

A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS 2ND EDITION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FROM THEIR ORIGINS IN THE 1980s up until the present day, public charter schools have enjoyed strong bipartisan support, including from many prominent Democrats. Some of the most notable Democratic and progressive public charter school champions include:

- Ember Reichgott Junge, a Democratic State Senator from Minnesota, who authored the nation's first charter school law along with her Democratic colleagues Representatives Ken Nelson and Becky Kelso;
- Al Shanker, former President of the American Federation of Teachers, who was one of the earliest proponents of the public charter school model;
- President Bill Clinton, who spearheaded passage of the first federal law designed specifically to support charter school start-ups;
- President Barack Obama, who spurred states to lift caps on new charter schools and created the first-ever federal funding stream dedicated to replicating and expanding high-performing public charter schools;
- Democratic Governors such as Phil Bredesen, Jerry Brown, Andrew Cuomo, John Hickenlooper, Dannel Malloy, Gina Raimondo, and Jared Polis;
- Urban Mayors like Karl Dean, Rahm Emanuel, Vincent Gray, Michael Hancock, Mitch Landrieu, Tom Menino, and Antonio Villaraigosa; and
- Members of Congress, including Senators Michael Bennet, Cory Booker, Chris Coons, Dianne Feinstein, and Mazie Hirono and Representatives Hakeem Jeffries, Cedric Richmond, Zoe Lofgren, André Carson, John Delaney, and Adriano Espaillat.

In undertaking this important work, these and other leaders understand that high-quality public charter schools embody bedrock progressive principles of opportunity and equity. They accept that pursuing those principles is never without adversity and struggle. And they exemplify the ideal of fighting on behalf of our nation's most vulnerable individuals, which has always been one of the Democratic Party's core missions.

In this, the 2nd edition of our “Democratic Guide to Public Charter Schools,” we trace public charter schools’ roots back to leading progressive thinkers and advocates and show that the current public charter school sector reflects our shared values of equalizing educational opportunities and empowering local communities.

THIS REPORT INCLUDES THE MOST UP-TO-DATE DATA ON:

- President Obama’s legacy of making it possible for hundreds of thousands of students to attend high-quality public schools of choice;
- Polling that shows strong support for public charter schools among key Democratic constituencies, particularly voters of color and millennials;
- The extremely high concentrations of public charter schools and public charter school students in areas represented by Democrats, at all levels of government; and
- Charter school performance across the U.S., especially as it pertains to improved academic achievement for students of color and those from lower-income families.

THE REPORT IS PRESENTED IN FIVE SECTIONS:

PART 1 Reviews the origins of the public charter school model in the ideas and principles put forward by key civil rights and labor leaders.

PART 2 Recounts how Democratic and progressive leaders have been, and remain, among the strongest proponents of high-quality public charter schools.

PART 3 Summarizes polling data showing solid support for public charter schools among key Democratic constituencies particularly Black and Hispanic Democratic primary voters and millennials of all races and ethnicities.

PART 4 Maps political party affiliations of elected leaders at the federal, state, and local levels in areas with high numbers and percentages of public charter school students.

PART 5 Reviews outcome data showing that public charter schools are serving the Democratic goals of equalizing educational opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE, FIRST AND FOREMOST, PUBLIC SCHOOLS. Charter schools are more fundamentally democratic than traditional public schools in that 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.

Public charters have more autonomy than traditional public schools. Charter school leaders have greater freedom to make decisions and tailor their approaches to the specific needs of the children in that school. In turn, charter school authorizers, i.e., those entities that oversee charter schools, have responsibility for overseeing improvements in low-performing charter schools, closing chronically failing schools, and expanding and replicating those which achieve strong academic outcomes for their students.

Across the entire country, public charter schools have given low-income students and children of color an alternative to the chronically low-performing traditional public schools to which they would have otherwise been assigned.

Progressive 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 exam schools that can set admissions criteria based on test scores or other student characteristics, charter schools cannot pick and choose which students to admit.
- When the number of applicants exceeds available slots, public charters must enroll students by lottery.
- Like other public schools, charter schools, by law, are nonsectarian and nondiscriminatory in employment practices and cannot charge tuition.

Across the country, public charter schools have given low-income students and children of color an alternative to the chronically low-performing traditional public schools to which they would have otherwise been assigned. Being a progressive charter school supporter, however, does not mean believing that autonomy or choice are “magic bullets” for improving public education. It does not mean having to unqualifiedly defend the charter school sector in states or districts where public charter schools underperform or in cases where individual charter schools misuse public funds. It allows debate and criticism where individual charter schools engage in questionable practices.

The following issue brief offers a reminder that throughout their history, public charter schools have had strong roots in progressivism and that the current public charter school sector, on the whole, reflects progressive values of equalizing opportunity and empowering local communities.

PART 1: ORIGINS

CIVIL RIGHTS AND LABOR LEADERS WERE AMONG THE EARLY PROPONENTS OF THE CHARTER SCHOOL MODEL

A diverse set of national progressive leaders has advanced public charter schools from their inception through the present: former President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), **Al Shanker**; the past two Democratic Presidents, **Bill Clinton** and **Barack Obama**; the late liberal icon Senator **Paul Wellstone**; and former Governor of Vermont and Head of the Democratic National Committee, **Howard Dean**, to name just a few. Minnesota Democratic state senator **Ember Reichgott Junge** authored the nation's first charter law. Big-city mayors like **Cory Booker**, **Jerry Brown**, **Antonio Villaraigosa**, **Vincent Grey**, **Mitch Landrieu**, and **Tom Menino** have succeeded in creating some of the most high-performing charter sectors in the country.

“Why shouldn’t every school be a charter and enjoy the kind of autonomy now being offered to only a few?”

-Al Shanker, Founder of AFT, 1994

Many historians trace the origins of the public charter school model back to 1974 when Ray Budde, professor at the University of Massachusetts, published a paper titled “Education by Charter.”¹ According to Ted Kolderie, who was involved in the design and passage of the first state charter school law in Minnesota in 1991, Budde’s main goal was to empower educators and school leaders:

Budde’s proposal was actually for a restructuring of the district: for moving from ‘a four-level line and staff organization’ to ‘a two-level form in which groups of teachers would receive educational charters directly from the school board’ and would carry the responsibility for instruction.

