

# Charter Schools as a Choice for Missouri Families

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## Introduction

Sally sat quietly in her seat as the bell rang for class to begin. Some of her classmates had been running about the room, disturbing the baskets of teaching tools and stepping on worn sets of classroom books. There had been no teacher present for at least ten minutes. A man in his early thirties walked in the room. He briefly looked around, contemplating the most effective way to restore order in the classroom. He was a new face in the building, but his new students failed to halt their disorderly conduct in order to pay attention to his presence. This was the fourth substitute of the semester for this classroom.

Sally mentally prepared herself for another day of boredom at school. On several recent occasions, Sally had indicated her desire to become a pediatrician while chatting with her mother at the home they shared with her grandparents. Despite Sally's desire to learn and optimistic outlook for her future, her mother had been disappointed and even angered to hear such stories that Sally brought home about the lack of a permanent teacher and a lack of learning at school. No homework ever appeared in Sally's backpack. Sally's mother feared that her daughter would fall behind. Would Sally even have the drive to finish high school? How would Sally perform on the ACT test? Could Sally get guidance so that she can apply to different colleges? Even if Sally does graduate from high school, would she be prepared to enter the world of college?

Her mother wants Sally to go away to university and have a better way of life than she had, as she was a high school dropout. However, if Sally is ill-prepared academically, how can any of that happen? If only there was another high quality educational option for Sally, her mother would not have to worry so much about Sally's future.

## What is a charter school?

A charter school is a publically funded, non-sectarian, tuition-free entity that is an educational organization running a school. Charter schools are considered schools of choice. Schools of choice are publically funded K-12 educational options for families in a certain area, region or state. Charter schools operate primarily on a proprietary model. They are operated independently of the traditional public school system and are governed by an independent board of directors, with an authorizer or sponsor to hold the independent governing board accountable. Authorizers or sponsors may vary from state to state, according to law. Some states allow not-for-profit organizations to become sponsors, and others allow universities with teacher preparation programs to be the charter school sponsor.

The charter model was created to allow schools to remain free from some governmental regulations and to offer parents a tuition-free choice for K-12 education. Charters are not permitted to discriminate with admission of its pupils and, if the number of applicants exceeds the number of available seats, are required by law to hold a lottery for admission. Unlike magnet schools, charters cannot base admission on GPA or special needs. Oftentimes, charters attract a higher proportion of students with Individualized Education Plans or 504 Plans and English Language Learner students than the traditional public neighborhood schools.

Charter schools have received a lot of media attention, particularly in the last decade. As charter schools became an alternative to public education for millions of families across the country, criticisms mounted against charter schools as the issue became politicized.<sup>1</sup> As expansions of charter schools continue, so does public comment.

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Research of Education Outcomes. *National*

## History of Charter Schools Across the U.S.

Public charter schools came into the American education landscape in 1991 because of ongoing United States education reform efforts aimed at targeting the poor academic achievement of America's children, in comparison with countries that appeared to be out-competing and out-innovating America.<sup>2</sup> Charter schools, by design, were created to introduce competition and to be a catalyst for improving standards.<sup>3</sup> Today, charter school students comprise more than 4 percent of the total public school population in the United States, which was a growing trend each year, and there were an estimated 6,000 charter schools in the 2012-2013 academic year serving over two million students.<sup>4</sup>

The first charter schools sprouted in Minnesota in 1991, and since then 42 states have adopted charter school legislation to allow charter schools to be established.<sup>5</sup> The District of Columbia hosts one of the country's highest percentages of enrolled charter school students. The same is true for the Los Angeles Unified School District. In the New Orleans public school system, nearly 80 percent of the schools are charter students.<sup>6</sup> It has been estimated that across the country, one million students remain on waiting lists for charter schools.<sup>7</sup>

Choice schools had become popular with parents who were dissatisfied with the traditional public school

system available to them as determined by their home location or zip code.<sup>8</sup> The school choice movement emerged as the latest reform-minded practice, and the hope was that by giving parents a choice in where their child attended school for free, the problems in education would be remediated.<sup>9</sup> Charter schools may be perceived as competition for the traditional public neighborhood schools, as well as for private schools.

Charter schools marketed themselves as free-market public schools that would be free of traditional public school bureaucracy and would provide for innovative and rigorous curricula, the flexibility of hiring and firing teachers at will, and the opportunity for teachers, parents, and community members to create and manage niche schools designed to serve the students within their community.<sup>10</sup> Parents choose charter schools based on a wide variety of factors. Some parents choose charter schools based on their academic effectiveness, safety, mission, or perhaps according to particular strategies adopted by the school. Charter advocates claim that by allowing for innovation and protecting the school's autonomy, leaders and teachers do whatever it takes to grow kids academically and to meet individualized learning goals. More often than not, the children enrolling in charter schools are already several grade levels behind. Methods that charter schools use are sometimes different from those used by traditional school districts in order to fill that gap. For example, some charter schools have an extended school day or school calendar year.

