

Quick Definition

Charter schools are by definition independent public schools. Although funded with taxpayer dollars, they operate free from many of the laws and regulations that govern traditional public schools. In exchange for that freedom, they are bound to the terms of a contract or "charter" that lays out the school's mission, academic goals, and accountability procedures. State laws set the parameters for charter contracts, which are overseen by a designated charter school authorizer—often the local school district or related agency. If the charter school's contract terms are not met, the authorizer retains the authority to close the school.¹ Charter schools may be led by educators, families, community groups, or private organizations. Because of their fiscal independence, charter schools must attract students in order to remain open.

¹ Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. "Charter Schools." Updated May 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/charter-schools>; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. "Providing Quality Choice Options in Education." August 2005.

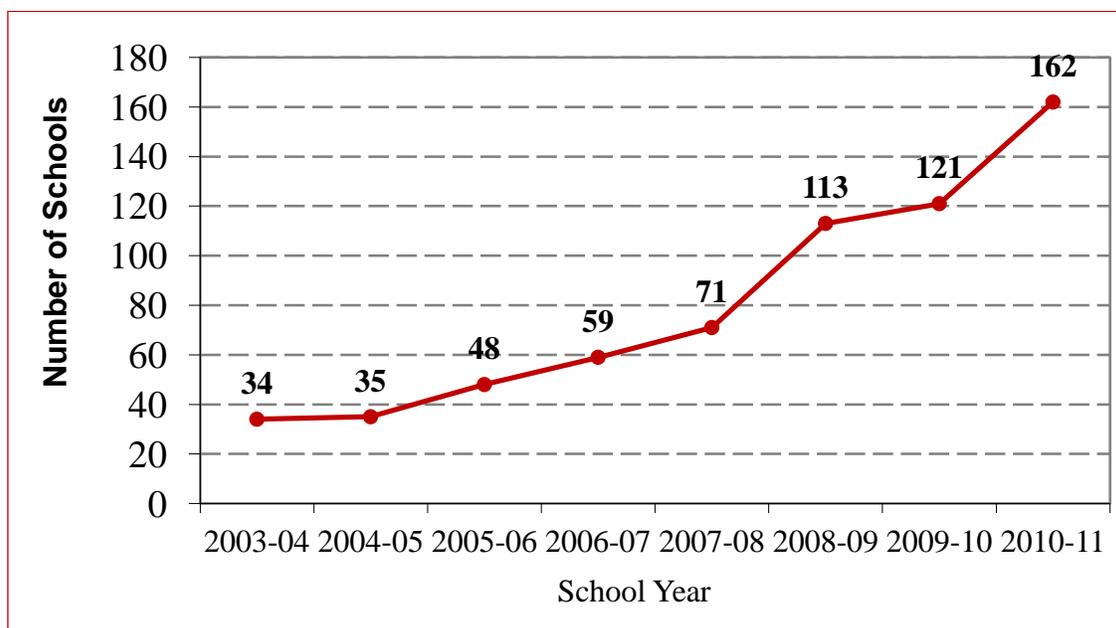
Relevancy to Georgia

Georgia has followed national trends in its charter school policy development. The Charter School Act, the state’s first law authorizing charter schools, was passed in 1993; since that time, the number of charter schools in Georgia has increased annually.

Georgia’s first three charter schools opened in 1995, two years after the passage of the charter school law. Since 1998, the first year start-up charter schools were allowed under Georgia law, charter schools have increased in visibility and prominence, becoming a fixture in school improvement efforts across Georgia. Eighteen charter schools were approved during the 2009-10 school year, including 13 start-up schools and 5 conversion charter schools. As of 2009-10, the total number of Georgia charter schools is 121.²

Despite the rapid growth of the charter school movement in Georgia, this educational choice model still serves a small proportion of the state’s student enrollment. Currently, 4 percent of Georgia public school students are enrolled in charter schools.³ The growth in Georgia’s charter schools and their student enrollments is presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Charter School Growth in Georgia, 2004-2011

