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Charter schools are increasing in prevalence, and they continue to be the subject of great interest and debate in the education community. Charter schools are public schools, but unlike traditional public schools, they operate under a contract, or "charter," issued by a school district or other public authority, and they can be closed if they fail to meet the conditions of their contract. In communities where charter schools are available, children may attend a charter school instead of their regularly assigned public school. But what do we actually know about charter schools?

Child Trends offers five insights based on its review of the most recent national data on charter schools.

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**Charter schools are on the rise**

From 2000 to 2011, the number of charter schools more than tripled (from 1,500 to 5,300) and the number of students served by charters quintupled (from about 340,000 to about 1.8 million), according to the U.S. Department of Education. Estimates from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools suggest that there were 6,000 charter schools, serving 2.3 million students, in 2012. Most charter schools are concentrated in cities -- 56 percent in 2011, compared with 25 percent of traditional public schools. The cities with the highest percentage of students enrolled in charter schools were New Orleans (76 percent), Detroit (41 percent), and Washington, D.C. (41 percent). Although the charter school student population represented just 3.6 percent of all students in 2011, it increased 11 percent from 2010 to 2011.

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**Parents give charter schools high marks**

In 2007, charter school parents were more likely than traditional public school parents to report being very satisfied with their child's school (70 percent vs. 56 percent) and teachers (78 percent vs. 60 percent), according to U.S. Department of Education National Household Education Surveys Program data. Charter school parents were also more likely to trust the staff in their
Charter school student bodies are more likely to be Black, Hispanic, low-income

Compared with traditional public schools, charter school student populations were more likely to be mostly Black (25 percent vs. 10 percent) and mostly Hispanic (21 percent vs. 14 percent) in 2011. Nationally, one in three charter schools (33 percent) served a student population that was at least 75 percent low-income, compared with one in five traditional public schools (21 percent).

Report cards for academic performance are mixed

Experiments -- the gold standard of education research -- have shown that some charter schools outperform traditional public schools, while others underperform. Quasi-experimental studies, which attempt to control statistically for differences in student populations across school types, also show mixed results. A recent nationwide quasi-experimental study found that for reading gain scores on state assessments, 56 percent of charters scored no different from matched traditional public schools, 29 percent scored better, and 19 percent scored worse. For math, these statistics were 40 percent, 29 percent, and 31 percent, respectively.

We can learn from successful charter schools

What should parents and students look for in a school? The best charter schools -- as measured by gains in math and reading -- are those where principals provide frequent feedback to teachers, teachers use data to drive instruction, students receive frequent tutoring and additional instructional time, and school staff members hold high expectations for all students’ behavior and academic performance, according to a recent study of charter schools in New York City. This same study found that traditional measures, such as class size, per pupil expenditure, and teacher qualifications were not strongly linked to student learning.

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