

Are charter schools “more accountable” than public schools?

No. Charter schools that fail to perform as expected are rarely held accountable. In theory, if a charter school does not meet its stated goals or if academic results are below stated expectations, the charter sponsor can revoke its charter or refuse to renew it, and families will withdraw their children from the school. This theory doesn't work in reality.

This is why

Charters are rarely closed for academic reasons. Charters that don't meet academic expectations are often given reprieves or remain on a probationary status for years. Those that eventually do close for academic reasons often poorly serve students for many years before shutting down.

Charter schools are a bad strategy for improving the whole public education system. In states that have large numbers of charter schools, those schools are often the worst academically performing schools in the state.

Charter schools get little to no oversight from authorities. Rules have lots of loopholes; staff and resources committed to oversight are often inadequate.

Charter schools can waste taxpayer money and get away with it. Unlike truly public schools that have to account for prospective and past spending in public budgets, charter spending of tax monies is often a black hole.

Charter schools can hide their operations from public view. Because charter schools are governed by non-elected, self-appointed boards, their leadership is often made up of people who frequently have personal or financial ties to the school's vendors, its management company, or property lease holders.

Look at the facts

A **national assessment** by the charter industry found only about 3% of charter schools are closed for academic reasons. The vast majority of charter school closures are for

financial reasons. Charters closed for academic under-performance were nevertheless able to stay open for an average of 6.2 years.¹

In **Ohio**, only one of 10 charter school students attend a school rated high performing.²

After two decades of charter-school expansion in **Michigan**, the state's overall performance on national assessments, known as “The Nation's Report Card,” has fallen from middle of the pack to nearly bottom for fourth- and eighth-grade math and fourth-grade reading. The state's charter schools scored worse on that test than their traditional public-school counterparts.³

In **Florida**, where millions are wasted every year on charter schools that eventually close, 21 of those that remain open scored a grade of D or below on state assessments. Those that do well do so largely because they have student populations that exclude economically disadvantaged students.⁴

A comparison of charter schools to public schools in **Louisiana** found on eighth-grade reading and math tests, charter-school students perform worse than public schools by enormous margins – 2 to 3 standard deviations.⁵

Neither the federal government nor the states have created a place taxpayers can go to see how much in taxes are going to each charter school and how the charters are spending the money, including what happens to real estate purchased with the public's money.⁶

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Since 1995, **the federal government** alone has spent over \$3.7 billion on charter schools, but knows very little about how the money was spent and how many of the charters eventually closed or never even opened.⁷

An audit carried out by a federal agency looked at **33 charter schools** in six states and found 22 examples where charter school management operations were likely wasting public money. In **Pennsylvania**, a charter management organization CEO, who had authority to write and issue checks without charter school board approval, wrote checks to himself from the charter school’s accounts totaling about \$11 million. At another **Pennsylvania** charter, a charter management company, that also owned a vendor that supplied services to the school, received \$485,000 in payments from the school

without charter school board approval. In **Florida**, a charter and its management company shared the same board and entered into an expensive lease agreement for the school building, expanded the facility, extended the lease, and increased the rental payments to the management company.⁸

An investigation of charter schools in **North Carolina** found the schools often enter into complicated contracts with management firms, in which almost all of the public funds given to the school are then paid to the management organization or vendors and real estate companies associated with the management firm. This makes it almost impossible to audit real expenses. Typical budget reports consist of vague line items that give little idea what money is actually being spent on.⁹

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
Charter schools are more accountable to parents and the public.	Charter schools hide critical information about their schools from parents and the public.
Expanding charter schools increases education opportunities.	Expanding charter schools leads to more opportunities for taxpayers to get ripped off.
Charter schools are independently run schools.	Charter schools are all too often dependent on the wrong people: those who have something financially to gain from the school.

Bottom Line

Charter schools continue to proliferate even though there is increasing evidence the public’s money is not being well spent. Rather than more ‘A’ rated schools, communities are getting more low-performing schools that have more opportunities to hide how taxpayer dollars are being spent. The flood of poor performing charters and the cost to taxpayers will only get worse until we get to the bottom of why this is happening and insist on transparency.

¹ “Charter Schools Closure Rate Tops 15 Percent,” CER Press Release, Washington, DC, December 21, 2011.
² “Revere school board requests changes in Ohio laws on charter schools,” Jody Miller, Akron Beacon Journal, May 24, 2015.
³ “DeVos’ Michigan schools experiment gets poor grades,” Caitlin Emma, Benjamin Wermund, and Kimberly Hefling, Politico, December 9, 2016.
⁴ “Florida Charters Fall Short on State Assessments,” The Center for Popular Democracy, January 2017.
⁵ “Policy Brief: Should Louisiana and the Recovery School District receive accolades for being last and nearly last?” Julian Vasquez Heilig, Network for Public Education, August 28, 2015.
⁶ “Charter School Black Hole: CMD Special Investigation Reveals Huge Info Gap on Charter Spending,” The Center for Media and Democracy, October 2015.
⁷ “Education Department Releases List of Federally Funded Charter Schools, though Incomplete,” Lisa Graves, PR Watch, Center for Media and Democracy, January, 2016.
⁸ “Nationwide Assessment of Charter and Education Management Organizations: Final Audit Report” U.S. Department of Education Office of Inspector General, September 2016.
⁹ “Tar Heel Heist: How the Charter School Industry Is Hijacking Public Education,” Jeff Bryant, Alternet, December 2, 2016.