While the report didn’t receive much attention at the time, it was republished 14 years later and caught the eye of then AFT President, Al Shanker. Shanker was so intrigued by the idea that he penned a column in the *New York Times* titled “A Charter for Change,” which took the charter conversation nationwide. Shanker saw charters as a vehicle for advancing

a proposal that AFT members had recently approved allowing teachers to set up their own autonomous schools:

The main idea that gripped the [AFT] delegates was the prospect of having hundreds, even thousands of school teams actively looking for a better way—different methods, technologies, organizations of time and human resources—to produce more learning for more students.²

Shanker was as politically astute as he was wonky. In part, he saw public charter schools as a viable alternative to privatization and vouchers:

If schools are to improve, they'll have to support a constant inquiry and search for new and better ways to reach youngsters. If they don't, the public will look for something other than public schools to educate our children.³

No one can know for certain what Shanker would think about today's charter sector, but it's important to review his writings because many observers cite Shanker as the go-to source for defining the "original idea" behind charter schools. The problem is that in doing so, they also have grossly distorted what Shanker actually said.

Two Myths Perpetuated by Shanker's Successors:

1

He viewed public charter schools solely as "laboratories of innovation."

2

He eschewed competition and was opposed to public charter schools as part of a system of public school choice.

The two related myths perpetuated by Shanker's successors are that: 1) He viewed public charter schools solely as "laboratories of innovation," implying Shanker envisioned only a limited number of public charter schools; and 2) Shanker eschewed competition and was opposed to public charter schools as part of a system of public school choice.

In a piece entitled “Restoring Shanker’s Vision for Charter Schools,” Richard Kahlenberg and Halley Potter erroneously claim:

Originally conceived as laboratories with which traditional public schools would collaborate, charters became a force for competition, with some suggesting they replace regular district schools.⁴

Similarly, AFT President Randi Weingarten asserts:

Unfortunately, some charter proponents have shifted the intent of charters from incubating ideas and sharing successes to competing for market share and taxpayer dollars.⁵

What is truly unfortunate is that Kahlenberg, Potter, Weingarten, and others have succeeded in getting too many elected officials, policymakers, and reporters to parrot these false claims.

What Shanker actually said is the exact opposite. Shanker liked the idea of choice and competition, stating:

A charter implied both the ideas of a franchise and competition. A school system might charter schools distinctly different in their approach to teaching. Parents could choose which charter school to send their children to, thus fostering competition.⁶

“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.”
-Late Senator and liberal icon Paul Wellstone, 1998⁸

Shanker also saw charters as having a role far beyond being “laboratories” and, in fact, argued against setting artificial limits on their growth. In a *New York Times* op-ed entitled “Every School a Charter,” Shanker proposed:

*What we really need—at the very least—are statewide curriculum frameworks and statewide assessments systems. Then, students and teachers in every school will know what kids are responsible for learning and whether or not they have learned it...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?⁷ [emphasis added]*

In just 100 words, Shanker, more than three decades ago, encapsulated the framework for accountability and public school choice that so many Democrats embrace today.

GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE

Some key civil rights icons envisioned public school reforms that presaged the charter school movement by calling for greater competition and radical changes to public school governance.

Kenneth Clark. Psychologist Kenneth Clark is mainly known for conducting, along with his wife Mamie, studies on racial identity that played a central role in the landmark Supreme Court school desegregation decision *Brown v. Board of Education*. But a decade later, in 1968, Dr. Clark called for what he referred to as “Alternative Public School Systems.”⁹ Clark believed that the public education system should be more broadly defined as an education system which is in the public interest and that “a system which says that the public has no competence to assert that a patently defective product is a sign of the system’s inefficiency and demand radical reforms in not in the public interest.”



Clark’s call for reform was bold: “Alternatives—realistic, aggressive, and viable competitors—to the present school system must be found.”

And he was acutely aware of the resistance that such changes would encounter:

*The development of such **competitive public school systems will be attacked** by the defenders of the present system **as attempts to** weaken the present system and thereby **weaken, if not destroy, public education**. This type of self-serving argument can be briefly and accurately disposed of by asserting and demonstrating that **truly effective competition strengthens rather than weakens that which deserves to survive**. [emphases added].*

Clark exactly predicted the types of attacks, from those invested in keeping the system locked into policies that work against the public that our school system is supposed to serve, on the alternative school governance models and choices provided by public charter schools.

James Baldwin. Progressive icon, author, and activist James Baldwin was a friend to both Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and an editorial board member of *The Nation*. According to Pulitzer Prize winning writer Clarence Page, Baldwin “never stopped articulating the anger and frustration felt by real-life Black Americans with more clarity and style than any other writer of his generation.”¹⁰

In the late 1960s, Baldwin espoused views¹¹ that were, in some ways, similar to those of Kenneth Clark regarding radical changes to school governance. At the time, two schools in the Ocean-Hill Brownsville section of Brooklyn were given increased autonomy because

Black and Latino parents, frustrated with resistance from White parents to integrate, decided that they needed to wrestle control away from White administrators and union leaders who were not looking out for the best interests of their children.

Baldwin wrote that it was the United Federation of Teachers, led by Al Shanker, who objected most strenuously to the same type of school autonomy that he would ostensibly come to embrace two decades later. Shanker launched a city-wide teacher strike which put an end to the “alternative way” of educating that happened to be working and was embraced by the Black and Latino parents of the community:



What broke the camel's back was the effrontery of the community in daring to pass on the qualifications of some of the teachers to teach their children. Rhody McCoy [who led the district] transferred several teachers out of his district, and this opened the saddest, most acrid, and most revealing chapter of this entire struggle...

McCoy's dismissal of the unsatisfactory teachers was not intended to be an attack on the United Federation of Teachers. McCoy was head of the district, responsible for and devoted to the well-being of the district, and there was no particular reason for him to have thought of the union at all. But his dismissal of the teachers meant he thought that he had the right to dismiss them. (McCoy felt that he had the duty to dismiss them). That he had no such right had to be made immediately and abundantly clear, not only to protect the power of the United Federation of Teachers, but also to prevent any of the billions of dollars involved in the education business from being controlled by black and Puerto Rican communities.

Perhaps nowhere was Baldwin more trenchant than when he described the disconnect between the espoused values of White liberals and the policies they defend that work against the interests of children of color:

The liberal sympathy—for I have never met a Northern school teacher who did not claim to be a liberal—is rarely equal to the dry-eyed task of teaching. I know that a good teacher is rare. I also know that they are not as rare as all that—I am a survivor of a ghetto school—and that their rarity is not the problem. The problem is that they are deliberately made rare and relentlessly weeded out. The process is efficient and it, too, operates on a level which absolves any particular individual of responsibility.

We'll never know whether Shanker fundamentally changed his views on school autonomy 20 years later when he began to voice his support for public charter schools. But the conflict between that autonomy and the union's presumption that they, rather than school leaders and parents, are the ultimate arbiter of personnel decisions remains a key tension in the public charter school debate today.

