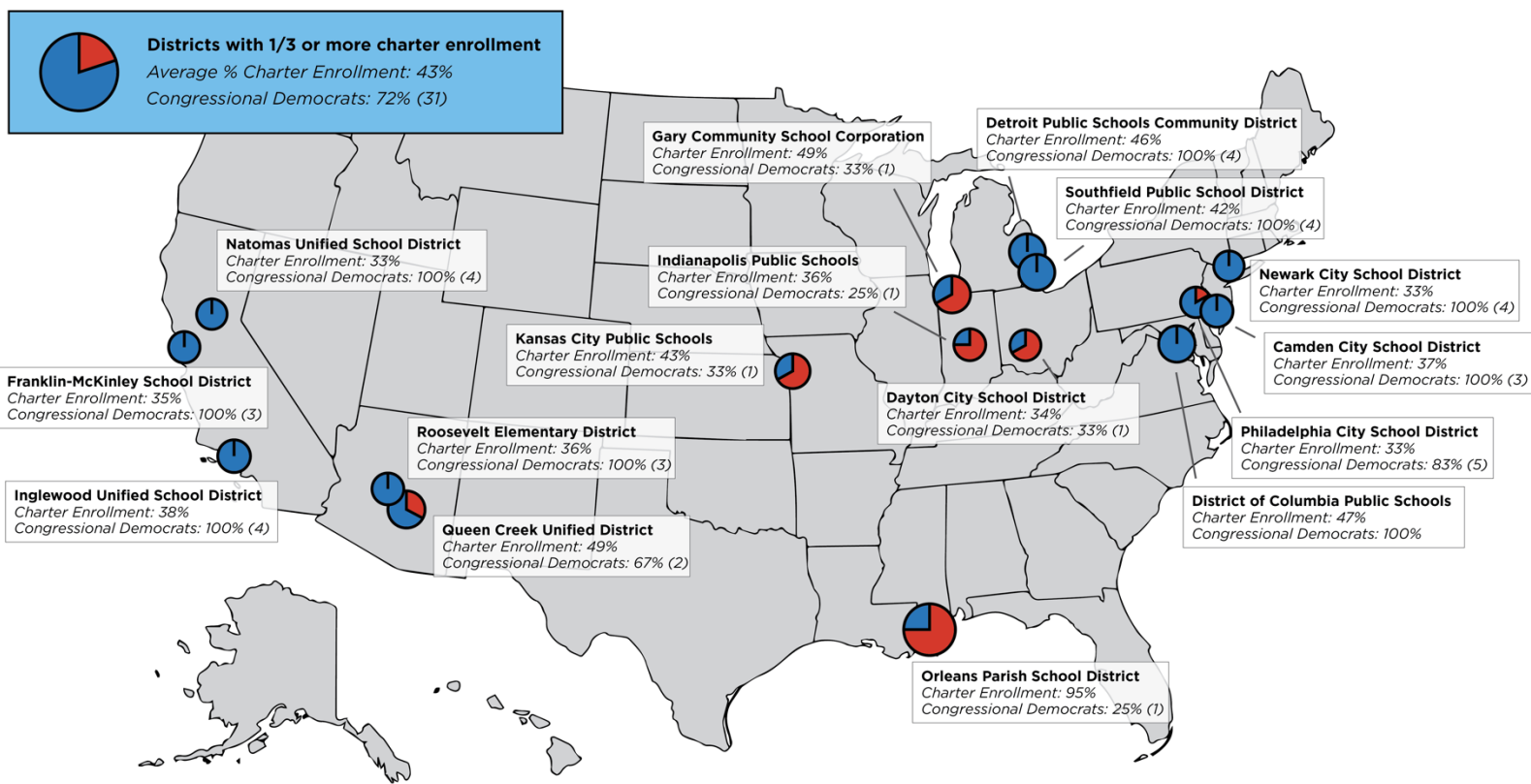
Some observers claim that the Democratic Party is the major impediment to the growth of public charter schools while public charters are universally loved by Republicans. The data, however, belie those assertions. **Even Democrats who have “philosophical” disagreements with the public charter school model can’t avoid contending with the fact that their constituents are increasingly making the choice to send their children to public charter schools.**

Democrats are the predominant party in almost all of the districts with the largest numbers and concentrations of charter school students. Democratic mayors preside over 19 of the 21 cities with districts that have 30% or more of its students attending public charter schools.



