



# WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL “PUBLIC”?

## *Charter schools expand the promise of public education*

Since the times of Thomas Jefferson, public schools have been seen as a pillar of our democracy. Jefferson, considered the father of public education in this country, saw a free education as critical in allowing all Americans, whatever their station, to develop their abilities and offer their contributions to society.

Jefferson’s basic premise—that public education is essential in enabling Americans to fulfill their potential—still prevails. And nowhere is this idea more alive than in the growing charter school movement. With more than 1.5 million students nationwide, charter schools are giving students of all backgrounds the chance to go to a school of their choice. Yet in discussions about charter schools, there persists a false notion that charters are not “public,” and that their emergence is somehow undermining the public school system.

Let’s be clear about this: Charter schools are public schools, in every definition of the word. Rather than undermining public education, they are strengthening it by giving parents more options for their children’s education.

To prove this point, let’s consider what makes a school “public.” First and foremost, a public school must be free and open to all students without preference. Beyond this, we think all would agree that a public school should be nonsectarian and transparently accountable to the public.

Charter schools meet all these criteria. They don’t charge tuition. Unlike private or parochial schools, they can’t select the students they want—any student may attend, provided there is space, and a lottery must be used if the number of applicants exceeds the available number of openings.

Charter schools are nonsectarian by legal

requirement. And they are accountable both for the academic performance of their students and for the appropriate expenditure of the public tax dollars on which they operate. Charter school students take the same state mandated standardized tests as those in traditional, district run schools.

The charter school idea was first developed in the 1970s as a way to give public school teachers more autonomy to innovate in the classroom. The idea was to grant teachers some freedom from the rigid constraints facing them in existing schools in exchange for a heightened level of accountability for results. Today’s charter schools are an expression of that vision. Charter schools offer families of all means a broad array of schooling options. Nationwide, 60 percent of students attending charter schools are minorities, and more than half are economically disadvantaged.

While charter schools are unquestionably public, they are not run by elected school boards. They are governed by: autonomous non-profit boards of trustees. It’s a critical difference that enables them to pursue distinctive approaches to achieving academic excellence and to be responsive to their most immediate constituency—that is, the students and families who have chosen the school.

These new charter schools are expanding the world of public education and allowing thousands more students in Pennsylvania and across the country to find a free, high-quality public school that works for them. **Charter schools are public schools that serve us all.**

*This series is brought to you by a consortium of Allegheny County charter schools.*



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