

# WARSAW CHARTER SCHOOL

## Creating Choice in Public Education



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## Introduction

Over the past several decades, political leaders and the public have been concerned with the direction of our public education system. School choice is among the many solutions discussed in the past twenty-five years. The full school choice movement in the public school system through the use of school vouchers is gaining momentum but is not available in Indiana. To date, the best available concept is that of a Charter School. Charter schools are popular across the country but are only a year old in Indiana.

Charter schools are public schools that were created by Indiana law to allow parents and students increased choice in educational opportunities. Specifically, charter schools are designed to allow for flexibility in determining where children will learn, the teaching methods employed, as well as flexibility in the curriculum that is taught. Increasingly, states are turning to Charter Schools as a choice driven alternative to traditional public education.

The ensuing pages provide a general overview of the success, history and future of charter schools throughout the country and in Indiana. In addition, this paper will provide practical suggestions for beginning the examination of whether a charter school is a practical for Kosciusko County as well as what steps are necessary to actually create a charter school. Throughout this discussion, however, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose behind the Charter School movement is to enhance public education opportunities, not to supplant the traditional public education system.

## Survey Shows Charter School Success

(Washington, D.C. 10/29/02) Not only are the nation's charter schools successfully educating children under-served by traditional public schools, but they are providing more instructional time, innovative curricula, and doing it cost-effectively

Those are some of the results from the Center for Education Reform's Charter Schools Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools, released today in Washington, DC. "Charter schools continue to defy the odds in educating at-risk children," declared Jeanne Allen, president of The Center for Education Reform. "Despite renewed attacks from the education establishment, both the data and the anecdotal evidence point to the clear conclusion that charters schools are doing what they set out to do: educate children left behind by a 'one-size-fits-all' education system "

Among the results from the survey charter school respondents:

- 43 percent of charter schools offer additional instructional time, including an extended school day, extended school year, or a combination of the two.
- Charter schools provide a wide range of curricular options - from "back to basics" to "Expeditionary Learning" - responding to the specific needs of each school's distinct population
- The average per-pupil cost of survey respondents is \$4,507, significantly less than the \$7,000 average in traditional schools, and charters are forced to use that money to underwrite facilities costs not included in traditional public schools' operating budgets.
- Despite having large numbers of academically challenged students, charter schools reported a range of achievements, including gains in reading and math performances; test scores higher than district, state or comparable school scores; increased parental involvement; higher attendance and fewer discipline problems
- Parental demand for the services charter schools offer has increased. More than 69 percent of charters have a waiting list and the average waiting list for a charter school has skyrocketed to 68 percent of the average school's enrollment.

"On a dollar-for-dollar basis, successful charter schools are outperforming their traditional public schools and doing more for students, and that performance is why parental demand is increasing" Allen noted. "Rather than throw obstacles in the path of charter schools, educators and policy-makers seeking to improve the education of students should be looking for ways to expand the number of charters."

Other conclusions from the survey indicate that 98 percent of charter schools administer at least one standardized test, including state tests in those states that have them, that charters serve students who are largely underserved, including at-risk and low-income students; and that areas with multiple chartering authorities are more likely to have charter schools.

The Center surveyed more than 2,357 charters operating as of September 2001 in 37 states and the District of Columbia

# Charter Schools

## Definition

Charter schools are public schools of choice that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. The "charter" establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. The length of time for which charters are granted varies by state, but most are granted for 3-5 years. At the end of the term, the entity granting the charter may renew the school's contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor, usually a state or public university, to produce positive academic results and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor, the parents who choose them and the public that funds them.

## Benefits

The intention of most charter school legislation is to

- Increase opportunities for learning and access to quality education for all students
- Create choice for parents and students within the public school system
- Provide a system of accountability for results in public education
- Encourage innovative teaching practices
- Create new professional opportunities for teachers
- Encourage community and parent involvement in public education
- Leverage improved public education broadly

People establish charter schools for a variety of reasons. The founders generally fall into three groups: organizations of parents, teachers and community members, entrepreneurs, or existing

schools converting to charter status. According to the first-year report of the National Study of Charter Schools, the three reasons most often cited to create a charter school are to:

1. Realize an educational vision
2. Gain autonomy
3. Serve a special population

Parents and teachers choose charter schools primarily for educational reasons. high academic standards, small class size, innovative approaches, or educational philosophies in line with their own. Some also have chosen charter schools for their small size and associated safety

## **The History of Charter Schools**

The charter school movement has roots in a number of other reform ideas, from alternative schools, to site-based management, magnet schools, public school choice, privatization, and community-parental empowerment. The term "charter" may have originated in the 1970s when New England educator Ray Budde suggested that small groups of teachers be given contracts or "charters" by their local school boards to explore new approaches. Albert Shanker, former president of the AFT, then publicized the idea, suggesting that local boards could charter an entire school with union and teacher approval. In the late 1980s Philadelphia started a number of schools-within-schools and called them "charters." Some of them were schools of choice. The idea was further refined in Minnesota and based on three basic values:

1. opportunity
2. choice
3. responsibility for educational results.

