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Are Charter Schools a Viable Option for Christian Teachers?

Charter schools are not going away. Over the past three decades they have developed as an increasingly widespread government funded alternative to traditional public schools.

Just over the past few weeks the following stories have captured media attention:

- A paper written by the National Bureau of Economic Research shed light on an expansion of charter schools in [Boston](#) that led to increased numbers of students in charter schools (9% of Kindergartners, 31% of sixth graders and 15% of ninth graders) and, “academic data show that those students performed better than they would have elsewhere.”
- In [California](#), where 650,000 pupils, or 11% of all students, attend charter schools, the legislature is grappling with legislation that would put new caps on the total number of charter schools and give school districts more authority to deny charter applications.
- [Education Week reports that some researchers](#) assert that parents who choose to send their children to charter schools that promote no nonsense discipline and self-discipline, are making mistakes, even though as Education Week reports, “These schools have been celebrated for Black and Latino students' high-test scores and now form the most prevalent charter option in a number of American cities.”
- In [Philadelphia](#), where over the past decade charter school enrollment increased from 38,000 to over 75,000 and school district enrollment in traditional schools has declined from over 160,000 to about 128,000, 150 families and community activists attended a Town Hall titled “Is School Choice the Black Choice?”
- A [report from the Fordham Institute](#) shows that, “black students in charter schools are about 50% more likely to have a black teacher than their traditional public school counterparts,” something believed to have a positive academic impact on black children.

- Politically, [a split has emerged among the Democrat candidates for President](#) around support for charter schools, particularly for-profit charters. Additionally, as we noted in the [March Washington Education Watch](#), the President proposed in his State of the Union Speech a five billion dollar Federal school choice voucher program that could add funds to state charter schools.

While charter laws vary from state to state, and in some cases city to city, there are a few common elements. Charter schools are authorized by some entity—a local or state school board, an independent chartering board, or a university. Approved charter schools are exempted from many local school district rules and regulations and in return must agree to be accountable to the authorizing entity for items agreed to in their charter. If the charter school does not meet the terms of the charter, the authorizing entity can shut them down. In every state charter schools must admit all students on an equal basis, must be non-religious, and may not charge tuition. This final point means that the charter schools, apart from donations (also used by some traditional public schools), must operate entirely on funds provided by the state government or local school districts.

If you would like to know how the charter school law in your state compares to other states, this [database maintained by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#) has the current information for the District of Columbia and the 44 states that have charter laws. One interesting item I noticed in perusing the database is that [most states allow charter school employees to access the state education retirement system](#).

Because state laws are so different, and the charter providers also vary widely, it is impossible to draw conclusions for all charter schools. However, by reviewing [Charter Schools In Perspective](#), a compilation of the research on charter schools, developed by the Spencer Foundation and Public Agenda, we can see some trends emerging.

First, *In Perspective* tells us that [charter parents tend to rate their schools higher than public school parents rate their children's schools](#). Of course, this is to be expected since the parents choose to apply to the charter.

Second, while academic results vary from state to state and charter to charter, *In Perspective* notes that [“lower-income and urban students are most likely to benefit from a charter education.”](#) A 2017 analysis of standardized test results indicated that:

“Black students who attended a charter school were significantly stronger in reading and math outcomes compared with black students who attended traditional public schools. The greatest gains were seen in black students attending charter schools operated by

organizations that run multiple schools, with math gains equivalent to 34 additional days and 29 additional days of reading.”

And third, the data from *In Perspective* indicates that [charter school teachers are slightly less satisfied with their work than traditional public school teachers](#). This finding may be tied to another fact revealed by *In Perspective*: [charter schools in nearly every state are funded at a significantly lower level than traditional public schools](#). This no-doubt leads to lower salaries and higher class sizes, items that frequently impact teacher satisfaction.

So, given the increased effort by some public schools to require teachers to affirm lifestyle choices they may disagree with (i.e. gay marriage and student transgender choices at increasingly younger ages), could charter schools provide a fertile place for Christian parents to send their children and for Christian teachers to teach? Many Christian educators are called to work in traditional public schools and will thankfully continue to be a blessing to their students, and every charter school is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all answer. As we noted previously, charter schools are not allowed to be explicitly religious. However, depending on the particular school in question, being free of some of the state requirements on public schools may provide a more welcoming environment for Christian teachers and students.

In 2012, Christian Theologian John Frame wrote [Christians and Charter Schools](#) to help Christian parents decide if charter schools could assist them provide the type of instruction recommended in Deuteronomy 6:6-9:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Frame writes from the perspective of someone who feels serious Christians should be very leery of sending their children to any public school but made nine positive observations about charter schools that are relevant to all Christian parents. The first five of these observations may also apply to Christian teachers thinking through the tough decision of possibly giving up some salary in order to work in a Charter School:

- 1) A charter school may have a largely Christian board and staff. Probably the school’s charter may not include this as a requirement for leaders, but if a school is designed to attract Christian students, it will certainly also attract Christian board and staff members...

- 2) The teaching and curriculum will be secular, of course. Christian textbooks will not be used. But the school can choose textbooks which do not oppose Christian teaching, which do not seek to brainwash students into becoming radical feminists, secularists, egalitarians, socialists, etc. Teachers also can present the material in ways that do not seek to tear down the values of the home...
- 3) Charter schools can renounce the cult of self-esteem, which opposes academic standards and encourages social promotion. They may teach students to think critically about their own abilities and character, a kind of self-examination that has driven many people to Christ and is often good for the soul.
- 4) Indeed, charter schools are free to take a critical approach to the dominant values of society. They may show that the philosophies of the mainstream educational establishment (pragmatism, postmodernism, naturalism, secularism, liberalism, radical feminism) are intellectually and socially bankrupt...
- 5) Charter schools are free to establish higher standards for classroom behavior and discipline than other public schools. Although the school may not say so explicitly, these standards may well be influenced by Scripture...
- 6) Charter schools may offer more flexible teaching hours than other public schools. Some may choose to hold classes only two days a week, enlisting the parents to teach the children at home for the other school days...
- 7) This more flexible schedule also permits an explicitly Christian emphasis during the home-schooling hours...
- 8) Charter schools are free, and they provide textbooks for the students free of charge...
- 9) Charter schools can resist the tendency of the public school system to overreach its authority. They can work from inside the system to discourage attempts of school boards to persecute home schoolers and Christian private schools...

The soon-to-be-released CEAI Member Survey indicates that many CEAI members (over 70%) support school choice, and within this group 72% felt that charter schools would be a good option. But we would like to hear from you individually. Have you had experiences with a charter school you would like to share, or are you considering it as an option for you or your children? Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the comments below.

[As always, the Washington Watch column is written by its author, and is not intended to represent any official position of CEAI. Beyond encouragement to follow God's word and seek the leading of His Spirit, CEAI does not make recommendations about where teachers should work, or where parents should send their children to school.]

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