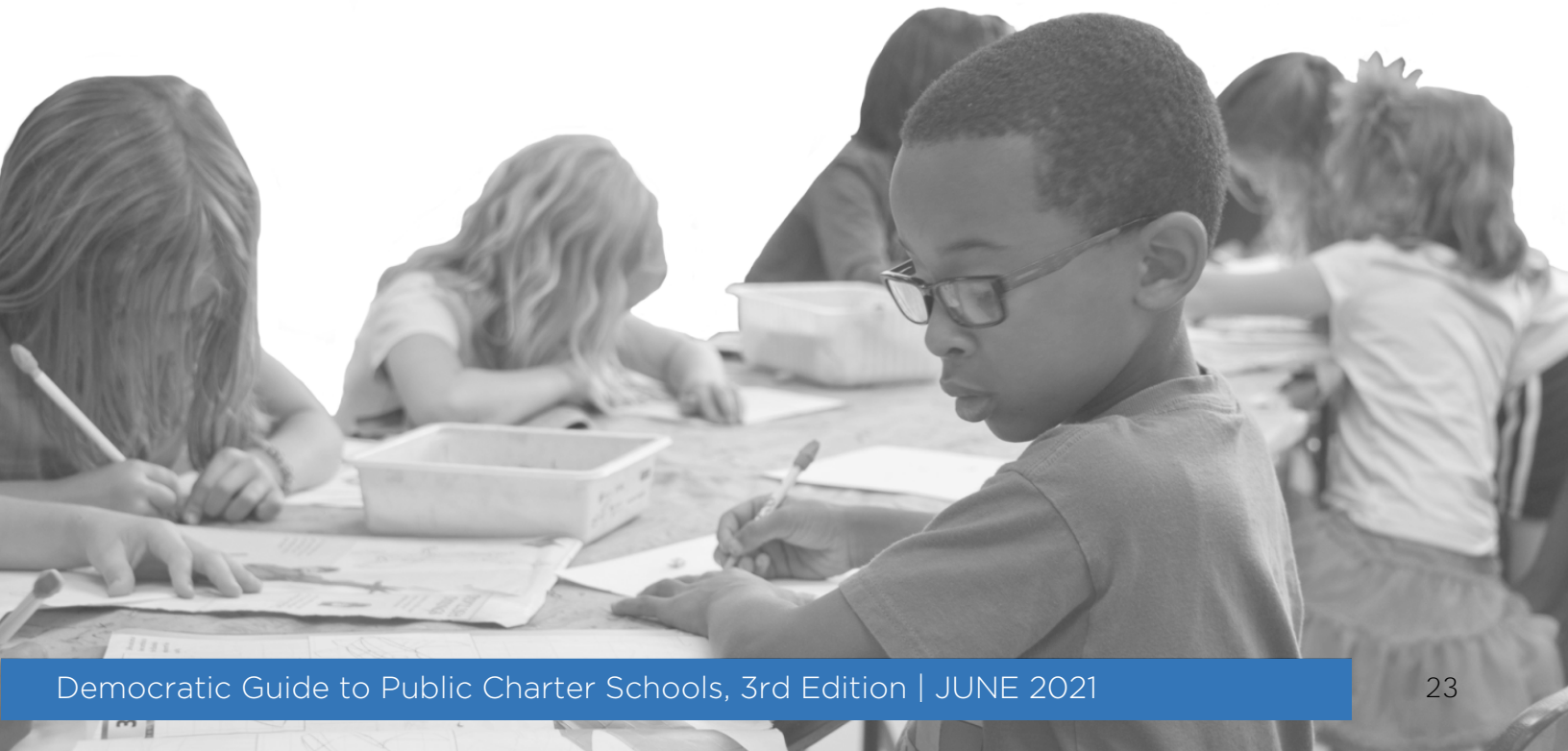
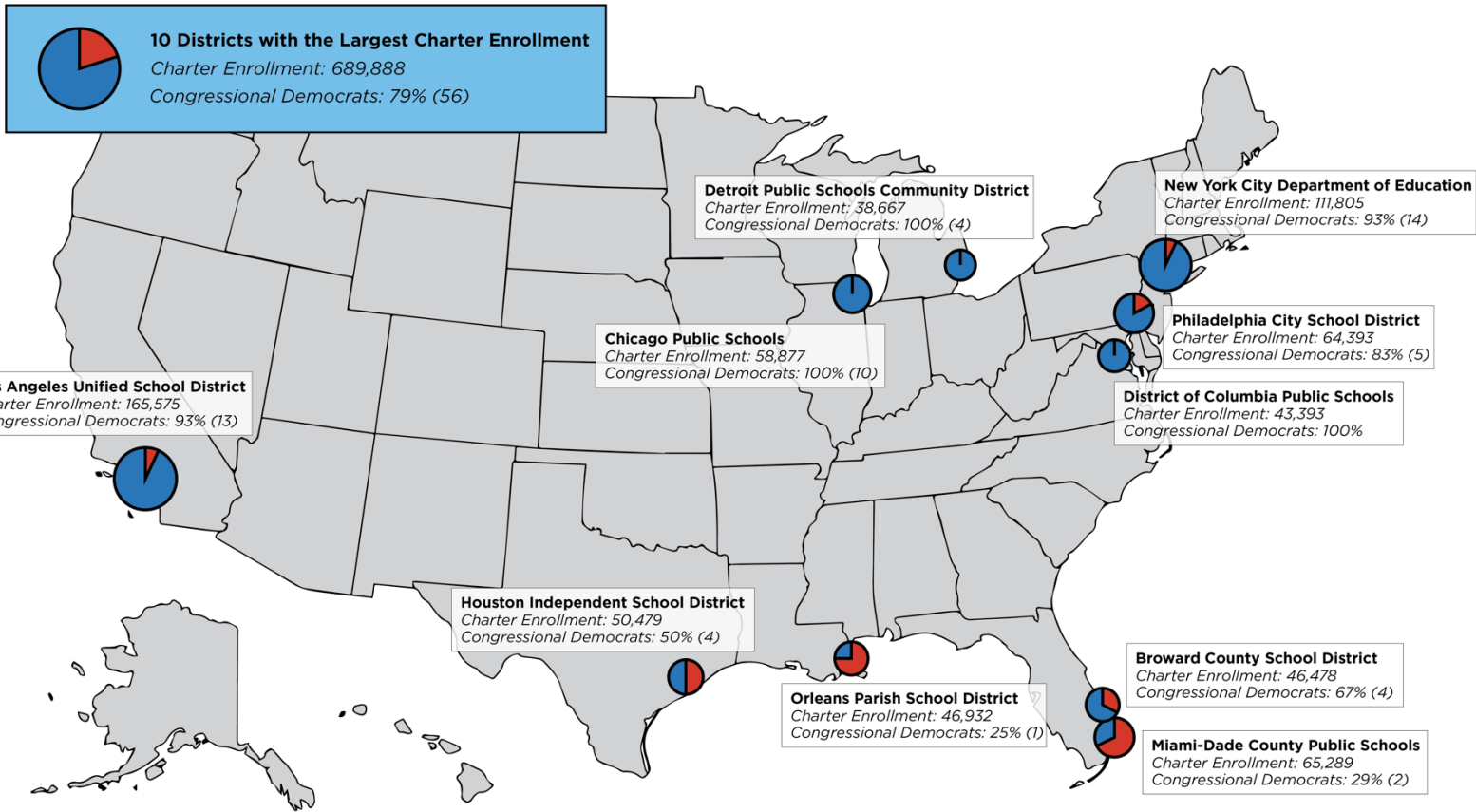
Since mayoral elections began 50 years ago in Washington, D.C., which has a higher percentage of students enrolled in public charter schools than any of the 50 states, every single mayor has been a Democrat as have all but a handful of members of the city council. Over that same period, every mayor of Los Angeles (L.A.), which has the highest number of charter school students of any city in the country, has been a Democrat. Fourteen of 15 L.A. City Council members are Democrats, as are four of the five L.A. County Supervisors, 13 of 15 state senators representing L.A., and 21 of the 24 State Assembly Members.

