

# The Political Agenda of “School Choice”

## Charter Schools, School Choice, and the Dismantling of Public Education

**W**e believe that ALL public schools must be held accountable to the same high standards of transparency and equity to ensure the success of all students. By their very nature, charter schools are vulnerable to waste, fraud, and abuse.

Public funding for charter schools (including local, state, and federal expenditures) is now more than \$30 billion annually. Despite this tremendous investment of public dollars to charter schools, and despite previous reports documenting gross financial mismanagement, government at all levels has still failed to implement systems that proactively monitor these schools for waste, fraud, and abuse.

As taxpayer-funded schools, charter schools must operate in a manner that is transparent and accountable to the families and communities they serve. This includes meeting the same quality standards for student outcomes, fair treatment of all students, and transparent use of taxpayer dollars the public insists upon for all other taxpayer-funded schools. Sadly, this is not the case in New Hampshire.

This year, majority leaders in the New Hampshire House and Senate have introduced numerous bills to enable charter schools to collect more money per student than public schools, enable even less oversight, and reduce the standard to open a charter school. And Governor Sununu has nominated an Education Commissioner who openly advocates for “increased school choice.”

Legislative proponents of public charter schools make their arguments while hiding behind the code words “school choice.” These politicians believe that not every child deserves the same opportunity to succeed, and will let public schools fall into disrepair, use outdated resources, and overcrowd classrooms to ensure that the students they deem most worthy will succeed. In the name of “school choice” we are witnessing the reinstatement of educational apartheid.

The fact is, we need great public schools in every community if every child is going to have a chance to succeed. The idea of choice is deep rooted in America. But the concept as sold by House and Senate majority leaders turns parents into selective consumers rather than active public citizens engaged in improving the common good by advocating for the great public schools in their community.

No one wants to deny any parent the right to make a choice to send their child to public, private, religious or home school. That choice should always be protected and respected. We, as a society, believe that education is so vital to our children’s and our nation’s success that for hundreds of years we have all agreed to share the cost of that education. Refusing to maintain our schools, to provide the resources needed to teach, and to ensure that educators are well qualified, compensated and respected all in the name of “increased choice” breaks a promise to this generation of children and those to come.

As educators, we know that when we talk about choice in schools, we should be talking about choices in instructional models. We know that not all students learn the same. We know that some students can succeed in the traditional model, while others may require more innovative or individualized approaches. Ensuring that these choices are available in every public school should be the goal of legislators across the country as they file bills and expend funds to support public education.

In 2016, the Center for Popular Democracy and In The Public Interest commissioned public opinion polls on charter schools. The poll found negligible interest in the primary argument of charter school advocates. **Only 8% considered lack of school choice a big concern.** People were far more concerned about excessive focus on standardized testing (42%) and cuts to programs like art, music and PE (35%). People considered the most important factors in K-12 education to be “highly qualified, caring teachers” (37%), “parental involvement” (31%), and “small teacher-student ratio” (31%). They were not crying out for choice.

The poll shows that the voting public favors the NEA supported idea of community schools that start with rigorous academics then add health and social services, youth and community development, and even parental education along with academics for students. Other results from the poll include:

**Require companies and organizations that manage charter schools to open board meetings to parents and the public, similar to public school board meetings.**

**Total Support: 92% (69% strongly)**

**Require companies and organizations that manage charter schools to release to parents and the public how they spend taxpayer money, including their annual budgets and contracts.**

**Total Support: 90% (75% strongly)**

**Ensure that neighborhood public schools do not lose funding when new charter schools open in their area.**

**Total Support: 78% (75% strongly)**

**Require state officials to conduct regular audits of charter schools’ finances to detect fraud, waste or abuse of public funds.**

**Total Support: 88% (72% strongly)**

**Require charter schools to return taxpayer money to the school district for any student that leaves the charter school to return to a neighborhood public school during the school year.**

**Total Support: 80% (57% strongly)**

**Require all teachers who work in taxpayer funded schools, including neighborhood public schools and charter schools, to meet the same training and qualification requirements.**

**Total Support: 89% (71% strongly)**

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University released a set of standards for charter schools aimed at ensuring accountability, transparency and equity. We believe these standards should be implemented in state charter school policies to better serve all students and protect the public's investment in public education.

The standards call for traditional districts and charter schools to work together to ensure a coordinated approach that serves all children, and for public charter school governance to be representative and transparent. Charter schools should ensure equal access to interested students and prohibit practices that discourage enrollment or disproportionately push enrolled students out of the school. In addition, the standards call for charter school discipline policies to be fair and transparent. All students deserve equitable and adequate school facilities. Districts and charter schools should work together to ensure that facilities arrangements do not disadvantage students in either sector. Online charter schools should be better regulated for quality, transparency, and the protection of student data. Finally, monitoring and oversight of charter schools are critical to protect the public interest. Regulations and laws should be strong and fully funded by the state.

NEA has created **Charter Schools 101** to help explain the challenge now being faced by public education advocates.

### **What are charter schools?**

Charter schools are privately managed, taxpayer-funded schools exempted from many of the rules and standards all other taxpayer-funded schools must follow to ensure student safety and success.

### **When were they created?**

Following passage of a charter school law the preceding year, the first charter school in the United States opened in Minnesota in 1992.

### **Why were charter schools created?**

The main argument initially offered for creating charter schools focused on a desire to create greater flexibility for innovation within public education. It was hoped that successful innovations could be adapted to benefit public education more broadly. Yet after more than 13 years of charter schools in New Hampshire, where is all the innovation that should be showing up in our traditional public schools? Majority party leaders recently submitted a bill that would remove the innovation clause from our state charter school law. Clearly, what started as an experiment in innovation has turned into a tool for majority politicians to drain funding from our public schools.

### **Do charter schools operate in the same way as traditional public schools?**

There are significant differences. Charter schools tend to hire younger and less experienced teachers. In New Hampshire un-certified educators can teach in public charter schools. Charter schools typically have appointed, rather than elected, school boards. About 4 in 10 charter schools nationally are managed under contract by for-profit or non-profit charter "chains." These may or may not be headquartered in the communities where their schools are located. The other 6 in 10 charter schools nationally, sometimes referred to as "mom and pop" charters, are not-for-profit and are operated by individuals or small groups of individuals who live in the local community. This lack of transparency and accountability means that tax dollars diverted to charter schools becomes untraceable.

### **How do charter schools come into existence?**

An individual or organization wanting to open a charter school must apply to a charter school "authorizer." Each state's charter law says which entities can authorize creation of a charter school. These entities can be a local school district, a state education department, or a separate state charter school board. The authorizer reviews each application and decides whether to approve or decline it.

### **How do students enroll in charter schools?**

They apply for admission. In cases where more students apply than the school can accommodate, a lottery is held to determine admission. Some charter schools employ selective outreach and recruitment practices. These appear to have contributed to under-representation of students with disabilities, especially those with more severe disabilities, and English language learners in the charter sector. Concern is also being raised that the proliferation of charter schools is leading to the re-segregation of public schools based on race, ethnicity, and income. Based on the various admissions and management policies, charters are choosing their students, rather than families choosing their schools— in essence, school choice has become charter schools choose.

### **Are charter schools private schools?**

Charter schools are taxpayer-funded but privately managed. They are not private schools in the ordinary sense in which that term has been understood, to refer to schools operated by religious or non-denominational private organizations that charge tuition to enrolled families.

### **How does student achievement in charter schools compare with that in traditional district schools?**

Many studies have looked at student achievement measures. These show very small differences, some favoring traditional district schools and some favoring charter schools.