In 1991 Minnesota passed the first charter school law, with California following suit in 1992. By 1995, 19 states had signed laws allowing for the creation of charter schools, and by 1999 that number increased to 36 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Charter schools are one of the fastest growing innovations in education policy, enjoying broad bipartisan support from governors, state legislators, and past and present secretaries of education. President Clinton has

also supported them, calling in his 1997 State of the Union Address for the creation of 3,000 charter schools by the year 2000. Since 1994 the federal Department of Education has provided grants to support states' charter school efforts, from \$6 million in fiscal year 1995, to \$100 million in fiscal year 1999.

## **Current National Statistics**

Over 40 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have passed charter school laws. During the 1998-1999 school year charter schools opened for the first time in Ohio, Idaho, Mississippi, and Nevada. The U.S. Department of Education reported that over 1800 charter schools operated in 1999-2000. The Center for Education Reform (CER) estimated that 350,000 students attended these schools in the fall of 1999. Charter schools serve every grade from pre-K to adult. Of these, 58% are elementary schools, 20% were secondary schools, and 22% included grades at both levels. Arizona leads the nation in number of charters, with over 350 schools currently in operation, followed by California (234), Michigan (over 175), Texas (over 150), and Florida (112). Five Indiana Charter Schools began operations with the 2002-03 school year.

## **Charter School Laws**

Charter schools vary from state to state, not only because the individual charters set out unique mission and goal statements, but also because state charter laws, which significantly influence the development of charter schools, also vary. The laws cover seven basic policy and legal areas:

1. Charter development who may propose a charter, how charters are granted, the number of charter schools allowed, and related issues.
2. School status how the school is legally defined and related governance, operations, and liability issues



3. Fiscal: the level and types of funding provided and the amount of fiscal independence and autonomy.
- 4 Students: how schools are to address admissions, non-discrimination, racial/ethnic balance, discipline, and special education.
5. Staffing and Labor Relations: whether the school may act as an employer, which labor relations laws apply, and other staff rights and privileges.
- 6 Instruction: the degree of control a charter school has over the development of its instructional goals and practices.
- 7 Accountability: whether the charter serves as a performance-based contract, how assessment methods are selected, and charter revocation and renewal issues

## **Indiana Legislative Summary**

Passed in 2001, Indiana's charter school law allows for an unlimited number of charters to be authorized by local school boards, public state universities, and the Mayor of Indianapolis - who can approve 5 schools per year. The initial term of a charter school is no less than 3 years. Charter school funding is comparable to other public schools

## **Developing a Charter School**

Though the specifics vary widely from state-to-state, charter school developers in many states proceed through several common stages in their school development process. This paper is an overview of that process with conclusions and recommendations for starting a charter school in Warsaw, Indiana.

### **Phase 1: Building a Foundation**

This phase includes examining the reasons for choosing to start a charter school, gathering basic background information on charter schools in Indiana, assembling an organizational committee, and developing an educational framework. It would be appropriate to survey your community's readiness for a charter school.

Some charter developers begin the process somewhat informally, while others are more deliberate in their efforts by developing a strategic or business plan. Many charter school developers begin by gathering start-up funds from public or private sources, or their own pocket. Start-up funds can be obtained from federal or state planning grants or private foundation or even corporate grants. Regardless of how the planning phase is structured or funded, there are a few steps most charter school developers should follow.

## **State Laws and Policies**

Charter developers should carefully review their state's legislation early in the exploration process, as state laws authorizing charter schools vary significantly and change over time. Among other things, one will want to note which agencies are empowered to grant charters, what the required components of the charter application are, and whether there is a negotiation or appeals process in case your charter is denied.

## **Chartering Agency Policies**

The state charter law defines who may grant a charter--often local or state school boards, sometimes universities or community colleges--and these charter granting agencies may have regulations or guidelines to explain how the legislation is implemented. These guidelines may provide additional information on what to include in the charter application and how to apply for a charter.

## The Organizational Committee

The organizing committee moves the charter school from a vision to a working public school. This group plans the school, writes the charter and operating plan, and many may help to operate the school. Developing a charter school requires a great amount of time and many different skills. The team's expertise should be broad based, but teams' vision should be focused on a shared educational mission. Professional expertise in the following areas is important:

- Curriculum and instruction
- Community relations and marketing
- Finance and fundraising
- Governance and management
- Legal issues, educational law
- Real estate
- Student assessment
- Writing charter school documents

## Designing a Charter School Plan

Many charter school developers come together with an idea already in mind for what they want to accomplish. This idea needs to be fleshed out as a comprehensive school design framework, including the following:

- a clear and agreed-upon mission and vision
- an overview of the instructional program
- a description of school governance and administrative structure
- a staffing plan
- a statement of facilities needs, and
- a rough budget

## **Phase 2: Developing the Charter**

This phase includes writing and negotiating the terms of an actual charter document and applying to a charter-granting agency for approval.