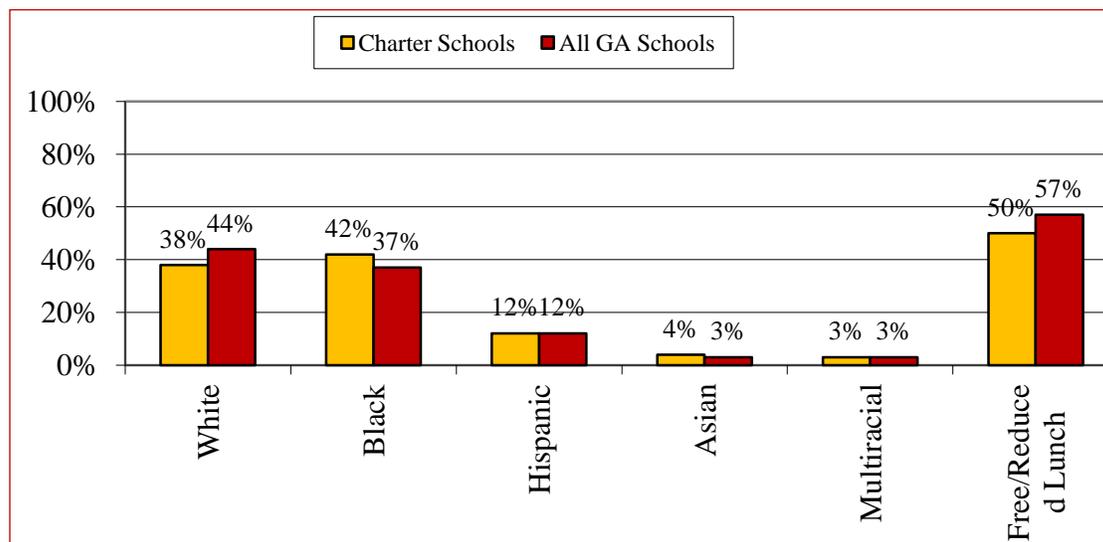


Source: Georgia Department of Education. “2010-2011 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” February 2012.

² Georgia Department of Education. “2009-2010 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” December 2010. At the time of this report, 14 additional charter schools were expected to open for the 2010-11 school year. Four school districts became new charter systems at the beginning of the 2010-11 school year and were not included in the report.

³ Georgia Department of Education. “2009-2010 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” December 2010.

Figure 2. Enrollment in Georgia Charter Schools by Demographic Group, 2010-11



Source: Georgia Department of Education. “2010-2011 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” February 2012.

Like traditional public schools, charter schools are funded with a combination of local, state, and federal dollars. Local funding is allocated on the same basis as for any local school in a Georgia school system. Both charter schools and traditional public schools receive an allotment of state funds in accordance with Georgia’s Quality Basic Education (QBE) funding formula (See Finance and Funding). Charter schools also receive federal funds for special education and other categorical services in accordance with student eligibility.⁴ Georgia’s QBE funding formula assigns additional dollars for more experienced teachers. This helps to explain why any new school in Georgia, traditional or charter, tends to receive less funding.⁵

Georgia’s charter schools vary in both type and focus. Georgia law authorizes distinct types of charter schools: start-up charter schools or conversion charter schools. Schools can also be a state chartered special schools or a system charter schools. Start-up and conversion schools operate according to the terms of a contract between the charter petitioner, local board of education, and the State Board of Education.⁶ (See Table 1 for a definition of each type of charter school.)

⁴ Georgia Charter Schools Act of 1998; Georgia Department of Education. “Frequently Asked Questions About Charter Schools.” Retrieved August 29, 2011 from <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us>.

⁵ Talk Up APS. “Charter Schools: Frequently Asked Questions.” Retrieved August 29, 2011 from <http://www.atlanta.k12.ga.us>.

⁶ The charter petitioner is the local school, individual, organization, or state or local public entity that submits a petition for a charter. Source: Georgia Charter Schools Act of 1998.