PART 2: SUPPORT FROM DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

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:

- 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 with charter schools, 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%);¹² 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 key Democratic public charter school supporters, from their inception to the present day:



PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON

President Bill Clinton was one of the earliest proponents of charter schools from either political party. During his time in the White House, 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 remains 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 2000¹³



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 2016¹⁴



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



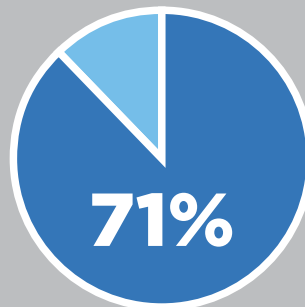
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Charter Management Organizations
expanding

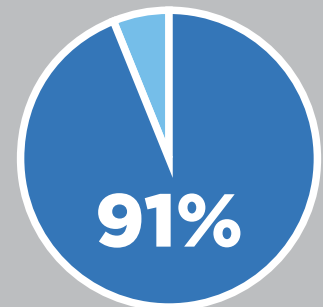
REAL INVESTMENTS. President Obama increased funding for the federal Charter Schools Program more in his first year in office than George W. Bush did over his entire eight years as President.

FOCUSING ON WHAT WORKS. As part of the largest increase in federal education funding in history—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 2018 (see left infographic).¹⁵

The vast majority of students in schools run
by the nation's high-performing charter
management organizations are low-income
students and students of color.¹⁶



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 quotations 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.¹⁸



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.”¹⁷



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. For example, New York’s governor, Democrat Andrew Cuomo, one of the biggest charter school champions at the gubernatorial level, was resoundingly re-elected to a third term. Earlier in 2018, Cuomo also beat back a primary challenge from an opponent who made his support of public charter schools a central issue. Similarly, in his 2018 gubernatorial bid, former Democratic Congressman Jared Polis (D-Boulder, CO) was challenged in the primaries for his longstanding and active support of public charter schools yet beat the anti-charter candidate by almost 2:1 margin. Governor Polis went on to win the 2018 general election for Governor in a landslide.

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 that 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 is a wide swath of Democrats across the country, at all levels of government, who are among public charter schools' most vocal and influential advocates.

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 named 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 many groups, 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 consid



**NEW YORK TIMES, MONDAY,
JUNE 30, 1997¹⁹**

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."²⁰

PART 3: PUBLIC OPINION

BIG PICTURE. Most polling shows solid support among voters for public charter schools, but there are some important differences both between and within the two major political parties.

Here are our major takeaways:

- Findings from a DFER-commissioned poll by the Benenson Strategy Group²¹ indicate that **there is strong public support for public charter schools among key Democratic constituencies**, particularly Black and Hispanic voters.
- Findings from a poll of **millennial voters, another key Democratic constituency, show even higher levels of support** overall and similar trends among racial and ethnic groups, relative to each other.
- **Progressive charter advocates have some work to do with White Democratic primary voters** who expressed the lowest favorability for public charter schools of all key demographic categories and who are also less likely to have their children enroll in and benefit from public charter schools.

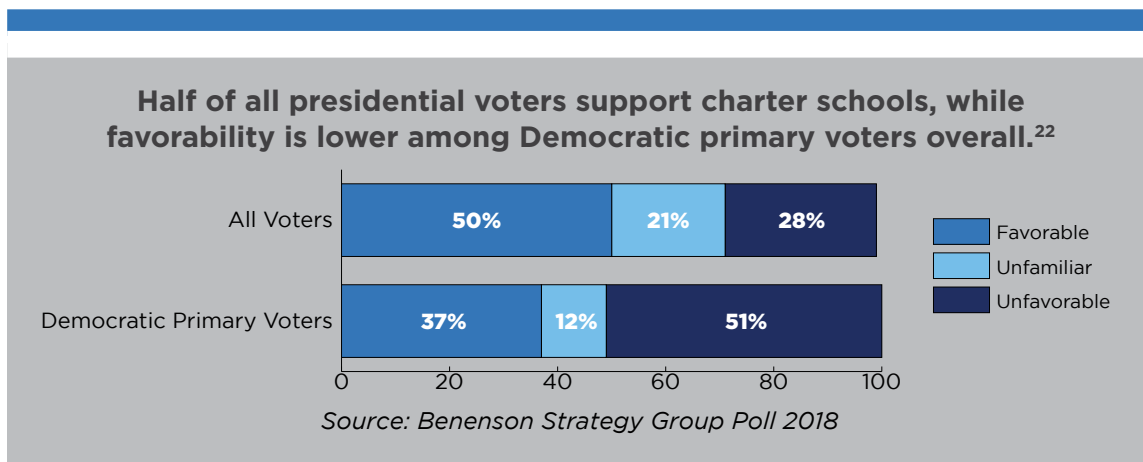


“Easy to be against charters if you are white. Harder if you come from a community which has had bad education outcomes and are finally seeing better results with public charters.”
- tweet from Howard Dean on May 21, 2019

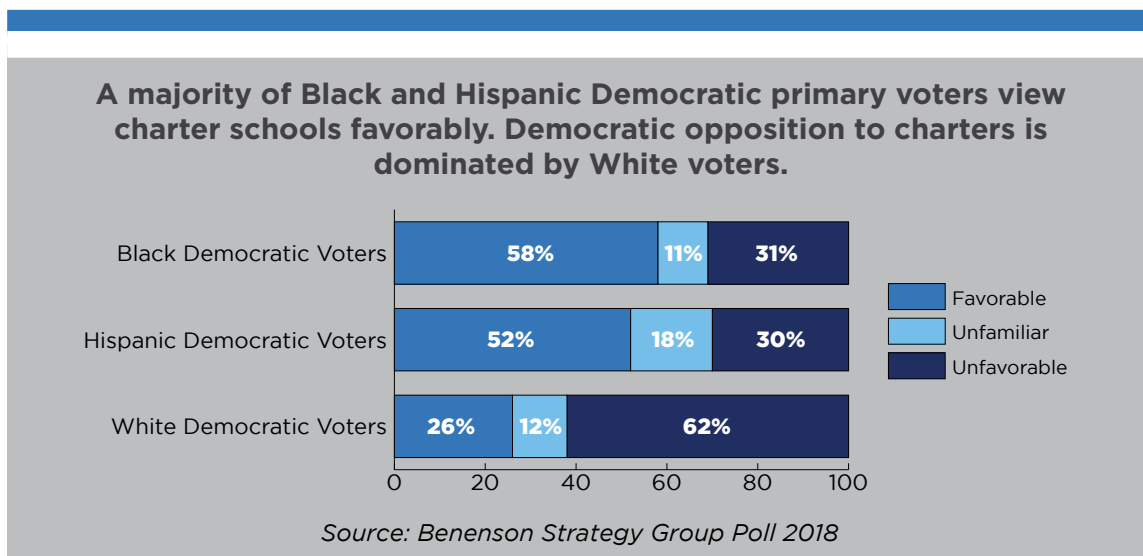
- **The views of White Democratic voters seem to be a significant political impediment to parents of color** gaining access to high-quality public charter schools that best serve their children.
- **Every key Democratic constituency supports public charter schools as part of a system of other public school choice options** that includes magnet schools and career academies.

