

Answers to 12 Common Questions About Public Charter Schools

Q1. Charter schools are private schools, and as such charge tuition.

A1. Charter schools **are public schools** that are privately run by non-profit organizations. They are authorized by the Board of Regents or the State University of New York, and typically receive a five-year charter that requires them to meet certain performance goals. If they fail to meet those goals, they can be forced to close. As public schools, they are free; charter schools may not charge tuition or discriminate in their admissions policy on any basis (ethnicity, gender, national origin, disability). Charter schools must accept all students that apply, and they have seats for, regardless of ability or income.

Q2. School districts have no control over charter schools, so they amount to "taxation without representation."

A2. Charter schools are public schools of choice and they exist because parents and guardians elect to enroll their children. Therefore, public education dollars should follow the child -- whether he/she attends a public charter school or traditional public school.

Q3. Charter schools aren't accountable for their academic results, finances and operations.

A3. Charter schools are subject to direct oversight from The New York Board of Regents and each school's respective authorizing body, which can be the State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees, State Education Department or the local school district (in NYC the NYC Department of Education). Authorizers conduct a rigorous and thorough review of charter schools annually over a five-year period evaluating student performance, operations and regulatory compliance. Charter renewal is based on the school's ability to show authorizers that it is meeting or exceeding academic standards and goals, and has operated in a fiscally sound manner. Schools that fail to do so risk sanctions or closure.

Q4. Charter schools are not entitled to use public school buildings.

A4 Charter schools are public schools serving public school students. As such—and by law—they are allowed to use public school buildings, just like any other public school.

Q5. There's no evidence that parents want charter schools.

A5. Nearly every charter school is at capacity, and generally has at least a 3 to 1 ratio of applicants to available seats. In fact, student enrollment is key for charter schools to operate financially since they receive funding based on the number of students enrolled. Citywide, there are approximately 40,000 families on waiting lists to enter their child in a charter school.

Q6. Charter school teachers and staff can't unionize.

A6. The Charter Schools Act of 1998, Article 56 of the Education Law, specifically provides that employees may organize collectively at their discretion. And union membership is mandatory in schools that serve more than 250 students in their first year, or in traditional public schools that convert to a charter school. Currently, 12 charter schools statewide have unionized employees.

Q7. Charter schools are for-profit businesses.

A7. By law, charter schools are non-profit organizations, and are typically created by educators, parents and community leaders who share a vision of the school's mission, academic focus, student population and performance standards. They are governed by a Board of Trustees and managed day-to-day either by an executive director or school principal. Often charter schools are formed in conjunction with other non-profit organizations, such as a university, that provide additional services to the school. Charter schools are allowed to hire for-profit entities to do work for them—just as traditional public schools do—but a for-profit entity can't get a charter in New York.

Q8. Charter schools are trying to take over the public school system.

A8. As of 2009, New York has approximately 2.8 million public school students enrolled in 4,500 public schools. By contrast, there are approximately 40,000 charter school students enrolled in approximately 150 charter schools. In other words, charter school students represent 1.4% of all public school students, and charter schools represent 3.3% of all the public schools statewide. In addition, only 15 of 721 school districts in New York (or 2.08%) have a charter school—and 11 of those 15 have 2 or less charter schools. Clearly, charter schools, while a valuable public education choice for parents, are in no position to take over the public school system.

Q9. Charter schools “cream” the best parents and students.

A9. By law, charter schools must enroll students by open lottery if there are more applicants than available seats. Reports by the state Board of Regents found that students who enroll in charter schools perform below their district peers. And arguing that charter schools have better parents implies that parent should not be allowed to choose where their children go to school, and that parents that choose to keep their children in traditional public schools are somehow inferior to parents that do.

Q10. Charter schools get more money than traditional public schools.

A10. Under state law, charter schools get approximately 20% less funding than a traditional public school. A particular inequity is the fact that charter schools get no capital funding to cover the cost of their building.

Q11. Charter schools drain money from traditional public schools.

A11. As public schools, it's difficult to argue that charter schools drain money from the public schools: they ARE public schools. The only difference is they're not administered by the Board of Education. In addition, when a child enrolls in a charter school the district keeps approximately 20% of the funds associated with that child, even though they no longer have to teach, transport or feed them.

Q12. Charter schools don't perform any better than traditional public schools.

A12. A study by Prof. Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University concluded that charter schools in New York City significantly outperform their traditional public school peers. Indeed, the study found that the “performance gap” between New York City charter school students and high-performing suburban public schools was nearly eliminated by the time they graduated from high school.