In addition, Democrats make up 72% of the Members of Congress (US House Representatives and Senators) representing all or part of the 16 school districts with at least a third of students enrolled in public charter schools.





Democrats also make up 79% of those Members of Congress (US House Representatives and Senators) representing all or part of the 10 school districts with the highest number of students enrolled in public charter schools.



# CHARTER SCHOOL OUTCOMES

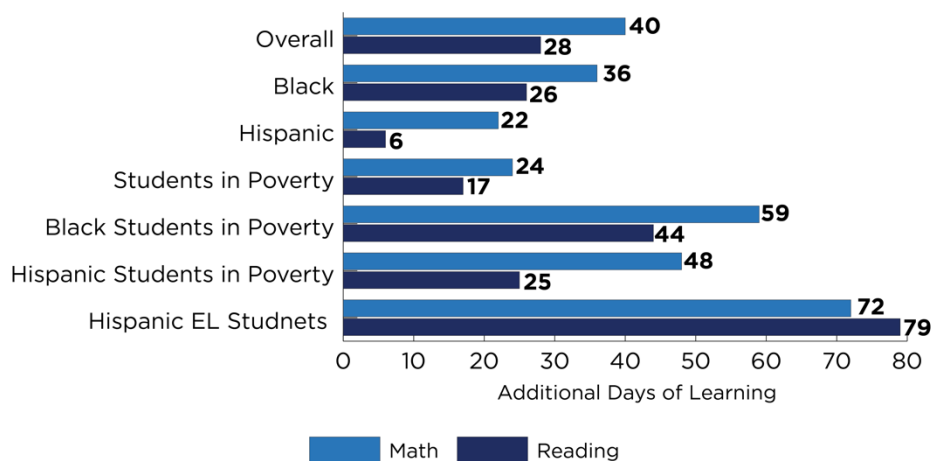
## PART 1: CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Public charter schools provide students living in high-poverty communities and students of color across the country with an alternative to what are frequently chronically underperforming district schools. While not all charter schools produce better academic outcomes for their students, the most rigorous and methodologically sound studies of charter school outcomes indicate that, on average, **Black students, students in poverty, and English Learners (EL) enrolled in public charter schools make significantly greater academic progress** as compared to their peers with similar demographics in traditional public schools.

Urban public charter schools have particularly strong academic results, compared to traditional public schools. CREDO's 2015 study<sup>51</sup> of 41 urban regions found that compared to their traditional public school peers<sup>52</sup>:

- All urban public charter schools students gained, on average, the equivalent of 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days in reading.
- Black students from low-income families gained the equivalent of 59 days of additional learning in math and 44 days of additional learning in reading.
- Hispanic English Learners saw the largest gains of any group, with 72 additional days of learning in math and 79 days of additional learning in reading.