PRESIDENTIAL VOTERS. Among those who cast a vote for President in 2016, 50% had a favorable opinion of public charter schools while only 28% of had an unfavorable view. About one in five Presidential voters were unfamiliar with public charter schools.

DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY VOTERS. The picture gets more interesting and complicated when one looks at Democratic primary voters. Among all Democratic primary voters, a slight majority held an unfavorable view of public charter schools, while slightly more than one-third had a favorable view. Democratic voters were more aware than Presidential voters overall of public charter schools, as only about one in 10 Democrats say they were unfamiliar with charter schools.



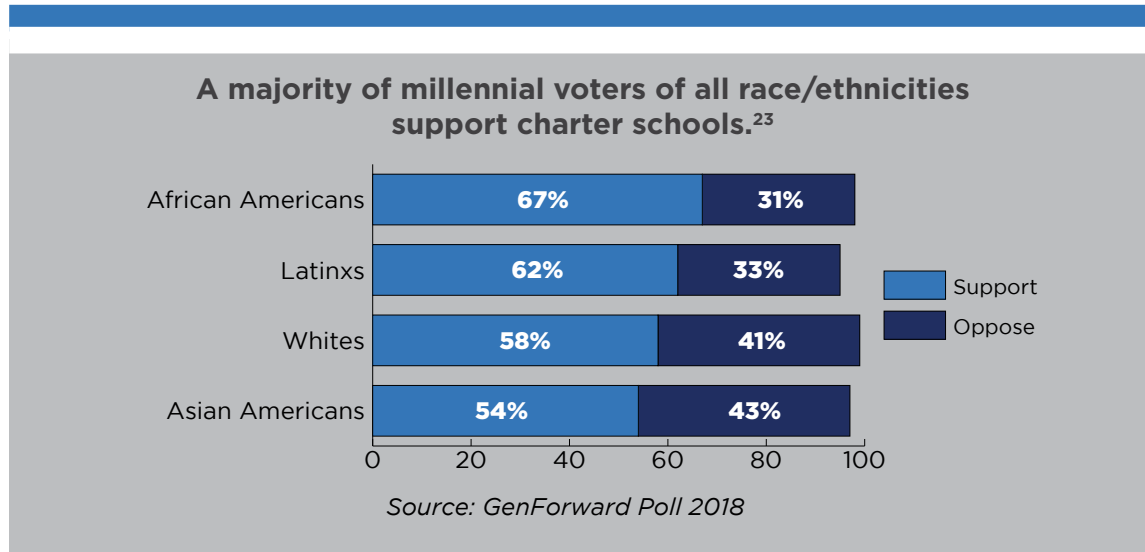
DEMOCRATIC VOTERS OF COLOR. We decided to unpack our findings on Democratic primary voters and look at responses by race and ethnicity. The differences here are stark and highly illuminating. Democratic voters of color were more than twice as likely as White Democratic voters to hold favorable opinions of public charter schools. Black Democratic



voters both gave the highest favorability ratings to public charter schools and were the least likely to be unfamiliar with them. Charter school favorability among Black Democratic voters was 58%, and favorability among Hispanic voters was only slightly lower, at 52%. In contrast, only 26% of White Democratic voters viewed charter schools favorably.

Democratic voters of color were more than twice as likely as White Democratic voters to hold favorable opinions of public charter schools.

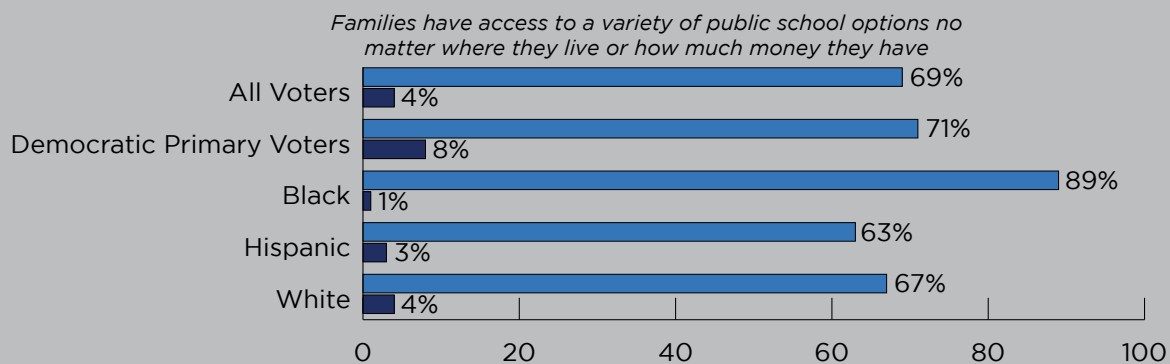
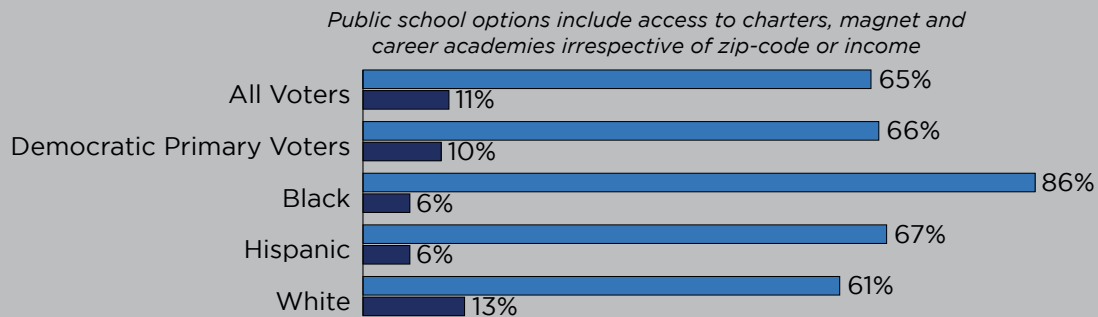
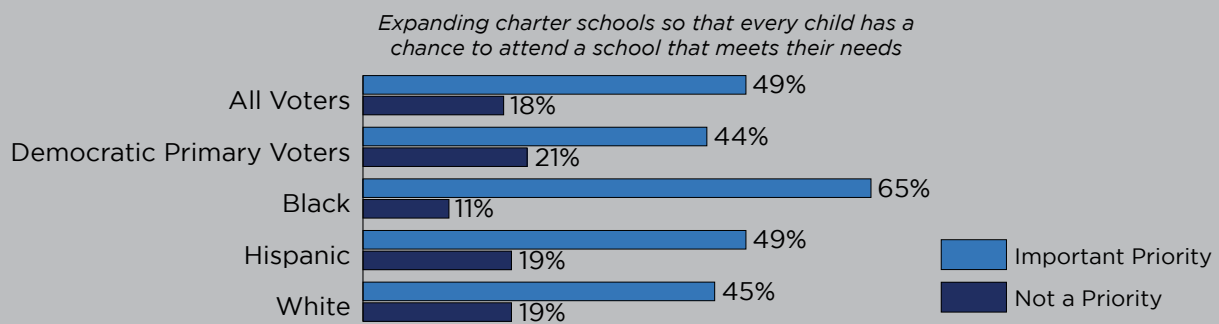
MILLENNIAL VOTERS. A clear majority of millennial voters also support public charter schools. Among millennial voters, as with voters overall and Democratic primary voters, African American voters indicated the highest level of support at 67%, closely followed by Latinx millennial voters at 62% and White millennial voters at 58%. Millennial voters are a key Democratic constituency who came out to vote in record numbers in the 2016 election.