Table 1. Georgia Charter Schools by Type, 2010-11

Type of Charter School	Definition	# of Schools in Georgia
Conversion	A charter school that existed as a local school prior to becoming a charter school.	30
Start-Up	A charter school created by a petition brought forth by private individuals, private organizations, or a state or local public entity.	71
System Charter Schools	A conversion charter school that is contained within a charter system and that operates according to the terms of the charter system's contract between the local school system and the State Board of Education.	61
Source: Georgia Department of Education. "2010-2011 Annual Report on Georgia's Charter Schools." February 2012.		

Georgia previously authorized another type of charter school, a commission school, through the establishment of the Georgia Charter Schools Commission (GCSC). The GCSC was an independent, state-level charter school authorizing entity. Formed in 2008 through House Bill 881, the GCSC was empowered to approve commission charter schools, although the State Board of Education could overrule the commission's approval with a two-thirds vote. This commission authorized municipalities, counties, consolidated governments, universities, technical schools, and RESAs to act as a cosponsor or joint petitioner for a charter school. In May 2011, Georgia's Supreme Court ruled that the GCSC was unconstitutional.

Several Georgia school districts sued the GCSC, arguing that the commission's actions were not upheld by the state constitution. One question raised during this debate was whether the state had the right to approve charter schools that local boards of education had already rejected. Georgia's constitution allows for the creation of state special schools, such as those for deaf and blind students. The local school districts, and ultimately the Court, did not believe that commission charter schools belonged in this category. Even if the commission charter schools had been approved as state special schools, they would only be eligible for state and federal funding. The commission charter schools rely on a share of local education dollars, which account for roughly half of their funding. Whether or not the commission could redirect local funds to commission charter schools, thereby decreasing the amount of revenue available to traditional schools, was a point of contention in this case. The Court determined that the state constitution gives exclusive authority to local boards of education to create and maintain K-12 public education and ruled in favor of the school districts. This decision leaves the fate of many of these commission schools uncertain. For the current 2011-12

school year, Governor Nathan Deal has pledged to financially support several of the schools that would otherwise have to close due to the Court’s decision. This funding is only for the 2011-12 school year, however, so all of the affected schools will need to seek approval to operate from their local districts, or submit an application to become a state chartered special school.

In 2007, Georgia legislators enacted the Charter Systems Act, which enabled local school boards to submit a petition to the state whereby all schools in the system may become chartered. The law means that districts would be exempted from many public school regulations and would have more freedom to choose how they meet performance goals. Only a few states in the country have enacted charter district laws.

Currently, Georgia has four county-level charter systems: Floyd, Putnam, Warren, and White; and four city-level charter systems: Cartersville, Decatur, Gainesville, and Marietta.⁷ Together, the schools in these systems comprise over half of the state’s charter schools. An additional six charter systems recently received approval.⁸

⁷ Georgia Department of Education. “2009-2010 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” December 2010.

⁸ According to the Georgia Department of Education as of September 2011.

National Perspective

The concept of charter schools clearly has strong appeal to the public and to policymakers. Since the first charter school was founded in Minnesota in 1992, this form of school choice has rapidly expanded across the country. According to the most recent policy data, 40 states and the District of Columbia currently have policies operationalizing charter schools. During the 2010-11 school year, there were 5,277 charter schools enrolling over 1.8 million students nationwide; 518 of those schools opened in the fall of 2010.⁹ The demand for charter schools is increasing. During the 2009-10 school year, an estimated 420,000 students were on a waiting list for a charter school.¹⁰

The current federal administration views charter schools as a way to improve student achievement. Support for charter school expansion is outlined in the administration's blueprint for the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Additionally, during the recent Race to the Top competition, states received more points if they supported the creation of charter schools and did not cap the number of charter schools that they would allow in the state.

Yet even in states like Georgia where there are no limits to the number of charter schools allowed, problems can still arise. The recent legal problems among local school districts and the Georgia Charter Schools Commission point to concerns about funding and governance of charter schools.

