

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS CONCERNING ARKANSAS PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

What is a public charter school?

Public charter schools are a new form of public school that are free from most of the restrictive laws that govern traditional public schools. This allows public charter schools more flexibility to implement creative and innovative programs and policies. In return for this freedom, public charter schools are held more accountable for student success. Funded like other public schools, they operate under contracts detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success.

How long have public charter schools been around?

In the 1970's an educator in New England proposed giving small groups of teachers contracts to allow for innovative teaching strategies to be put in place. In the early 1980's schools in Philadelphia began creating schools within schools and called them charters. Minnesota refined the idea, passing a public charter school law in 1991. Arkansas passed a public charter school law in 1995. The law was rated as one of the most stringent public charter school laws in the nation and no public charter schools opened under the 1995 legislation. The Legislature revised the law in 1999. As a result of the legislative revision, the State Board of Education approved four public charter schools to open in the fall of 2001.

Who can grant a school a charter?

Charter laws vary from state to state. In Arkansas, only the State Board of Education can grant a charter.

Are there different types of public charter schools?

Yes, in Arkansas there are two basic types of public charter schools. A conversion school is a public school converted to a public charter school. Conversion schools can only draw students from within the school district's boundaries. An open-enrollment school is a public charter school run by a governmental entity, an institution of higher learning or a tax-exempt non-sectarian organization. Open enrollment schools can draw students from across district boundaries. Beyond the basic two types of charters, the concepts put in place by a public charter school are as broad as the imagination.

Who can start a public charter school?

Act 890 of 1999 establishes the eligible entities as a public institution of higher education, a private nonsectarian institution of higher education, a governmental entity, or an organization that is nonsectarian in its program, admission policies, employment practices and operations, and is exempt from taxation under Section 501(c)(3) of the IRS.

Four (4) groups commonly operate public charter schools:

- Parents
- Teachers & Community Leaders
- Public Schools
- Private Entities

Can a private school become a public charter school?

No private or parochial school in existence on July 30, 1999 is eligible for open-enrollment public charter school status. Private and parochial schools are not eligible for conversion public charter school status.

Can a public charter school be affiliated with a church?

A public charter school cannot be sectarian in its practices. Although it is allowable under the law for a public charter school to be housed in a church owned facility, the facility must be free from religious symbols and the public charter school must have exclusive use of the facility during school hours. A church is not an eligible entity to sponsor a public charter school.

How are public charter schools funded?

During the 1999 legislative session the Arkansas General Assembly set aside \$2.5 million dollars for the funding of public charter schools for the 2000-2001 school year. Public charter schools receive funds equal to the minimum state and local revenue per average daily membership. The financial difficulty for public charter schools is that with these funds, and limited start-up funds from grants and other sources, public charter schools must address the issues such as new facilities, transportation, supplies, and equipment which public schools already have in place.

Will public charter schools be accountable for use of the public funds?

Yes, public charter schools will be audited in the same manner as traditional public schools. All financial and student data will be reported through the Arkansas Public School Computer Network in the same way as public schools.

Are public charter schools held accountable for student performance?

Yes, each charter spells out the goals for the school. Each school will be monitored and be held accountable for meeting all aspects of the charter. In addition, each public charter school must participate in all aspects of the Arkansas Comprehensive Testing, Assessment and

Accountability Program (ACTAAP). Public charter schools are also accountable for Adequate Yearly Progress as mandated by No Child Left Behind.

If public education is not working why don't we spend our resources fixing the problem instead of re-inventing the wheel?

Keep in mind that public charter schools ARE public schools. Public charter schools are one way of "fixing the problem."

How will public charter schools help improve education?

The following reasons are cited as benefits of public charter schools:

- Increase opportunities for learning and access to quality education for all students
- Create choice for parents and students within the public school system
- Provides a system of accountability for results in public education
- Encourage innovative teaching practices
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers
- Encourage community and parent involvement in public education
- Creates competition among public schools and thus stimulates improvement

Why do parents choose to put their children in public charter schools?

Surveys of parents whose children attend public charter schools list the following reasons:

- Nurturing environment
- Safety
- Strong value systems
- Quality of academic program
- High standards of achievement
- Small class size
- Specialized curriculum
- Innovative programs

What difficulties do public charter schools face?

Operators of public charter schools list the following hurdles in opening a public charter school:

- Inadequate operating funds
- No monies for facilities
- Inadequate facilities
- Lack of planning time
- State board or local board opposition

How do charter schools compare to other public schools?

Research is not yet clear on the performance of charter schools vs. traditional public schools. Research on charter schools by the U.S. Department of Education provides the following information:

- Charter schools tend to be small. 62% of charter schools enroll fewer than 200 students.
- 72% of all charter schools are newly created schools, 18% are public conversions, and 10% are converted private schools.
- Student/teacher ratio is slightly lower in charter schools, 16/1 for charter schools vs. 17.2/1 for public schools.
- Charter schools serve a higher percentage of minority students than public schools. Charter schools have a minority enrollment of 52% vs. 41% minority enrollment for public schools.
- Charter schools serve a higher percentage of students' eligible for free and reduced-price lunches than do public schools.
- 59 charter schools that have opened have either closed or had their charter revoked. That's 4% of all charter schools.
- Charter schools serve a slightly lower percentage of students with disabilities than public schools, 8% enrollment for charter schools vs. 11% for public schools.
- 75% of charter schools are opened with the purpose of realizing an alternative vision than that provided by the public schools.
- 30% of charter schools are opened to target special populations of students.

What types of innovation do public charter schools implement?

A recent study of public charter schools found the following similarities in terms of innovation among public charter schools:

- Interdisciplinary Instruction
- Thematic Instruction
- Focus on Mastery of Skills
- Project Based Learning
- Multi-Aged Classrooms
- Shared Vision
- Longer School Days
- Alternative Class Schedules
- Student Portfolios with Individualized Education Plans
- Foreign Language at Early Age
- Student Self Assessment and Peer Assessment
- Strict Discipline Policies
- Increased Parental Involvement
- Low Student/Teacher Ratio
- Increased Emphasis on Citizenship, Ethics and Character Education

What is the purpose of charter schools?

The "purposes" of charter schools as discussed at the 1997 national charter school conference include:

- Charters are to do what public schools already do-just better.
- Charters are to do something different.
- Charter schools provide viable alternatives for the "square pegs" in the system.
- Charter schools provide a testing ground for new governance models.
- Charter schools provide a testing ground for innovative teaching and learning.
- Charter schools can provide choice for all parents and students.
- Charter schools provide competition to the traditional public school system.
- Charter schools provide for increased accountability, both internally and in traditional public schools.
- Charter schools provide the mechanisms for organizational changes, allowing opportunity for parents and teachers to teach what they want.
- Charter schools provide the impetus for systemic change and reform.

What if the public charter school isn't working?

The State Board of Education may revoke or modify a school's charter at any time if the public charter school is not meeting the requirements of the charter.