CHARTERS AS PART OF A SYSTEM OF PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE. Our polling also finds that voters in both parties consistently support public school choice, both with and without the specific mention of public charter schools. The highest support for public school choice among Democratic primary voters—71%—comes when those surveyed were asked how high a priority it should be that “families have access to a variety of public school

options no matter where they live or how much money they have.” A solid two-thirds of Democratic primary voters placed a high priority on providing public school options that include access to public charters, magnets, and career academies.

An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that providing students with public school options regardless of where they live is an important priority. Black voters in particular strongly support this position.²⁴



Source: Benenson Strategy Group Poll 2018

PART 4: 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 and that public charters are universally loved by Republicans. The data, however, disprove those assertions.

Democrats are the predominant party in almost all of the districts with the largest numbers and concentrations of charter school students (see tables on pages 23-26). Democratic mayors preside over six of the seven cities with districts that have 40% or more of students attending public charter schools,²⁵ and Democratic or Democratic-affiliated mayors preside over all 13 cities with districts that have 30% to 39% of students attending public charter schools.

Some observers claim that the Democratic party is the major impediment to the growth of public charter schools and that public charters are universally loved by Republicans. The data, however, disprove those assertions.

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 all five L.A. County Supervisors, seven of the eight state senators representing L.A., and all 15 State Assembly Members.

In addition, Democrats make up 83% of the Members of Congress representing all or part of the 21 school districts with the highest percentage of students enrolled in public charter schools. Democrats also make up 95% of those Members of Congress representing all or part of the 10 school districts with the highest number of students enrolled in public charter schools. 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.

In contrast, of the six states that do not have charter school laws—Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia—all but one, Vermont, are solid Red states. Moreover, of the eight states that have only recently passed charter school laws or have less than one percent of students enrolled in charters, only two are Blue states: Virginia and Washington. The other six are solidly Red: Alaska, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Mississippi, and Wyoming. At the district-level, some key Red states enroll far fewer charter students than Blue states:

- **Washington, DC:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **90,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **46%**
- **Newark, NJ:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **52,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **31%**
- **Omaha, NE:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **52,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **0%**
- **Wichita, KS:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **50,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **0%**
- **Montgomery, AL:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **31,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **0%**
- **Jackson, MS:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **28,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **3%**
- **Camden, NJ:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **14,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **38%**
- **Inglewood, CA:**
Total number of public K-12 students: **13,000**
Percentage of students enrolled in charters: **30%**

Even Democrats who have ‘philosophical’ disagreements with the public charter school model can’t avoid contending with the fact that their constituents are, in increasing numbers, choosing charter schools for their children.

PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ATTENDING CHARTERS - MAYORS

Democratic mayors preside over six of the seven cities with districts that have 40% or more of its students attending public charter schools.²⁶

Rank	School District	% Charter School Enrollment	City Where District is Located	Mayor of the City Where District is Located	Mayor is a Democrat or Leans Democrat
1	Orleans Parish School District	93%	New Orleans, LA	LaToya Cantrell	✓
2	Gary Community School Corporation	46%	Gary, IN	Karen Freeman-Wilson	✓
3	Queen Creek Unified District	48%	Queen Creek, AZ	Gail Barney	✗
4	District of Columbia Public Schools	46%	Washington, DC	Muriel Bowser	✓
5	Detroit Public Schools Community District	53%	Detroit, MI	Mike Duggan	✓
6	Kansas City School District	43%	Kansas City, MO	Sly James	✓
7	Southfield Public School District	42%	Southfield, MI	Kenson Siver	✓

Democratic or Democratic-leaning mayors preside over all 13 cities with districts that have 30% to 39% of its students attending public charter schools.

Rank	School District	% Charter School Enrollment	City Where District is Located	Mayor of the City Where District is Located	Mayor is a Democrat or Leans Democrat
8	Inglewood Unified School District	38%	Inglewood, CA	James Butts Jr.	✓
9	Camden City School District	37%	Camden, NJ	Frank Moran	✓
10 (tie)	Roosevelt Elementary District	36%	Phoenix, AZ	Kate Gallego	✓
	Indianapolis Public Schools	36%	Indianapolis, IN	Joe Hogsett	✓
12	Franklin-McKinley School District	35%	San Jose, CA	Sam Liccardo	✓
13	Dayton City School District	34%	Dayton, OH	Nan Whaley	✓
14 (tie)	Natomas Unified School District	33%	Sacramento, CA	Darrell Steinberg	✓
	Philadelphia City School District	33%	Philadelphia, PA	Jim Kenney	✓
	Newark City School District	33%	Newark, NJ	Ras Baraka	✓

Rank	School District	% Charter School Enrollment	City Where District is Located	Mayor of the City Where District is Located	Mayor is a Democrat or Leans Democrat
17 (tie)	Alum Rock Union Elementary School District	32%	San Jose, CA	Sam Liccardo	✓
	St. Louis City School District	32%	St. Louis, MO	Lyda Krewson	✓
19 (tie)	Cleveland Municipal School District	30%	Cleveland, OH	Frank Jackson	✓
	San Antonio Independent School District	30%	San Antonio, TX	Ron Nirenberg	✓
	Oakland Unified School District	30%	Oakland, CA	Libby Schaaf	✓

NUMBER OF STUDENTS ATTENDING CHARTERS - MAYORS

Democratic mayors preside over nine of the 10 cities with districts that have the highest enrollment of students attending public charter schools.²⁷