Ultimately, charter schools attract families that have similar belief systems and missions as the school claims. Charter schools rely on building a community that supports the school and its students in a variety of ways. Parents and community members might attempt to fundraise, run extracurricular programs or provide services to the school and its families, for example. Charter schools understand the needs of the families and students and have the flexibility to be able to make choices and implement new practices as they are

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*Charter School Study 2013*. Accessed March 13, 2015, <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Monica Almond, "The Great Migration: Charter School Satisfaction Among African American Parents," *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University*, Accessed December 1, 2014, <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=lux>.

<sup>3</sup> Argun Saatcioglu, Aarti Bajaj, and Michael Schumacher, "Parental Expectations and Satisfaction with Charter Schools: Evidence from a Midwestern City School District," *Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy*, (2011): 428-451.

<sup>4</sup> Center for Research on Education Outcomes, *National Charter School Study*, (2013).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "Students Names on Charter Schools Waiting Lists Top 1 Million for the First Time," Accessed June 2015, <http://www.publiccharters.org/press/waiting-list-2014>.

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<sup>8</sup> M. Willis, "A Case Study of an African American Charter School's Satisfactory Performance Based on the Perception of Stakeholders of Parents, Teachers, Students and Community Members" (PhD. diss., Clark Atlanta University, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Almond, "The Great Migration: Charter School Satisfaction Among African American Parents."

needed. By allowing educators to experiment and practice innovative philosophies, the charter school movement has established itself as a permanent and rapidly expanding fixture in today's educational environments across the nation.

## History of Charters in Missouri

Most often, local parents, community members, or other local leadership who wanted a quality education for children developed the actual charters. Missouri was the 34th state to pass a law for the creation of charter schools in May 1998.<sup>11</sup> The first charters in Missouri opened their doors to serve the St. Louis and Kansas City metropolitan area pupils only, as determined by statute. Charter schools in Missouri were required by statute to have a sponsor, or commonly referred to as an "authorizer" in other states, that held them accountable to their established goals and standards, set with mutual agreement upon opening. In this, Missouri institutions of higher education were the dominant authorizers of charter schools, which happened to be an exception to the rule in comparison with most of the other charter school states.<sup>12</sup> Across the country, most charter schools are authorized by the local public school districts.

As charter school organizations obtained sponsorship, it allowed schools to be free from the traditional, regulatory control of the state and allowed more creation and implementation of localized decisions. This promised autonomy of the school, in theory, allowed the school to use innovative and exceptional "outside of the box" methods to engage and educate students better than the traditional public alternative option.<sup>13</sup> The sponsors of the schools conducted

periodic reviews for continuous improvement and accountability purposes as a requirement of the law. According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education charter school website, every five years, the State Board of Education reviews the academic performance of the charter school (LEA) and determines whether to renew the school's charter for another five years.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, if the school did not meet its outset academic, financial, and operational goals set out in its charter contract, or it did not attract enough students, it would cease to operate.<sup>15</sup>

Currently Missouri has approximately fifty charters with about half in the Kansas City area and the other half in the St. Louis area. Charters serve 19,000 students (10,000 in KC and 9,000 in St. Louis) as of 2014, which equates to approximately 2 percent of Missouri's school-age children.<sup>16</sup> Originally, state statute did only allow charters to be established in metropolitan areas with 350,000 inhabitants or more. This limited the charters to Kansas City and St. Louis, where the major unaccredited districts resided. Charters seemed to be a potential solution to the urban education problem in legislators' eyes. The original legislation was considered a victory for charter advocates, but weaknesses were certainly present.

## Implementing Expansion of Charter Schools Outside of the Metropolitan Areas

Legislation passed in 2012 has opened up charters to be established in any unaccredited district and to any other district that would like to open its own charter, regardless of whether or not they are accredited by the state. Policy changes could allow for the expansion of

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Stakeholders of Parents, Teachers, Students and Community Members."

<sup>14</sup> Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. *Charter school*. Accessed February 22, 2015. <http://dese.mo.gov/sites/default/files/qs-model-charter-school-application.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. *Delivering on the Promise: How Missouri Can Develop Excellent, Accountable Public Charter Schools*. Washington, DC, 2011. Accessed March 17, 2014,

[http://www.kauffman.org/~media/kauffman\\_org/research%20reports%20and%20covers/2011/02/missouri\\_charter\\_school\\_report\\_2111.pdf](http://www.kauffman.org/~media/kauffman_org/research%20reports%20and%20covers/2011/02/missouri_charter_school_report_2111.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Thaman. *The History of Missouri Charter Schools*.