Students in urban charter schools have significantly higher learning gains than their similar peers in traditional public schools. These gains are particularly strong for low-income students of color and Hispanic English Learners.



Charter quality across the 41 regions varied, but there were very impressive academic gains in a number of urban areas. Compared to their traditional public school peers:

- Public charter school students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Washington DC, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, and Newark had the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning in math.
- In reading, charter students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Memphis, Nashville, and Newark received the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning.
- Boston and Newark charter students had especially large learning gains compared with their traditional public school peers, with the equivalent of over 150 additional days of learning in reading and math, almost an entire school year.

CREDO's 2013 national study of 27 states<sup>53</sup> also found varied results across the country:

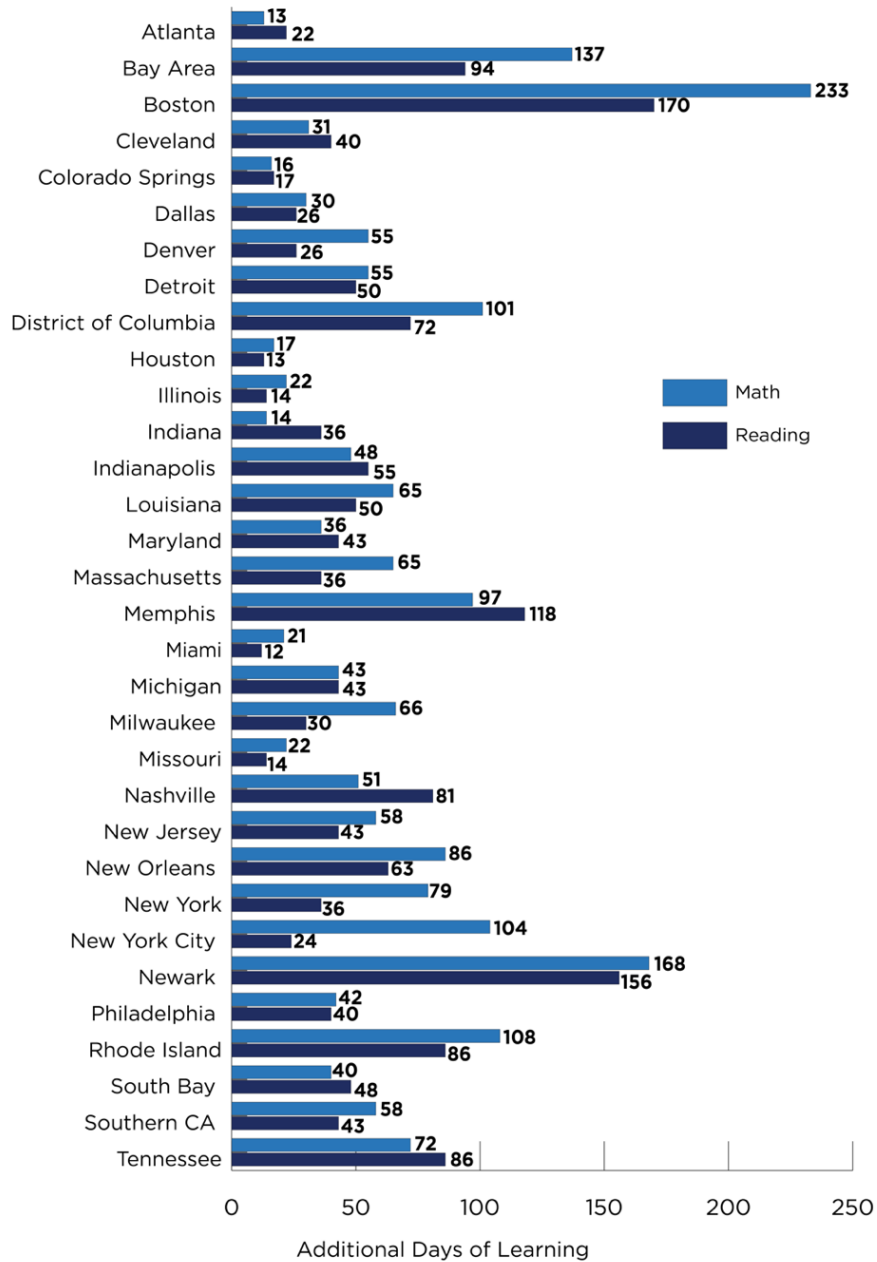
- In nine states—Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Tennessee—plus the District of Columbia—charter students did significantly better than their matched peers in traditional public schools in both reading and math. A 2019 study found similar results in Maryland.<sup>54</sup>
- In eight states—Arizona, Arkansas, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Utah—public charter students did significantly worse than their counterparts in traditional public schools in both math and reading.

**There is also evidence that charter sectors continue to improve.** A 2020 Harvard study comparing the nationwide growth of NAEP scores of charter and district schools found that between 2005 and 2017, charter schools have seen as much as 0.2 SD more growth on NAEP than district schools.<sup>55</sup> These results have closed the gap in NAEP scores between the two sectors, suggesting that the charter sector nationwide has improved substantially over the past decade and is now providing students with larger academic growth than district schools.