Rank	School District	Charter Students	City Where District is Located	Mayor of the City Where District is Located	Mayor is a Democrat or Leans Democrat
1	Los Angeles Unified School District	163,575	Los Angeles, CA	Eric Garcetti	✓
2	New York City Department of Education	111,805	New York, NY	Bill de Blasio	✓
3	Miami-Dade County Public Schools	65,289	Miami, FL	Francis Suarez	✗
4	Philadelphia City School District	64,393	Philadelphia, PA	Jim Kenney	✓
5	Chicago Public Schools	58,877	Chicago, IL	Lori Lightfoot	✓
6	Houston Independent School District	50,479	Houston, TX	Sylvester Turner	✓
7	Orleans Parish School District	46,932	New Orleans, LA	LaToya Cantrell	✓
8	Broward County School District	46,478	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Dean Trantalis	✓
9	District of Columbia Public Schools	43,393	Washington, DC	Muriel Bowser	✓
10	Detroit Public Schools Community District	38,667	Detroit, MI	Mike Duggan	✓

MEMBERS OF CONGRESS REPRESENTING DISTRICTS WITH THE LARGEST CHARTER STUDENT ENROLLMENT

DISTRICTS WITH THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Democrats make up 83% of the Members of Congress representing all or part of the 21 school districts with the highest *percentage* of students enrolled in public charter schools.²⁸

School District	% Charter School Enrollment	% Democratic Members of Congress (House)	Number of House Members (Democrat/Total)
Orleans Parish School District	95%	50%	1/2
Gary Community School Corporation	49%	100%	1/1
Queen Creek Unified District	49%	0%	0/1
District of Columbia Public Schools	47%	100%	1/1
Detroit Public Schools Community District	46%	100%	2/2
Kansas City Public Schools	43%	100%	1/1
Southfield Public School District	42%	100%	2/2
Inglewood Unified School District	38%	100%	2/2
Camden City School District	37%	100%	1/1
Roosevelt Elementary District	36%	100%	1/1
Indianapolis Public Schools	36%	50%	1/2
Franklin-McKinley School District	35%	100%	1/1
Dayton City School District	34%	0%	1/1
Natomas Unified School District	33%	100%	1/1
Philadelphia City School District	33%	100%	3/3
Newark City School District	33%	100%	2/2
Alum Rock Union Elementary School District	32%	100%	2/2
St. Louis City School District	32%	100%	1/1
Cleveland Municipal School District	30%	100%	2/2
San Antonio Independent School District	30%	60%	3/5
Oakland Unified School District	30%	100%	1/1
Total	-	83%	29/35

DISTRICTS WITH THE HIGHEST NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

Democrats make up 95% of the Members of Congress representing all or part of the 10 school districts with the highest *number* of students enrolled in public charter schools.²⁹

School District	Charter Students	% Democratic Members of Congress (House)	Number of House Members (Democrat/Total)
Los Angeles Unified School District	163,575	100%	13/13
New York City Department of Education	111,805	100%	13/13
Miami-Dade County Public Schools	65,289	80%	4/5
Philadelphia City School District	64,393	100%	3/3
Chicago Public Schools	58,877	100%	7/7
Houston Independent School District	50,479	67%	4/6
Orleans Parish School District	46,932	50%	1/2
Broward County School District	46,478	100%	4/4
District of Columbia Public Schools	43,393	100%	1/1
Detroit Public Schools Community District	38,667	100%	2/2
Total	-	95%	52/55

PART 5: CHARTER SCHOOL OUTCOMES

Across the country, public charter schools have given low-income students and children of color an alternative to the chronically low-performing traditional public schools to which they would have otherwise been assigned. Being a progressive charter school supporter, however, does not mean believing that autonomy or choice are “magic bullets” for improving public education. It does not mean having to unqualifiedly defend the charter school sector in states or districts where public charter schools underperform or in cases where individual charter schools misuse public funds.

There’s both good news and bad news when one looks at charter school outcomes, but the former far outweighs the latter, especially when it comes to the students whom public charter schools were designed to serve. The most rigorous and methodologically sound studies of charter school outcomes indicate that Black students, students in poverty, and English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled in public charter schools make significantly greater academic progress as compared to their peers with similar demographics in traditional public schools.

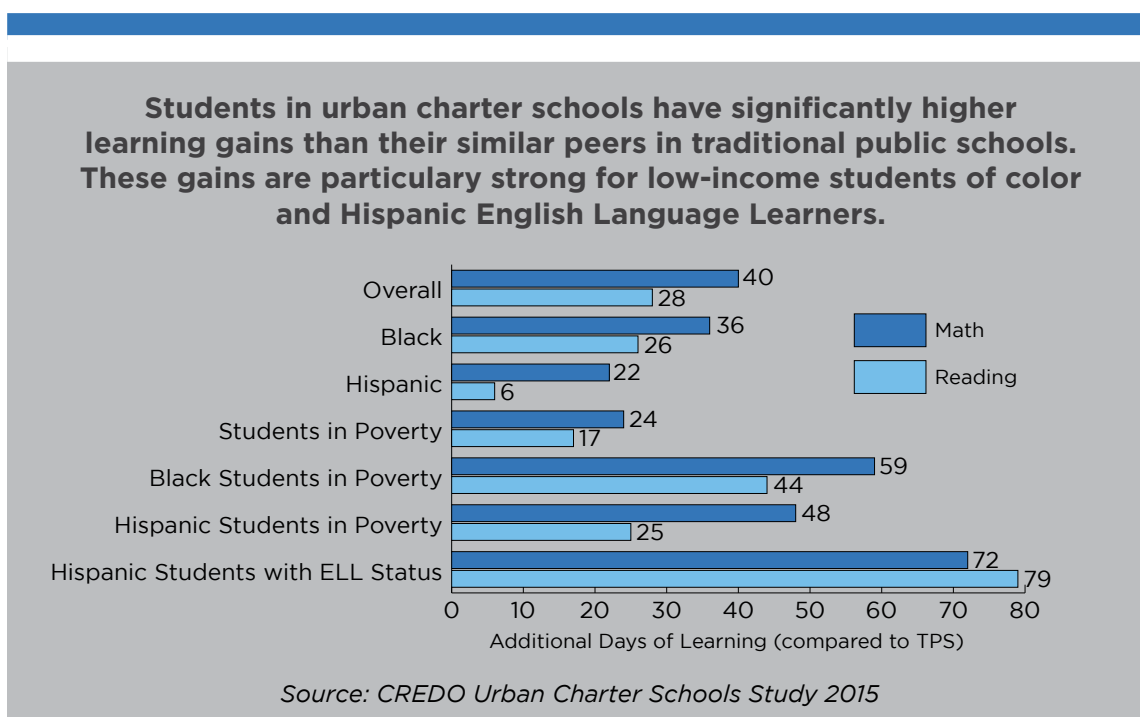
The most rigorous and methodologically sound studies of charter school outcomes indicate that Black students, students in poverty, and English Language Learners enrolled in public charter schools make significantly greater academic progress as compared to their peers with similar demographics in traditional public schools.