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Thaman, *The History of Missouri Charter Schools*. 2014. Accessed June 5, 2015, <http://www.mocharterschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/MO-Charter-School-History-2014-Final.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> National Association of School Psychologists. *School-Family Partnering to Enhance Learning: Essential Elements and Responsibilities*. [http://nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/positionpapers/Home-SchoolCollaboration.pdf](http://nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/Home-SchoolCollaboration.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Willis, "A Case Study of an African American Charter School's Satisfactory Performance Based on the Perception of

opportunities for charter schools to be established with sponsoring entities that have been approved by the Missouri State Board of Education and the Charter School Commission. This would allow for additional public school options for families across the state. Policy promoting expansion of charter schools statewide, unrestricted in terms of locale, could mean other choices for parents in the state of Missouri. Not only would it provide quality options for parents in unaccredited or failing districts, but it could also offer a good fit for parents interested in a different type of education for their child(ren). Montessori, fine arts education, science and technology focused “theme” schools could be appealing to Missouri families and could be offered if policy changes occur.

### **Financial Impact of Charters on Traditional Districts**

Financial impact on the home district is a major concern for critics of the charter school movement. Because charter schools are publically funded schools, charter schools threaten traditional public education in the fact that they would remove financial resources from the district per student that transfers to a charter from that home district. On average, charter schools across the nation operate on 28 percent less than neighboring traditional public schools and do not get funding for facilities in some states, such as Missouri.<sup>17</sup> Currently, Missouri does not offer state grants or any loan programs that would provide access to funding for facilities. Existing public buildings that are vacant are not currently accessible to charter schools by statute, nor do they give right of first refusal to charters for purchase or lease at below fair market value.<sup>18</sup>

### **Opening the State Up to Charter Schools**

Historically, charters seem to be a solution to the urban education issues, but charters are not only established in urban areas. In the 2010-2011 year, 814 rural charters were in operation across the country, which

comprised of 16 percent of all charters nationwide.<sup>19</sup> More growth and more opportunity for other charters to serve families in Missouri could be considered. Rural communities have struggling school systems as well, and could see a demand for another quality option for public education in the community. Proposed changes in the Missouri state statute could allow expansion of charters into all areas of the state of Missouri, as long as an approved sponsor is responsible for its oversight.

Sponsors of charter schools in the state of Missouri can be:

1. The local school board
2. A sponsor who has met the standards of accountability and performance as determined by the department based on sections 160.400 to 160.425 and section 167.349 of Missouri Revised Statutes on Schools—General Provisions<sup>20</sup> and is:
  - a. A public or private four-year university with an approved teacher preparation program
  - b. A community college that services the area that encompasses some portion of the district
  - c. Any two-year private vocational or technical school designated as a 501c (3) nonprofit with its primary campus in Missouri
  - d. The Missouri Charter Public School Commission<sup>21</sup>

Sponsors, according to Section 160.400.1:

1. Will receive 1.5 percent of the amount of state and local funding, not to exceed \$125,000, for its operations and costs related to sponsorship
2. Are required to expend no less than 90 percent of their charter school sponsorship funds to support oversight responsibilities or as a direct investment in the schools
3. Are required to maintain a rigorous charter school application system
4. Are required to establish a legal contract with charter schools that clearly outlines expectations

<sup>17</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, “Measuring Up,” Accessed May 2015, <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/MO/>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. Accessed May 2015, <http://www.publiccharters.org/get-the-facts/law-database/states/MO/>.

<sup>20</sup> Missouri Revised Statutes. “Schools-General Provisions,” Section 160.400.1. August 28, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

and consequences of charter schools not meeting those expectations

5. Are required to make decisions regarding renewal based on comprehensive data
6. Shall develop their own policies and procedures for sponsorship.
7. Are subject to review by the State Board of Education<sup>22</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If local school districts are unwilling to sponsor charter schools within their districts, policy should allow for entities approved by the State Board of Education to sponsor and open charter schools across the state. Charters need significant support from families and would most likely only appear in areas of need. Charters should not be seen as a threat to healthy school districts. Even if a charter school did appear in a healthy district, it should be viewed as another option for families in that particular area. High quality educational options that provide a safe and nurturing environment for students and encourage personal growth and academic achievements are needed. Educated students grow to become informed, responsible and productive adult citizens. All students should be adequately prepared for the workforce and/or to attend college at the culmination of grade twelve. All students should receive a K-12 education that completely prepares and encourages them to enter post-secondary education and will allow them to be globally competitive in today's job market. In Missouri, all students and their families deserve a choice.

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<sup>22</sup> Missouri Revised Statutes. "Schools-General Provisions," Section 160.400.1. August 28, 2014.