

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF GREATER TUCSON CHARTER SCHOOL STUDY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2011

What are charter schools?

In 1994 the Arizona legislature established the ability to form public, state-funded charter schools that would be privately operated. The legislature believed that this would improve academic achievement and provide school choice for parents and students.

The legislation allowed anyone who was “sufficiently qualified” to apply for a charter. The applicant or sponsor could contract for a charter with the Arizona Board of Education, the State Board for Charter Schools, or via a local school district. If the business and organizational plan was approved, and it was determined that there was not a religious connection, the charter school could be organized. The bill passed with bi-partisan support.

In ensuing legislative sessions, requirements for background checks and fingerprints were mandated for teachers, operators, and charter school boards. Because of the difficulty of bonding for 5 years, the charter was increased to 15 years in duration. Start-up costs would no longer be awarded by the state. Charter schools had to be contiguous to a school district if they were formed by a school district.

Each charter school or group of schools under the same sponsorship is its own local legislated authority, similar to being its own school district. Decisions are made regarding the management of the school by the sponsors/operators who were awarded the charter. The owner of the charter school determines the focus, the curriculum based on state standards, the hiring of staff, and the functions of the board members who are appointed by the owner/operator. A charter school can determine the size of enrollment, but must accept all students, including those with special needs.

Are charter schools accountable? How successful have they been?

Over 100,000 Arizona students are now enrolled in public charter schools. Fully 25% of the state’s public schools are charter schools, enrolling 10% of the public school students. In Pima County there are approximately 83 public charter schools with an enrollment of about 21,000.

Charter public schools still have to meet the requirements and standards specified by the State of Arizona for successful completion of K-12 education in a comprehensive program just as the traditional district schools have to do. They also must follow federal, state, and local laws and regulations regarding health, safety, civil rights, and insurance. While teachers do not have to be certified, they must be qualified in their respective subject matters.

In the beginning charter schools had few accountability standards from the legislature or the State Board for Charter Schools; however, recently that has changed. The standards for academic outputs and financial oversight are now being applied more stringently, and there are consequences for non-performance.

Publicity noting that Arizona has the second highest number of charter schools of any state in the nation helped prompt the LWVGT to begin a study to see what impact charter schools have had on student education . Since the schools have existed in Arizona since 1995, it was believed that there ought to be some evidence of their successes and impacts on the public school system.

About this study:

At the 2009 LWVGT annual meeting, members voted to authorize a one year charter school study. (In 2010 an additional year was added to complete the local study.) The study would focus on Pima County charter schools. A committee of LWVGT members was organized. The committee recognized that the final report would be based on what was easily available to a citizen. It did not do its own statistical or scientific data.

The scope included the following questions:

1. What has been the success rate of charter schools since they were established in 1994?
2. How do charter schools compare with traditional district public schools?
3. How are charter schools regulated and who is responsible for their oversight?
4. How are charter schools funded?
5. Why do some charter schools succeed and some fail?
6. What impact have charter schools had on traditional public schools or the school system as a whole?
7. What specific reforms have charter schools established and how can they be used in traditional district public schools?

Members of the committee conducted interviews with the Executive Director of the Arizona Board of Charter Schools, attended a local charter school operators meeting, and heard speakers on Arizona school finance and charter operations. Numerous articles about charter schools were reviewed.

The committee divided itself into sub-groups: research, finance, interviews, and later a consensus question committee to work on specifics and report back to the entire group. It was evident that there was a need to visit some charter schools and interview administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Tucson Unified School District traditional public schools would also be interviewed to allow a comparison as part of the study.

Based on the information we hoped to gain, the interview committee developed a series of questions for both types of schools. These questions, along with the scope, were submitted to each school prior to the actual interviews.

Committee members conducted the interviews at high schools of both types of public schools in the spring of 2010. In the fall of 2010 elementary and middle schools for charter schools and district public schools were interviewed, using appropriate interview questions established by the interview committee. A summary of their findings are listed in an addendum to the report.

Charter school funding:

Both charter schools and district public schools receive similar per pupil funding of operation and maintenance based on daily student counts. It is difficult to tell whether charter schools or district schools get more public funding. Both get equal per student payments along with the funding formula for special needs students.

Basic minimum per student funding for all schools is figured by the state. Where poor district property taxes cannot cover this per student funding, the state steps in to make up the shortfall for poor districts, thus “equalizing” funding for all districts.

Even though charter schools are not district schools, they are included in the basic minimum per student funding guarantee. Thus they inadvertently are “equalized” with all other schools. The state funds the total guaranteed student amount for charter schools since they lack the authority to tax property and thus generate local funds..

Since charter schools have no taxing authority, the state has given them funds to cover some capital and equipment expenditures along with transportation funds. However, the schools are under no obligation to provide transport and can use these dollars for other programs. Financial audits are required for fiscal accountability for both charter and traditional district public schools.

The voter- elected school boards of traditional district schools have the ability to ask the voters to pass bonds and repay them with local property taxes. There are minimum facilities standards for traditional district schools set by the School Facilities Board, and there are requirements to provide transportation to school for their students.

