

AT A GLANCE

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TENNESSEE



DECEMBER 2012

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State Collaborative on Reforming Education

AT A GLANCE: PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TENNESSEE

WHAT ARE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Charter schools are public schools that are operated by independent, non-profit governing bodies, which include parent members.¹ As public schools, they are tuition-free, funded by public dollars, and held to the same academic standards as other public schools in Tennessee. While they must meet those standards, the main difference between public charters and traditional schools is that charters have more control over their budgets, staff, curricula, and operations.

HOW ARE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS FORMED IN TENNESSEE?

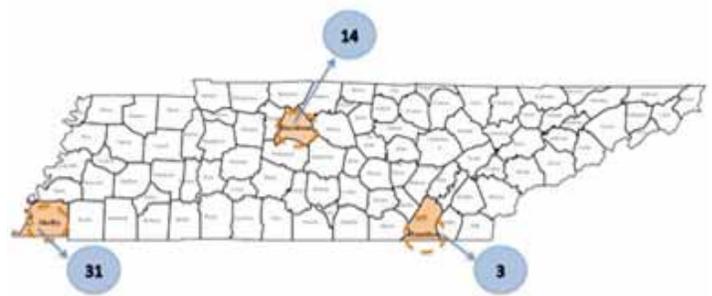
By law, all prospective charters must be approved by an *authorizer*, which is a local or state entity granted chartering authority by law. Authorizers ensure that only certain charter schools, which are meeting the needs of the authorizer's students, district and community, open and remain open. Authorizers do this through rigorous authorization processes, ongoing monitoring of the academic and financial performance of charter schools, and, when necessary, through the revocation or non-renewal of charters. The only authorizers of charter schools in Tennessee are local school boards and the Achievement School District (ASD).

The ASD is a special statewide district that acts as both operator—running a number of schools directly—and authorizer, recruiting and selecting charter management organizations to run the lowest 5 percent of schools in terms of achievement. In the Fall of 2012, the ASD opened its first six schools in Memphis and Nashville, two of which are charter schools and one which will officially become a charter in 2013.²

While some states allow for-profit companies to operate public charters, Tennessee requires that all sponsors be independent, non-profit entities with governing boards that include at least one parent.³ Sponsors must apply to their local authorizer in order to receive a charter if they wish to open a school in that authorizer's jurisdiction; if the authorizer rejects the application, the sponsor can appeal to the State Board of Education. Alternatively, a local board of education may convert an existing school to a charter by handing control to an independent governing body. Finally, a provision within the law known as the "parent trigger" stipulates that if 60 percent of the parents or teachers at a given school approve, they can petition the local board to convert their school into a charter.

CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TENNESSEE

There are currently 48 public charter schools in operation across the state. Projections for the number of new charter schools slated to open in the 2013-14 school year range anywhere from 18 to 25, but could be even higher depending on the number of charters authorized by the ASD.⁴ There are nearly 13,000 students enrolled in charter schools across the state, compared with less than 10,000 last year.⁵



WHAT CHANGES TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL LAWS AFFECT STUDENTS AND PARENTS IN TENNESSEE?

Three significant changes to public charter school laws were enacted in 2011 and are now in effect in 2012. First, the state legislature lifted eligibility requirements to allow any student within a charter's zone to attend—a policy known as *open enrollment*. Second, the legislature removed the cap on the number of charters that can be opened in the state. Third, the ASD began its inaugural year as a charter school authorizer for those schools identified as the bottom five percent in the state in terms of student achievement. These shifts in the law reflect a larger, growing trend of bipartisan support for charter schools, and were enacted with the approval of Governor Bill Haslam.

These changes are significant largely because they broaden the impact of public charter schools beyond the populations originally targeted by charter laws. In the past, Tennessee law placed restrictions on who could attend charter schools, reserving them for failing students, students enrolled in chronically underperforming schools, or the economically disadvantaged.⁶ Strong majorities in both legislative houses pushed for the shift to the open enrollment policy recently amended to the law.

Significant Legislative Changes for Public Charter Schools in TN

Open enrollment: any student in the district is eligible to attend

The cap on the number of charter schools allowed in the state has been removed

The Achievement School District can now authorize public charter schools

HOW ARE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR STUDENT AND TEACHER PERFORMANCE?

Charter schools are part of the public school system and, as such, are held responsible for their students' performance. Students enrolled in charter schools must take the statewide TCAP and End-of-Course exams that their peers in traditional schools take, and these data are used to calculate the performance of the school as a whole. Under the state's new accountability system, schools are evaluated based on student growth on state standardized tests. Additionally, a school's charter can be revoked if it is identified as a Priority School in the bottom 5 percent – this decision cannot be appealed to the State Board of Education.

Just as schools are held accountable based on their students' performance, teachers at public charter schools must be evaluated like their peers at traditional schools, in order to maintain their teaching licenses. Charter schools are allowed to propose alternate teacher evaluation rubrics other than the model developed by the state, as long as student growth and achievement make up significant components of the model. Therefore, even though there may be variation in evaluation format, charter school teachers must be held accountable by an approved evaluation model.

HOW DOES THE PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS COMPARE TO TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

There are a number of charter schools in Tennessee that outperform their neighboring traditional schools; however, there are also a handful of charters that are underperforming. The Center for Research on Educational Outcomes at Stanford University has been studying the impact of charter schools in Tennessee by comparing academic performance of charter school students to similar students in traditional schools. In the 2011-12 school year, 15 charter schools performed better than their traditional counterparts, 7 performed at about the same level, and 13 performed

worse than the local public schools in either math or reading.⁷ Under the state's new system for tracking school progress, two charter schools were designated Reward schools in 2012 for being among the top 5 percent in terms of overall performance and the top 5 percent of greatest growth: New Vision Academy in Nashville, and Freedom Preparatory Academy in Memphis. In addition, Power Center Academy in Memphis was a recipient of the 2011 SCORE Prize, demonstrating strong growth in student achievement.

CONCLUSION

For parents, students, and legislators alike, it is important to note that public charter schools represent one piece of the education reform landscape.

When discussing the impact public charter schools have on Tennessee's education landscape, three major takeaways emerge:

- A rigorous application process needs to be in place for approving prospective charter schools.
- Public charter schools should provide a high-quality option for students to access rigorous courses and great teachers.
- Strong systems must be in place to hold existing schools accountable.

Many public charter schools are dramatically improving student achievement, and we should take the opportunity to learn from these high performing charter schools and share their best practices with educators across the state. Equally important is the way information is disseminated to the expanded range of parents and students affected by recent changes to the law. To this end, it is imperative that the state's reporting systems for collecting school performance data are transparent to the public, in order for parents to make informed decisions about their children's education.

1 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (September 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.public-charters.org/About-Charter-Schools/What-are-Charter-Schools003E.aspx>.

2 Achievement School District. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.achievementschooldistrict.org/>.

3 Tennessee Public Charter Schools Act. (2002). Retrieved from <http://www.state.tn.us/sos/acts/102/publpc0850.pdf>.

4 "Current Tennessee Charter Schools 2012-13." (September 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.tn.gov/education/fedprog/fpcharterschls.shtml>.

5 "Current Tennessee Charter Schools 2012-13." (September 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.tn.gov/education/fedprog/fpcharterschls.shtml>.

6 "Charter Schools Annual Report." (July 2012). Retrieved from <http://www.tn.gov/education/fedprog/fpcharterschls.shtml>.

7 Achievement School District (2012). Effect Size TN Data 2011-12. Retrieved from http://www.achievementschooldistrict.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Effect-Size_TN-Data-2011-2012.pdf

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