High Expectations And High Accountability: Tennessee’s Charter School Sector

Across the country, 45 states and the District of Columbia have public charter schools. However, not all charter sectors are created equal. Unlike many other states, Tennessee’s public charter school policies are defined by rigorous standards and high accountability. Over a decade of evolving public charter school policies, the state has created a high-quality sector driven by a clear expectation for charter schools to effectively serve all students.

All Tennessee charter schools are:

- Public, nonprofit, and free to attend for all students
- Authorized by either a school district or the independent state commission
- Required to follow a clear, rigorous process to open or renew a school
- Subject to automatic closure for failure to meet standards for student achievement and financial health
- Required to undergo an annual financial audit by an independent third party
- Accessible for all students within the district who apply, regardless of academic achievement, behavior, or special needs and required to use a random lottery if student demand exceeds supply
- In person, not virtual or with a hybrid attendance model *

Tennessee’s public charter schools are allowed flexibility to choose their own curriculum, educators, schedules, extracurricular activities, and more. While traditional district-run schools can go through processes to have more flexibility, charter schools can do so more nimbly. All these flexibilities allow charter schools to design innovative school models that uniquely meet students’ needs. However, Tennessee law requires some aspects of the public charter school student experience to be just like a traditional public school to maintain a high bar for quality across all public schools.

Students in Tennessee public charter schools are:

- Taught by teachers who meet the same licensing requirements as every other public school teacher
- Taught the same academic standards as every other public school student
- Required to take the same state tests as every other public school student
- Held to the same attendance expectations as every other public school student

* Many public charter schools operated virtually or hybrid during the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years due to the pandemic.