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.

Looking across all the accusations made about charter school demographics—that they do not accept low-income and minority students, ELL’s, and students with disabilities; or, that they push them out—Fact-Check.org, a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters based at the Annenberg Public Policy Center concluded: “we find that [the] broad claim that ‘most charter schools’ don’t accept or don’t keep the hardest-to-teach kids is not supported by the evidence.”³⁰

Particularly in urban areas, research shows that public charter schools serve the Democratic goals of equalizing educational opportunities:

- A 2015 CREDO study found that students in urban public charter schools gained, on average, the equivalent of 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days in reading compared to their traditional public school peers. Across all urban regions, Black students from low-income families enrolled in public charter schools gained the equivalent of 59 days of additional learning in math and 44 days of additional learning in reading compared to their peers in traditional public schools. Hispanic English Language Learners saw the largest gains of any group, with 72 additional days of learning in math and 79 days of additional learning in reading, compared to similar students in traditional public schools.³¹

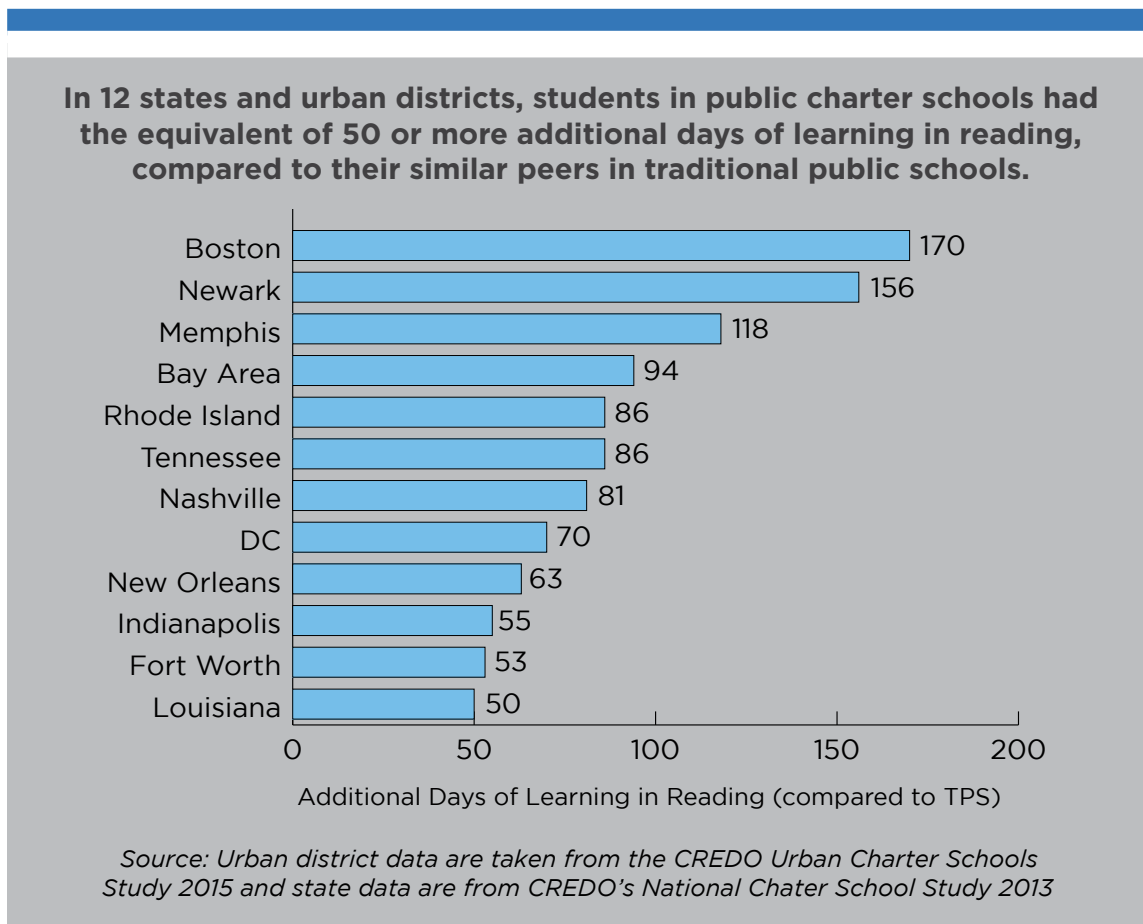


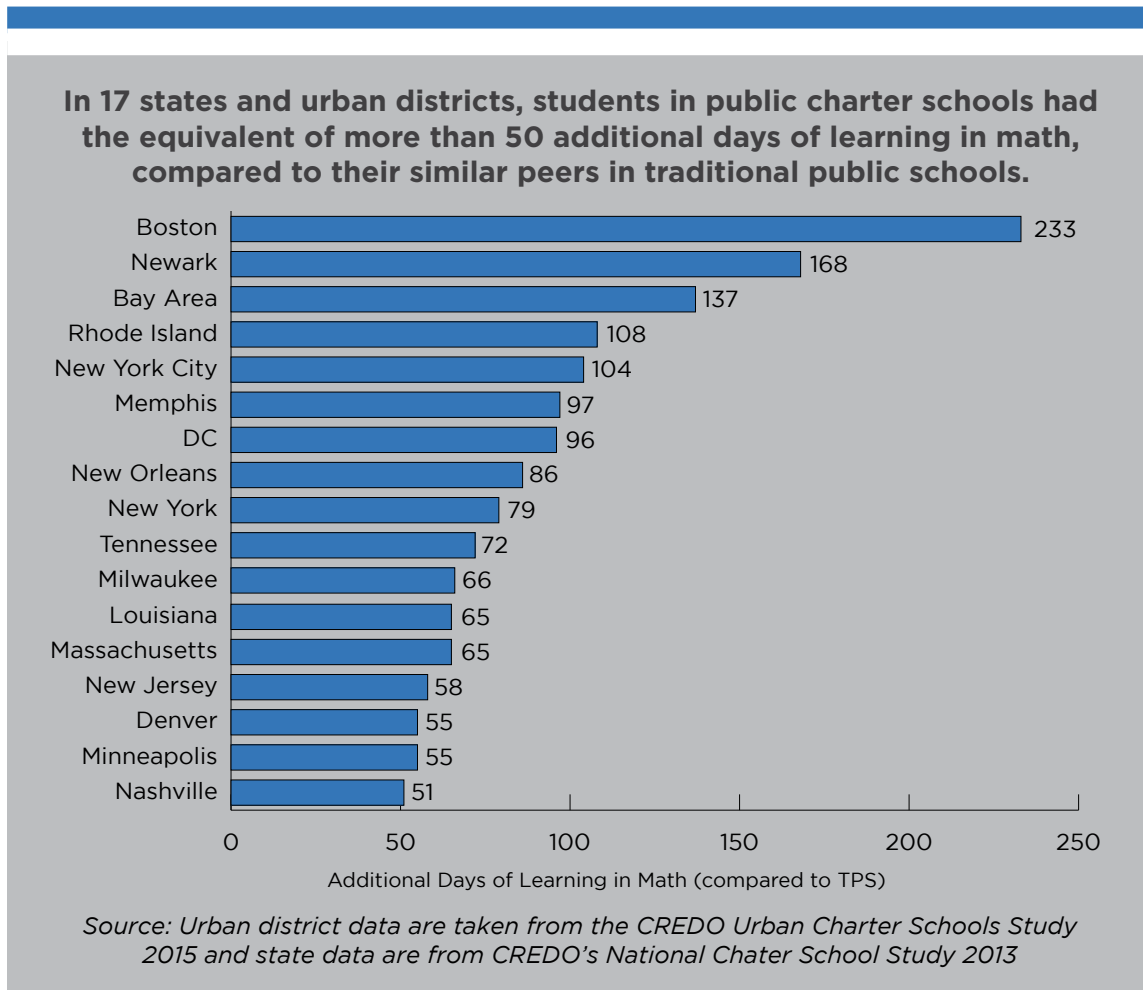
- Public charter school students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Washington D.C., Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, and Newark had the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning in math compared to students in traditional public schools. In terms of reading, charter students in San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Memphis, Nashville, and Newark received the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning.³²
- 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.³³

