

Are charter schools innovative?

No. Charter schools were intended to be centers of education experimentation and innovation, but they generally don't invent new teaching methods or develop and spread new education practices. They're businesses first, and schools second.

This is why

Charter schools generally mimic public school teaching practices.

Charters will adopt and rename good public school teaching practices, and they have created some awful ones—like “cold calling” and “data walls” that are not supported by research. However, they differ from public schools mainly in the ways they govern schools and treat teachers rather than in their educational practices.

Charter schools often stifle

innovation. Charters often revert to a traditional “basics” approach rather than develop new educational practices. They rely on policies like retention that do not work and drive students out.

Even charter school advocates admit their schools are not particularly

innovative. Their arguments for charter expansions increasingly tend to be about replicating practices of so-called high-performing charters rather than developing new and innovative approaches.

Charter schools don't focus their resources on the students. Most spend more on administration and less on instruction and other direct services to students than public schools.

Charter schools care less about having experienced, highly knowledgeable teachers. They tend to hire less experienced teachers who don't plan to stay in the school for very long. They do not value the teacher/family relationships that emerge in communities over time.

Look at the facts

An analysis of 75 **Arizona** charter schools found little evidence the schools were developing new classroom practices.¹

A study of **Colorado** charters found that more than 60% of the schools used reform models that are common elsewhere, and their instructional approaches were already being used in district public schools. Another analysis of charters in that state found their curricular programs were similar to programs already available in public schools.²

A survey of teaching methods in **California** schools found 87% of charter respondents used traditional approaches in their classrooms.³

A study of **Michigan** charters found whatever innovations in teaching and learning that were present in those

schools were “marginal and no more significant or frequent” than practices in public schools.⁴

A **nationwide** analysis of charter school practices found charters are not developing education options outside the range of what is already evident in public schools.⁵

Charter schools in **Massachusetts** claim their extended school day is an innovation, but some public schools in the state have had a longer day way before charters opened in the state.⁶

Another **nationwide** study of charter schools found that when these schools are compared to other schools in their local contexts, there was little evidence of innovation outside of staffing and administration. Among the chief differences were the tendencies of charters to have teacher merit pay and no opportunities for tenure.⁷

Public schools have used **innovative education models**, such as Montessori and project based learning, for decades – well before the advent of charter schools.^{8,9}

(continued)



Leading charter **school advocacy organizations** now prioritize replication of existing charter models over creating new schools that trail blaze innovative approaches to teaching and learning.¹⁰

These charter proponents admit market pressures, which were a foundational principle for establishing these schools, are now a reason charters have little incentive to innovate.¹¹

While only 10.7% of teachers in public schools are novice (3 years or less experience), 26.3% of charter school teachers are novice. More public school

teachers have more advanced degrees, with 56.8% holding a master's degree or higher. Only 43.6% of charter school teachers have master's degrees or higher.¹²

A **national study** of charter schools found they spend less on instruction, student support services, and teacher salaries and more for administration — both as a percentage of overall spending and in salaries for administrative personnel. While public schools devoted 21.3% of operating expenditures to teacher salaries, charter schools spent 15.1% on teacher pay.¹³

A **Michigan** study found charter schools on average spend \$774 more per pupil per year on administration and \$1141 less on instruction than traditional public schools.¹⁴

Since New Orleans became an all-charter district, instructional spending in the city has stagnated or even decreased, while administrative costs have skyrocketed from about \$1,000 per student in 2005 to \$1,700 in 2014.¹⁵

WHAT PRIVATIZERS BELIEVE	WHAT WE BELIEVE
Charter schools have more freedom to try new things.	Charter schools are less apt to try new practices because they don't value teaching and making a long-term investment in staff.
Charter schools are student centered.	Charter schools are businesses that cut corners on student services to save costs.
Charter school give teachers more flexibility.	Charter schools care more about managing teachers and cutting the cost of instruction.

Bottom Line

The idea of charter schools may have originally been about giving teachers more freedom to try out new ideas, but these schools are now dominated by a business mentality more interested in managing costs, producing high test scores and competing with public schools than serving students. When teachers are considered an expenditure that needs to be reined in – by hiring less experienced staff and emphasizing only “the basics” – the value of classroom teaching is diminished, and students lose in the long run. We need public schools that truly make high-quality education and great teachers the top priority.

¹⁻⁵ "Innovation in education markets: Theory and evidence on the impact of competition and choice in charter schools," Christopher Lubienski, American Educational Research Journal, 40(2), 395-443, 2003.

⁶⁻⁶ "Are charter schools truly innovative? The answer can depend on your definition," James Vaznis, Boston Globe, October 12, 2016.

⁷ "Research Brief: School Innovation in District Context: Comparing Traditional Public Schools and Charter Schools," Courtney Preston, Ellen Goldring, Mark Berends, and Marisa Cannata, Vanderbilt Peabody College, September 2011.

⁸ "Growth of Public Montessori in the United States: 1975-2014," National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector.

⁹ "A Review of Research on Project Based Learning," John W. Thomas, March 2000.

¹⁰ "Replicating Quality: Policy Recommendations to Support the Replication and Growth of High-Performing Charter Schools and Networks," National Association of Charter School Authorizers, January 2014.

¹¹ "In the Eye of the Beholder: Charter Schools and Innovation," Robin J. Lake, Center for Reinventing Public Education, April 2008.

¹² "Green and Write: Students pay the price for unequal treatment of charter school teachers," Amy Auletto, Michigan State University College of Education, March 17, 2016.

¹³ "Equal or Fair? A Study of Revenues and Expenditures in American Charter Schools," Gary Miron and Jessica L. Urschel, Western Michigan University, June 2010.

¹⁴ "Is Administration Leaner in Charter Schools? Resource Allocation in Charter and Traditional Public Schools," David D. Arsen and Yongmei Ni, Michigan State University, 2012.

¹⁵ "Does School Reform = Spending Reform? The Effect of the New Orleans School Reforms on the Use and Level of School Expenditures," Christian Buerger and Douglas N. Harris, Education Research Alliance for New Orleans, Tulane University, January 17, 2017.