Charter schools can receive grants from private foundations. Charter schools may own land and buildings, but they have to depend upon other sources of revenue to pay for these. The owners can apply for loans and grants to pay for the facilities. It is possible for a charter school facing the need for expansion to take out a loan on its building equity to finance the addition.

Academic Accountability

Charter public schools must administer the same standardized tests (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards or AIMS) as all district schools do each year. Both must annually report the test results and other information (numbers of students taking the test, drop-out rates, graduation rates) to the State Department of Education. Thus both types of Arizona public schools are ranked together as far as academic results are concerned.

The two ranking systems (based on testing) provide a dual accountability system. They are:

1. The federal average yearly progress (AYP) as required by No Child Left Behind. A school and/or district gets a Yes or No grade that they have made adequate progress toward 100% proficiency by 2014.
2. The state AZ Learns ranking which determines whether schools have met state standards in math, reading, writing, and science. A school is ranked as excelling, highly performing, performing plus, performing, not performing, or failing.

The school report cards distributed by the Arizona Department of Education do not show that the academic performance of charter schools is significantly better than traditional district schools in Pima County or at the state level.

If a school does not meet the two standards, the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools asks the school to plan for improvement. The Arizona Department of Education works with the school for progress and improvement.

The State Board for Charter Schools is just starting to implement a five year “high stakes” review of all charter schools. If a school has not shown improvement in growth and proficiency for five years, that school will, after a series of hearings and appeals, be closed. This new system is a result of pressure from charter schools themselves reacting to their public image, which they feel has been determined by the poor schools.

Popular belief was that since charter schools had to follow fewer rules than traditional district schools, they would be free to innovate. While they have offered tutors during school hours or after school to help students falling behind and some have longer school years and online classes, innovation does not seem to be any more prevalent in charter schools than it is in traditional district schools.

Some have succeeded and are ranked high in the nation. Others have gone out of business or been put out of business by the State Charter School Board for poor academic performance, fiscal problems, or not living up to their respective charters.

There is some evidence that traditional district schools are now competing with the charter schools with better quality programs, more flexibility of schedules, emphasis on extra-curricular activities, and better marketing to retain students. Some district high schools now feature online classes and night classes to help those students who are falling behind and who may otherwise have difficulty meeting graduation requirements.

The impact on the traditional education system:

Because of open enrollment, parents now have many choices for their students’ education. It is not easy, however, to find information on individual schools. There are a number of websites, including some with performance data for charter schools. Test data is also available via the Arizona Department of Education site for both charter and district public schools www.ade.state.az.us

For parents who do not own personal computers, it is more difficult to gather this information. They can use computers at a library or telephone the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools at 602-364-3080 and request that a parent brochure be sent to them. Most often parents choose schools for their youngsters based on word of mouth.

The introduction of charter schools and school choice or open enrollment has had a major impact on the education system in Pima County in terms of the movement of students among schools. Students may opt to go to any school within or without their district, if there is room for them.

There are now a number of public schools that advertise a special program for students. Because of the open enrollment law, parents have researched public schools outside their neighborhood areas, and in many cases, choose one of these schools. Hence charter public schools and some traditional district schools have waiting lists. As a result, neighborhood schools for all students is a concept that is rapidly dwindling.

CONCLUSIONS:

The LWVGT study of charter schools has come at a time when there is high interest in the topic. However much of the idea of reform, as well as actual change, is in flux at the present time, so it is difficult to foretell what changes for the better in education will take place. No final results are evident yet.

Charter schools are here to stay. Smaller class sizes and a focus on the individual students and their needs are appealing. Charter schools with a special emphasis such as science, the arts, or college preparatory attract students with that particular interest.

We believe that there is a mix of student abilities in charter schools. Some of the schools we visited are designed to educate low achievers in diverse minority populations. There may be a wide mix of students within each charter that provide more diversity in the system as a whole.

The introduction of charter schools and school choice has had a major impact on the Pima County education system. Students do move back and forth between charter schools and traditional district schools.

A shift of students to charter schools has diminished funds for traditional district public schools. This movement can affect future planning guidelines and hiring for both types of schools; it has also brought more marketing of special programs to students so that they are aware of the choices they have. However, school choice does undermine neighborhood-based schools.

The school report cards distributed by the Arizona Department of Education do not show that the average academic performance of charter schools is significantly better than traditional district schools in Pima County or at the state level.

We also learned that there is ongoing debate in the state and the nation about whether the current testing instruments (AIMS) and school ranking evaluations are adequate or fair ways to measure either district or charter schools.

The charter legislation was permissive so that there is variation among charter schools. There is also some variation among traditional district schools, which makes it almost impossible to compare district and charter schools on many features.

We have spent many hours researching and visiting public schools. We submit this report for your consideration for possible policy positions regarding charter schools.

For further consideration of other changes in our public school system, we suggest that you read the addendum regarding the legislature's and State Board of Education's mandates.