Additionally, subsequent CREDO state specific studies in Texas, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico, found strong growth compared to earlier studies. Texas<sup>56</sup> charter school students in 2017 performed at similar levels to district students in math and slightly better in reading. Similarly, charter students perform at similar levels to their traditional public school counterparts in reading and math in New Mexico<sup>57</sup> and reading in Pennsylvania.<sup>58</sup>

*“Public charter school students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Washington DC, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, and Newark had the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning in math. In reading, charter students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Memphis, Nashville, and Newark received the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning.”*

Public charter schools in 32 states and urban areas provide significant additional learning in both math and reading.

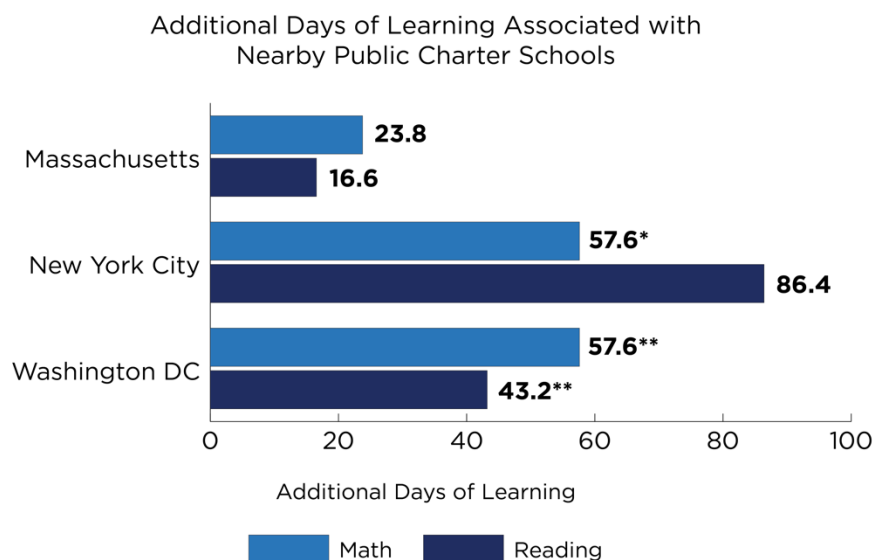


At the school level, CREDO’s urban study found that 76% of public charter schools perform similarly or better than district schools in math and 84% perform similarly or better in reading.

**Varied outcomes do not mean that progressive charter school supporters must unqualifiedly defend charter schools in states or districts where public charter schools underperform. Rather, it means we must continue to advocate for strong accountability to close ineffective schools, while working to replicate and expand those that are working for students.** The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) has identified 12 essential practices for authorizers that help ensure charter school efficiency and effectiveness, including: requiring annual, independent financial audits; having documented criteria for the evaluation of charter applications; and having established criteria for revocation.<sup>59</sup>

## PART 2: EFFECTS ON DISTRICT SCHOOL OUTCOMES

What about students that remain in traditional public schools? One counter narrative to charter schools is that even if students in charter schools are actually seeing academic gains, they are pulling resources from district schools, jeopardizing the achievement of those left behind. Yet, recent evidence suggests that, at worst, charter schools have no overall effect on traditional public schools, and at best **high-quality, urban public charter schools not only improve the achievement of students who attend them, but also spur district schools to improve achievement.**



Note: Learning gains converted from SD to days using CREDO's transformation of learning gains scale.

\*Statistically significant at the 95% level \*\*Statistically significant at the 99% level

**A study of charter expansion in Massachusetts found that per-pupil spending in district schools actually increased during a period of charter expansion, with money shifting from support services to instruction.**<sup>60</sup> Students in these districts also had small, though insignificant, gains in achievement. The presence of nearby high-quality charter schools in DC was found to result in an additional 1.5-3 months of learning in math and 2-4 months of learning in reading for students in district schools.<sup>61</sup>

**In New York City,** students in district schools co-locating with charter schools saw 2.9 months of additional learning in math and 2.2 additional months in reading.<sup>62</sup> Gains for district students were even stronger if nearby charters had high-achievement rates or were from an established, high-profile CMO, such as KIPP or Uncommon Schools.

