

### **Charter School Conversions: Myth vs. Facts**

Despite the success of charter schools, or perhaps because of it, misconceptions abound about what charter schools are and what they do. Supporters of the educational status quo have propagated a number of myths about charter schools—myths that have sometimes proven hard to dispel in the popular press and with some members of the general public. Today, perhaps more than ever, it is critical that these myths be dispelled. You can find Frequently Asked Questions about charter schools, videos and more at [www.calcharters.org](http://www.calcharters.org).

**MYTH:** Charter schools are private schools.

**FACT:** Charter schools are public schools open to any child, free of charge. They offer options to families that may be dissatisfied with their local schools, but cannot afford private school. Choice is a powerful tool for parents seeking educational equity and equal access to quality education for their children.

**MYTH:** Conversion charter schools are not public schools.

**FACT:** A conversion charter school is a school that existed as a traditional public school prior to becoming a charter school, and operates under the terms of a charter between the school and the authorizer, which may be a local school district, board of education, or the State Board of Education.

Traditional schools decide to convert into charters for a variety of reasons, but key drivers are the flexibilities and autonomies available under the charter model. Conversion provides increased flexibility in the areas of curriculum, instruction, operations, governance and finance in exchange for a chance to improve student achievement, demonstrate continuous growth, and have additional accountability.

Conversion charters can either be independent or district-dependent. The latter does not represent true charter schools, as they lack the flexibility and autonomy that are the cornerstones of the charter school movement. There are several advantages for independent conversion charter schools, including more flexibility in staffing, funding, and curricula.

Currently, there are 150 conversion charter schools across the state. The numbers have consistently increased as teachers and school leaders have realized the benefits of conversion.

**MYTH:** Conversion charter schools do not enroll district school students.

**FACT:** An existing traditional public school converting to a charter school adopts and maintains a policy giving admission preference to pupils who reside within the former attendance area of that public school. Additional preference for students currently attending an existing public school and those living within the boundaries of the school district where the school is located can also be given.

**MYTH:** Charter public schools receive more money than district public schools.

**FACT:** In most cases, charter schools receive LESS federal and state money than district public schools, for a variety of reasons. For instance, charter schools do not have the same access to local parcel taxes and bonds as traditional districts and often have to pay to rent facilities out of their operating funds. Charter schools have also been particularly hard hit by the state budget crisis because they are not able to access low-cost financing as school districts can to help address state deferrals.

**MYTH:** Conversion charter schools negatively impact the communities, district and traditional public schools.

**FACT:** Conversion charter schools have a *positive* impact in the communities, districts and traditional public schools where they are located. They provide increased educational opportunities and choices for their parents and students, as well as flexibility to the operators. Some specific benefits include:

- Parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders have an active voice in school governance.
- School leaders can develop a robust professional development program, increase teacher support and effectiveness and make informed personnel decisions.
- Budgetary decisions are made at the school level, potentially increasing the amount of dollars reaching the school and classroom, which allows resources to be aligned with programmatic mission, vision and objectives.
- Teachers and staff have the freedom to develop and implement innovative instructional programs tailored to the needs of their students.
- The Board of Directors has the ability to make critical governance decisions at the school site level.

**MYTH:** Conversion charter schools will take money away from public schools.

**FACT:** Charter schools are public schools, and are funded by the state of California on a per-pupil funding basis based on grade levels and population served. They receive funding via a block grant and make decisions at the school site or the nonprofit organizational level to best meet the needs of the school and students. Conversely, funding for unified school districts is increasingly complicated as revenue is derived from many varying sources and school districts make varying decisions in how they allocate their funding to best serve the needs of schools and the district. One important thing to be aware of is that charter schools are funded based on their actual enrollment.

**MYTH:** Charter public schools accept only the "cream of the crop" and reject underperforming students.

**FACT:** Unlike exclusive private schools, charter public schools do not recruit and select "the best" students. When enrollment requests exceed the number of seats, charter schools are required by law to hold a public lottery to determine who will attend. Because they are free and open to all, charter public schools cannot engage in selective admissions policies.

California charter schools serve a large number of students traditionally considered to be low-achieving or otherwise at-risk, educating some of the state's most underserved students, allowing them to achieve success where the conventional system failed to do so. Research shows that charter schools educate a diverse student population reflective of diversity in the state.

**MYTH:** Charter public schools do not provide special education services.

**FACT:** Like all public schools, charter schools understand their responsibility to serve all students, and charter schools are committed to serving students with exceptional needs. In fact, because charter schools are designed to have more flexibility than traditional public schools, they are uniquely situated to provide innovative, high-quality educational services to students with unique learning needs.

**MYTH:** Charter public schools are not held accountable for academic performance.

**FACT:** Charter schools, unlike traditional public schools, are academically accountable on two counts. They are held accountable by their authorizer and, more importantly, by the families they serve. When a team of school developers submits their charter petition, they must define their academic goals. In order to be authorized, their goals must be rigorous. In order to stay open, they must meet or exceed

those goals. Families make the choice to enroll their children in charter schools, and families can remove their students if they are dissatisfied with the school. A charter school that neglects its academic duties will soon find that its enrollment has dwindled, as well as its budget accordingly, and major changes may be necessary for the school to remain open.

**MYTH:** Charter schools operate without any oversight.

**FACT:** Charter schools must operate within the provisions of state and federal law. They must abide by health, safety and civil rights laws, and cannot discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex or national origin. Charter governance bodies are subject to various business regulations, such as ethical financial practices, and public body rules, such as open meeting laws. Charter schools also have oversight from their authorizers (usually the local school district, county office of education or State Board of Education). In fact, the very name charter refers to the contract that the school enters into with their authorizer. Authorizers review financial reports, have the authority to conduct audits, determine if the school is to be renewed at the end of the charter's term (usually five years) and can revoke a charter for certain reasons outlined within charter law if the school is not meeting the terms of its charter.

**MYTH:** Charter public schools are an unproven experiment.

**FACT:** The incredible growth in charter schools – 982 schools serving over 412,000 students, suggests that families believe charters to be a common sense solution to their education needs. In fact, due to lack of space, 42,000 students whose families' applied to attend a charter school in California were not able to get a seat. For families in urban centers, charters represent a beacon of hope, as charter schools serving low-income populations are much more likely to be high-performing than non-charters serving low-income populations. The same is true for autonomous conversion schools, especially at the high school level. In aggregate, autonomous conversion charter high schools outperformed large traditional public high schools every year from the 2006-07 school year through the 2010-11 school year in terms of API scores, ELA proficiency levels, and math proficiency levels. Indeed, the data reveals that autonomous conversion charter schools' academic performance across the board has grown tremendously after charter conversion.

Charter public schools are an important part of the state's public school system, providing a space for innovation, educational opportunity in low-income communities and unique curriculum options to fulfill the needs of their students and communities. Charter schools have been reinventing public education in California for nearly 20 years and continue to gain support from the public across the state and the nation.