Results do vary greatly by state.

CREDO has found that:

- 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 (2013).³⁴





- However, 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.³⁵ Note, however, that these data are now six years out-of-date, and a 2017 CREDO study saw—following reforms to the Texas charter sector—public charters in Texas performing on par with traditional public schools.³⁶

Online charter schools almost invariably provide a substandard education. CREDO (2015) found that students in online charter schools lagged behind their peers in traditional public schools, equating to a loss of 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in math.³⁷ Online charter performance can also mask the high performance of “brick-and-mortar” charters. For example, CREDO (2019) found that Ohio charter students received the equivalent of 50 fewer days of learning in math and no differences in reading when compared to peers in traditional public schools. However, when online charter schools were removed differences in math achievement disappeared and students in charter schools gained an additional 29 days of learning in reading compared to their peers in traditional public schools.³⁸

CONCLUSION

As outlined in this series, Democratic, progressive, and labor leaders were among the first proponents of public charter schools. Both recent Democratic presidents, Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, led efforts to advance the charter sector through federal policy. Moreover, many current Democratic mayors, governors, and Members of Congress strongly support public charter schools despite highly misleading efforts to tie charter schools to the Trump/DeVos privatization agenda.

Key Democratic constituencies are also showing their support for public charters. Solid majorities of Black and Hispanic Democrats view charter schools favorably, as do millennial voters of all races/ethnicities. Yet Democratic support for charters has a stark racial divide. A majority of White Democrats—who are less likely to have children in charters—have negative perceptions of charter schools. Thus, the views of White Democratic voters seem to be a significant political impediment to children of color gaining access to high-quality public charter schools.

The reason we support public charter schools is because they work for those students whom they are intended to serve. Across the entire country, public charter schools have given low-income students and children of color an alternative to the chronically low-performing traditional public schools to which they would have otherwise been assigned.

The most rigorous and methodologically sound studies indicate that students of color, students in poverty, and English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled in public charter schools make significantly greater academic progress compared to their peers with similar demographics in traditional public schools. Our best urban public charter schools provide students with the equivalent of three to five months of additional learning time in math and reading as compared to what they would have received otherwise.

In a neighborhood where the traditional public school is chronically underperforming, an alternative public school option—such as a public charter school—can be a lifesaver, particularly for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students. Like affluent families, who can exercise choice by moving or sending their children to private schools, low-income families also deserve to have a choice of high-quality schools to educate their child.

To be clear, however, public charter schools are in no way a replacement for traditional public schools, nor are they a “privatization” scheme. In fact, our polling finds that virtually every group of voters supports a wide variety of choice in the public education system including public charters, magnet schools, and career academies.

We do think, however, that coupled with strong accountability for results, there is no reason that all public schools shouldn't get the same level of autonomy to innovate as do public charters. We find that public charter schools are more than willing to share what they've learned about what works. The challenge for the rest of public school system is to take those lessons to heart and provide every child the same world class education being provided by our nation's high-quality public charter schools.

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14 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>

15 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.

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Below is the exact wording for the questions referenced in this report:

Public charter schools: Do you have a very favorable view of them, somewhat favorable view, somewhat unfavorable view, or a very unfavorable view of them?

Expanding public charter schools so every child has a chance to go to a school that meets their needs: Please tell me how much of a priority this is to you personally, using a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 means it is an extremely important priority to you and 1 means that it is not a priority at all.

Ensuring parents have a variety of public school options for their kids—including charter schools, magnet schools, and career academies—no matter where they live or how much money they have: Please tell me how much of a priority this is to you personally, using a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 means it is an extremely important priority to you and 1 means that it is not a priority at all.

Ensuring parents have a variety of public school options for their kids, no matter where they live or how much money they have: Please tell me how much of a priority this is to you personally, using a scale from 1 to 7, where 7 means it is an extremely important priority to you and 1 means that it is not a priority at all.

22 Those surveyed were asked to rate their views on “Public Charter Schools” on a scale of very favorable to very unfavorable. Results on the graph report very favorable and somewhat favorable as favorable and somewhat unfavorable and very unfavorable as unfavorable. Responses of “heard of but no opinion” or “have not heard of” are reported as unfamiliar.

23 GenForward surveyed 1,910 a nationally representative sample of adults ages 18-34 between July 26 and August 13, 2018. Those surveyed were asked “Charter schools are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. Do you support or oppose charter schools?” Results in the graph report responses of strongly support and somewhat support as support and strongly oppose and somewhat oppose as oppose. <http://api.genforwardsurvey.com/download/188/?f=true>

24 Those surveyed were asked to rate the priority of each policy on a scale of 1-7 where: 1 = Not a priority at all, 4 = Somewhat of a priority, 7 = Extremely important priority. Results in graphs are as follows: ‘Not a priority’ = Percentage responding at 1 or 2, ‘Important priority’ = Percentage responding at 6 or 7. Excluded: Percentage responding at 3, 4, or 5.

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28 Missouri Census Data Center: <http://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/geocorr2018>.

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