**And in Texas,** districts with charters in their attendance zones have been found to be more likely to improve than districts without charters: from 2016 to 2019, 82% of districts with charters in their attendance zones boosted their fifth grade reading scores—compared to 67% of districts without any charters. Over the same period, the number of districts with charters where at least 95% of fifth graders met state math standards doubled, compared to a 63% increase among districts without charters.<sup>63</sup>

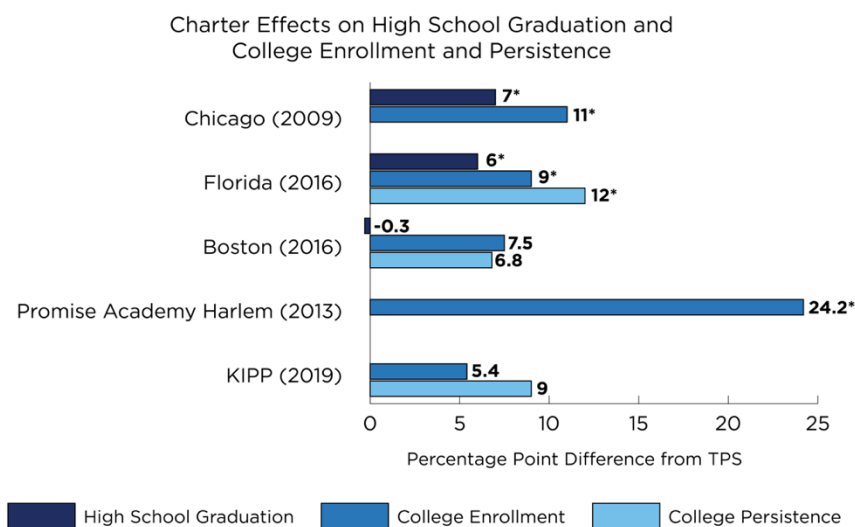
**Nationally**, a recent study found a small but statistically significant positive relationship between higher proportions of charter school students in a district and gains in student achievement.<sup>64</sup> This suggests that the increased presence of public charter schools either has no impact on district schools, or that impacts are largely compensated by changes in local policy or district actions.

### PART 3: NON-TEST SCORE OUTCOMES

Given the criticism that some charter schools' focus on test scores could overstate or distort charter benefits, researchers have begun to examine the impact of public charter schools on other important outcomes, including medium-term outcomes such as high school graduation and college enrollment, as well as behavioral outcomes like chronic absenteeism and suspensions. These studies suggest promising results for public charter schools.

Three recent studies examined the impact of charter high schools by looking at students who attended middle schools and comparing those that went on to charter schools to those that moved back to traditional public schools.

- **In Chicago**,<sup>65</sup> researchers found that continuing into a charter high school increased the likelihood of graduation by seven percentage points and college enrollment increased by 11 percentage points.
- **Similar effects were found in Florida**,<sup>66</sup> as well as a 12 percentage point increase in college persistence (attending college at least one semester in consecutive years), and a 12 percent increase in early career earnings.
- **A study of KIPP middle schools**<sup>67</sup> nationwide also found a 12.9 percentage point increase in 4-year college enrollment.



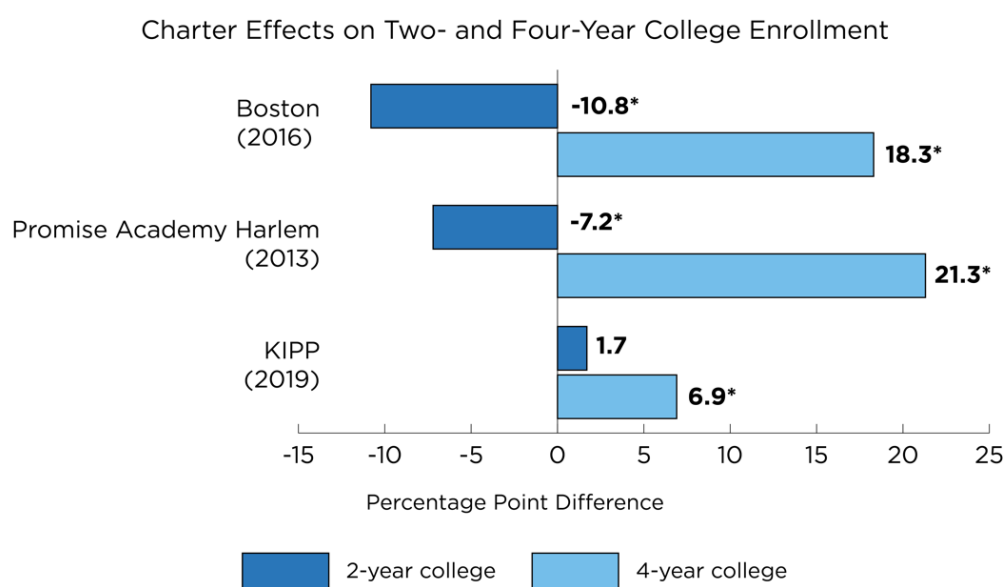
\*Statistically significant at the 95% level

**A study of charter high schools in Boston**<sup>68</sup> did not find significant differences in the likelihood of high school graduation or college enrollment. However, there was a distinct shift from two to four

year colleges, which research suggests increases the odds that those enrolled in college will actually obtain a 2 or 4 year degree:

- Charter attendance resulted in an 11 percentage point drop in 2-year college enrollment, with a subsequent gain in 4-year enrollment of 18 percentage points.
- Additionally, students who entered charter schools with below median academic achievement did see significant gains in overall college enrollment, compared to similar non-accepted applicants.

**A study of Promise Academy<sup>69</sup> in Harlem** found a similar shift: lottery winners—students selected for enrollment in charter schools with more applicants than available seats—were 21.3 percentage points more likely to attend a four-year college and 7.2 percentage points less likely to attend a two-year college.