Many charter school advocates looking to expand charter schools rely on Charter Management Organizations (CMOs). A CMO is a non-profit organization that creates groups of schools with a shared educational vision and mission. CMOs provide governance and oversight to the schools in their network. Philanthropies funding charter schools have been supportive of these organizations, investing about \$500 million into CMOs between 1999-2009. Because many CMOs operate on a model that is believed to produce results for low-income and minority children, about 84 percent of CMOs are "moderately to highly prescriptive" about such factors as curriculum, instructional techniques, and student behavior and support programs. There are approximately 87 CMOs currently managing over 500 schools nationwide. The vast majority of CMOs operate in nine states (California, Arizona, Texas, Ohio, Illinois, New York, Louisiana, Florida, and Pennsylvania) and the District of Columbia.¹¹

The rise of portfolio districts is another trend that could expand the use of charter schools. A variety of school options comprise a portfolio district, including traditional schools and

⁹ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. "Public Charter School Dashboard." Retrieved August 12, 2011 from <http://www.publiccharters.org>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lake, R., Dusseault, B., Bowen, M., Demeritt, A., & Hill, P. "The National Study of Charter Management Organization (CMO) Effectiveness: Report on Interim Findings." Center on Reinventing Public Education, June 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.crpe.org>.

independently run charters. Portfolio districts are based on three key ideas: the school is directly responsible for instruction and therefore must have the freedom to meet the particular needs of its students; differences among schools are good and necessary; and schools' existence and freedom of action are contingent on performance.¹² Proponents of this model argue that traditional schools have failed to meet the needs of underserved students, particularly low-income students and students of color. Critics argue that the emphasis on test-based accountability will lead to instability when "failing" schools are forced to close or undergo restructuring. Although supporters point to signs of success with this new model, particularly in New York and New Orleans, no scientific studies have been conducted to show that portfolio districts have any positive impact on student achievement.¹³ At least 19 districts nationally are currently testing this new method of school reform.¹⁴

CMOs and portfolio district managers are two types of charter school support structures that have gained prominence in recent years. Others include franchises, technical assistance providers, comprehensive school design teams, incubators, and school operations managers. As demand for charter schools grows, stakeholders may increasingly turn to organizations like these for guidance and support.

¹² Hill, P., Campbell, C., Menefee-Libey, D., Dusseault, B., DeArmond, M., Gross, B. "Portfolio Districts for Big Cities: An Interim Report." Center on Reinventing Public Education, October 2009.

¹³ Saltman, K. J. "Urban School Decentralization and the Growth of 'Portfolio Districts'." The Great Lakes Center for Education Research & Practice, June 2010.

¹⁴ See the Center on Reinventing Public Education website for a list of participating districts, www.crpe.org.

Research Tells Us

Perhaps overshadowing the contention over charter schools is the question of whether these non-traditional models actually do a better job of educating students. Recent studies of charter schools yield mixed results. For example, a study of schools in Washington, D.C., found that students at the district’s public charter schools significantly outperformed their peers in traditional schools. Conversely, an analysis of performance at charter schools in Ohio found the opposite outcome: charter school students lagged behind their traditional school peers on the majority of standardized performance measures.¹⁵

A study of 36 charter middle schools across 15 states found that, on average, the charter schools were “neither more nor less successful than traditional public schools in improving student achievement, behavior, and school progress.”¹⁶ The first longitudinal student-level analysis of charter school impacts found that nationally, roughly half of charter schools perform comparably to the traditional public schools and 37 percent perform worse, while 17 percent of charter schools offer a significantly better education opportunity than the traditional public school.¹⁷ This same study, using the results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in mathematics and reading, found that student performance in Georgia’s charter schools was either mixed or not significantly different from their traditional public school peers.