Statistically significant at the 95% level

## NON-ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

**A study<sup>70</sup> examining charter schools in North Carolina** finds that students who first enrolled in a charter school in 9th grade were significantly less likely to be chronically absent (2 percentage points), be suspended (7pp), or commit a crime (0.9pp), compared to similar students who remain enrolled in a traditional public school. Students attending charter schools were also more likely to be registered to vote and participate in elections.

Additionally, the study of Promise Academy also found that female lottery winners were 12.1 percentage points less likely to report that they have ever been pregnant, and male lottery winners were 4.3 percentage points less likely to commit a crime, outcomes which could limit students' ability to successfully complete high school.

## INNOVATIVE TEACHER PREP



As we outlined last year in our paper *Breaking the Cycle of Mediocrity*<sup>71</sup>, traditional schools of education are failing to adequately prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom. These programs consistently emphasize theory over practice, lack quality clinical training and experience regarding both pedagogy and classroom management, and only 51% teach candidates about scientifically based reading instruction. The good news is that a growing number of new, alternative teacher preparation programs have emerged that are committed to improving teacher quality.

Public charter schools—unsatisfied with candidates from traditional preparation programs—are among the leaders in innovations to teacher prep. These programs are highly selective and focus on providing teacher candidates with extended time in the classroom guided by expert faculty and coaches.

Prominent charter networks Achievement First, KIPP, and Uncommon Schools founded the Relay Graduate School of Education<sup>72</sup>, a two-year master's degree program that includes a one-year residency and now operates in 12 states and Washington DC. Similarly, Urban Teachers<sup>73</sup>—cofounded by two DC charter schools—is a four-year program where teachers are full-time teachers for three years while being supported by rigorous coursework and ongoing coaching. MATCH charter schools<sup>74</sup> in Boston and High Tech High<sup>75</sup> in San Diego have also created their own teacher preparation programs with a strong focus on pedagogy and classroom practice.





# THE FUTURE OF CHARTERS

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG FEDERAL AND STATE CHARTER POLICIES

As evidenced by the varied academic outcomes across the country cited earlier, all charter schools are not created equal. While outcomes vary substantially between charter schools within states, on average we see that some states and regions have much stronger charter sectors than others.

*“Through continued and increased funding to CSP, Congress can support the growth of the strongest facets of the nation’s charter school sector, improving opportunities for students across the country.”*

The federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) provides resources to replicate and expand charter schools in networks that have a proven track record of strong outcomes for their students.

**Since 2010, the replication and expansion portion of the charter school program has given over ½ million students access to seats in a high-performing charter school network.**

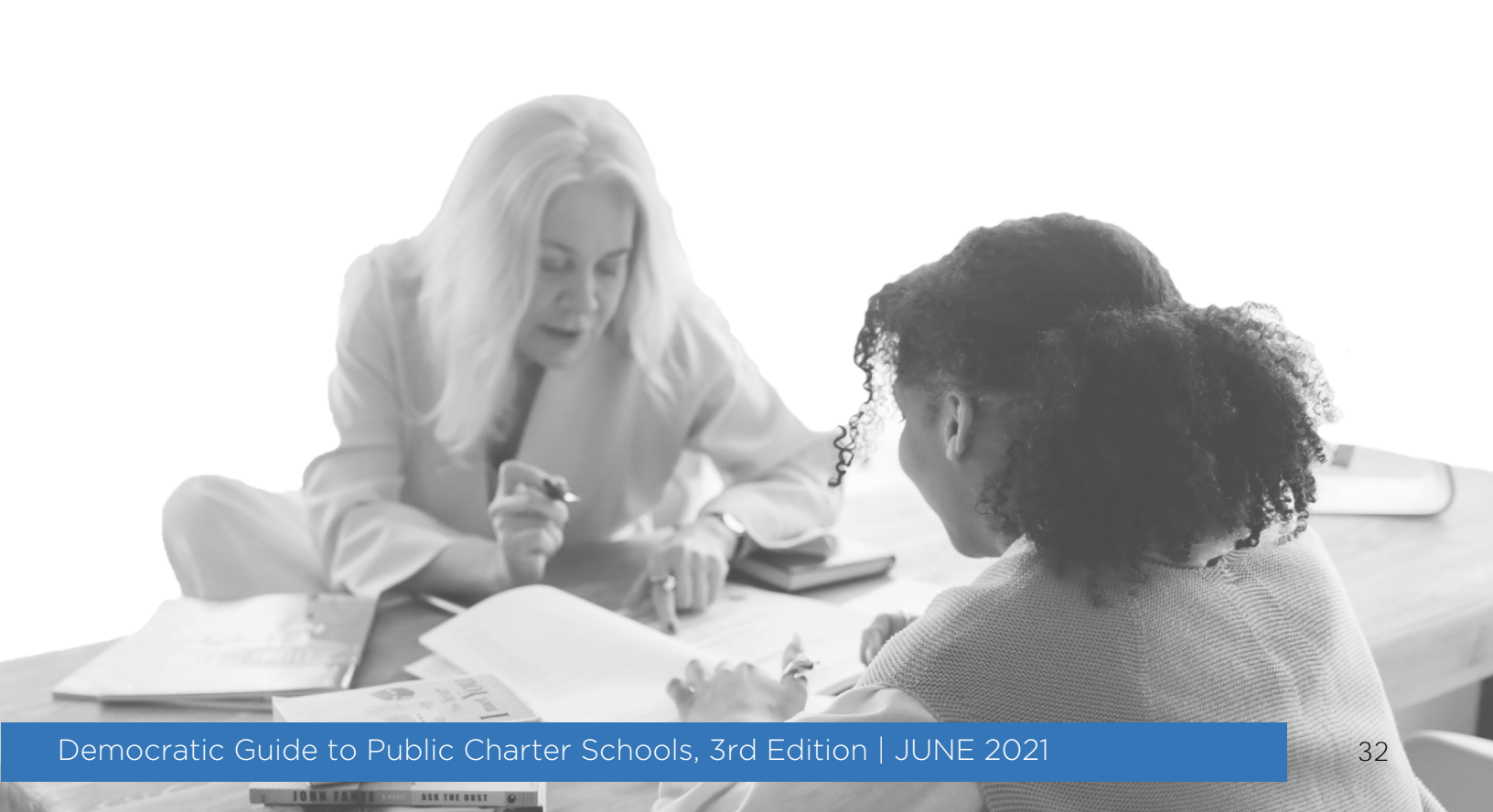
Through continued and increased funding to CSP, Congress can support the growth of the strongest facets of the nation’s charter school sector, improving opportunities for students across the country.