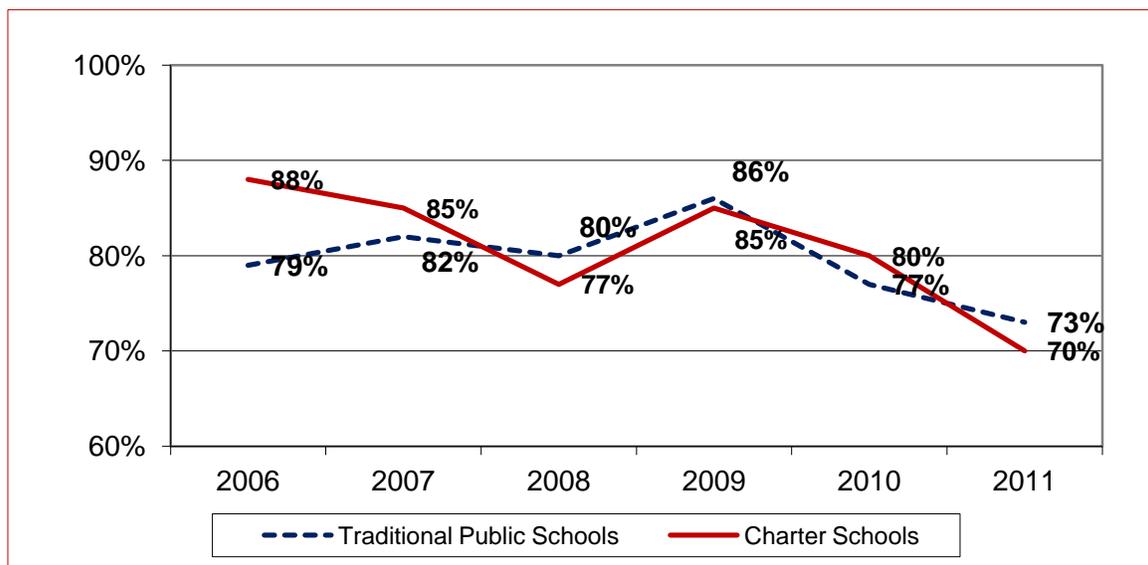
Still, for Georgia’s charter schools, demographic data and state-level student achievement results point to some successes. Data from the Georgia Department of Education show that the state’s charter schools serve a diverse student population: in the 2010-11 school year, exactly half of charter school students qualified for free and reduced lunch, and over half were of a non-white ethnic group. Additionally, student performance at Georgia’s charter schools is commendable. The percentage of charter schools making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is comparable to the rest of the state (Figure 3).

¹⁵ Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. “Charter Schools.” Updated May 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/charter-schools>.

¹⁶ Gleason, P., Clark, M., Tuttle, C. C., & Dwoyer, E. “The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts: Final Report.” National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, June 2010.

¹⁷ Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO). “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States.” June 2009.

Figure 3: Percentage of Schools Making AYP, 2006-2011



Source: Georgia Department of Education. “2010-2011 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” February 2012.

While 70% of all charter schools including charter system schools made AYP, only 67% percent of conversion and start-up charter schools made AYP in 2010-11.¹¹ This is a decrease from 80% in 2009-10. In comparison, traditional public schools also declined from 2009-10 to 2010-11 although by a smaller percentage.¹² Over the past five years, the overall performance of charter schools compared to traditional public schools has been mixed but both groups have traditionally demonstrated the same general performance trends.¹⁸

¹⁸ Georgia Department of Education. “2010-2011 Annual Report on Georgia’s Charter Schools.” February 2012.

For More Information

Georgia Charter Schools Association
www.gacharters.org

The Georgia Charter Schools Association (GCSA) is a Georgia non-profit, 501 (c) (3) corporation. GCSA is the membership organization for Georgia's charter school operators and petitioners. The mission of the Georgia Charter Schools Association is to be an effective advocate and service provider for all charter public schools in Georgia.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools
www.publiccharters.org

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools is a national non-profit organization committed to advancing the charter school movement. The Alliance provides assistance to state charter school associations and resource centers, develops and advocates for improved public policies, and serves as the united voice for this large and diverse movement.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA)
www.qualitycharters.org

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) is a professional organization of authorizers and other education leaders who work to achieve quality public charter schools.