**Though the federal government can provide funding to encourage the creation and expansion of charter schools, state laws dictate nearly all aspects of public charter schools policy.** State charter laws that are weak on accountability and

oversight are often at least partially to blame for the disparities in charter outcomes between states by allowing schools with poor performance to continue to operate while not providing adequate or equitable resources for the overall charter sector. Common sense changes to state charter laws can support the growth of high-quality public charter schools through more equitable funding structures while limiting and closing low-performers by establishing strong charter authorizers. **More specifically, states can improve their charter laws by:**

- ✓ **Providing access to and funds for school facilities.** Finding an affordable facility is often one of the biggest barriers to starting new charter schools, especially in urban areas with high real-estate costs. States and localities can ease this burden by allowing public charter schools access to state capital funds, local mill levies, improving their ability to access unused public buildings, as well as passing provisions that facilitate space sharing agreements between charter schools and districts.

- ✓ **Provide equitable access to state and local education funds.** States should first ensure that funding formulas provide equal access to state funds to both district and charter LEAs. However, since local funding accounts for a large portion of education funding in most states, states should also remove local funding exemptions to ensure charter students have access to an overall equitable share of resources.
  
- ✓ **Ensure that charter school authorizers adopt and maintain policies that promote charter school effectiveness and responsible stewardship of public funds.** To strengthen the overall charter sector and ensure strong outcomes for all students, it's critical that authorizers have—and exercise—the authority to hold poor-performing schools accountable. While closing schools is often politically difficult and causes disruptions in learning, it's more important that students are not trapped in under performing schools. NACSA has identified 12 essential practices for authorizers that help ensure charter school efficiency and effectiveness, including: requiring annual, independent financial audits; having documented criteria for the evaluation of charter applications; and, having established criteria for revocation.<sup>76</sup>
  
- ✓ **Ban on for-profit charters.** For-profit charter management companies are incentivized to be efficient with resources to maximize profits, rather than outcomes for students. Additionally, they have an additional point of accountability, their shareholders or investors, who may have different priorities that conflict with what should be the ultimate goal of charter schools, improving student outcomes.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.publiccharters.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019-12/State-Leg-Session%20%281%29.pdf>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncsecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Enrollment-of-Students-with-Disabilities-in-Charter-Schools-and-Traditional-Public-Schools.pdf>
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- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.educationnext.org/charter-boost-special-ed-students-english-learners-inclusion-boston-charter-schools/>
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- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.educationnext.org/a-closer-look-at-charter-schools-and-segregation/>
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- <sup>9</sup> <https://credo.stanford.edu/publications/urban-charter-school-study>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://edtrust.org/educator-diversity/>
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- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.nber.org/papers/w25070.pdf>
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.educationnext.org/charters-and-common-good-spillover-effects-charter-schools-new-york-city/>
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- <sup>50</sup> <https://www.educationnext.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ednext-poll-question-wording-over-time-through-2020.pdf>
- <sup>51</sup> Stanford's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) studies are the gold standard for judging the performance of students enrolled in public charter schools compared to their peers in traditional public schools. This is because CREDO compares demographically matched sets of students enrolled in public charter schools with their peers who are enrolled in traditional public schools. CREDO matches students in charter schools to students in district schools according to: gender, race/ethnicity, level of English proficiency, family income, and baseline test scores.
- <sup>52</sup> <https://credo.stanford.edu/publications/urban-charter-school-study>
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