### **Writing the Charter**

The charter is a legal document granting permission to a group or individual to own and/or operate a public school. The purpose, content, and format of charter documents vary widely among states. Under Illinois law, for example, a charter is a binding legal contract between the granting agency and the school developers, specifying the terms of their relationship. In Minnesota, by contrast, a charter grants permission for the sponsor and developers to enter into a second contract that defines their relationship. Generally, the key components of a strong charter application include the following:

- Clear mission statement
- Statement of why the school is needed
- Description of the education program to be used
- Learning objectives for students
- Methods for student assessment
- Financial plan and 3-5 year budget projection
- Governance and/or organizational model
- Personnel policies
- Student enrollment and discipline policies
- Facilities information
- Insurance (as applicable)
- Compliance with state and federal regulations, as well as with any other requirements
- Reference to a pre-determined monitoring, evaluation, and renewal process

## **Community Support for a Charter School**

Charter school approval and success requires buy-in from the community you will serve. It is important to enlist community support for your charter school idea and to get to know members of the sponsoring (charter granting) agency. You can gather feedback from representatives of all segments of the community by circulating the application for review. You may also want to submit the draft charter to the staff of your sponsoring agency and/or school board for review. Carefully consider the feedback you receive and revise the application as applicable. This review stage can strengthen community support, which may prove instrumental once your charter is ready for formal submission. The last step of presenting your charter may involve attending committee hearings to discuss and review the application. Be prepared to show how the school will meet specific needs in the district. Provide letters of support and have supporters present at the meeting.

### **Phase 3: Preparing to Operate**

This phase follows the approval of the charter application and includes the actual process of developing the school. Below are pointers for navigating this phase.

1. Develop a detailed plan and timeline with the core founding group listing all of the tasks that need to be accomplished before doors open. The plan should identify who will address each issue, when, and how, and how the work will be coordinated.
2. Develop formal operating agreements with the sponsor to identify any services they will provide and the terms under which they will provide them.
3. Establish the formal organization. As applicable, draft and file articles of incorporation, file for nonprofit status, recruit and install the governing board, and draft bylaws, policies, and an administrative structure.

4. Recruit and admit students along with recruiting and hiring staff.
5. Formalize the instructional program. Select and purchase instructional materials, choose methods of assessing student achievement, establish the school calendar, and plan professional development
6. Secure facility and support services, such as fiscal support (accounting, budget, payroll, banking, auditing, purchasing), transportation, food service, insurance, staff benefits, telecommunications, legal advice, custodial service, etc.

## **Phase 4: Operating a Charter School**

This stage includes the actual opening of the charter school, with its inevitable unforeseen issues. It also includes establishing the culture of the school, clarifying the school's expectations and beliefs, and beginning to use data on student performance as the primary guide for school planning and policymaking. At this point the work involved will be divided among the charter school teachers, administrator, and board. Several common areas of focus follow:

1. Formally open the doors and celebrate the commencement of the school.
2. Identify and address unforeseen glitches and constraints.
3. Transition the school's governance structure from the initial "start-up" stages to one of ongoing policy-making and oversight.
4. Establish or formalize relationships with community groups, supporters, the sponsor district, the media, and other potential partners
5. Refine curriculum and instruction

6. Collect and interpret student performance and achievement data, using it as the foundation for ongoing planning and school policy development.

## **Conclusions**

The shortcomings of public education over the past several decades have been well studied and documented by conservatives and liberals alike. There is considerable agreement on the need for reform and restructuring of the current monopolistic system. A system, described as “operating without consequence while protecting everyone except our most valuable resource, our children.”

Indeed, children are this communities’ most valuable resource and the quality of education plays an important role in community development and future viability. On May 2, 2001 Governor Frank O’Bannon signed the Indiana Charter School Law permitting the creation of charter schools by individuals interested in school choice. The formation of a charter school in Warsaw can provide our community with school choice and the opportunity for parents to take a more active role in the selection of an education system based on the total educational offerings a school provides.

It should be recognized, that charter schools are not an educational panacea, nor are they a fad, or even a substitute for full school choice. They can however, provide an opportunity for limited school choice for those who cannot afford private education. In addition, charter schools can engage the parents who can demand accountability for rigorous academic standards, societal values, and strong governance with the help of local teachers and community members.

This Kosciusko County Leadership Academy project faces many challenges. Is a charter school the right choice for Warsaw? It is easy to present just one side of this topic. There is more work to be done. Additional study, public education, and debate are needed to examine the benefits

that school choice can bring to our local public education system. To undertake this process, financial resources are needed to:

1. Undertake a feasibility study for starting and sustaining a charter school in Warsaw/ and or Kosciusko County.
2. Provide public presentations on school choice options to generate debate, interest, and support for educational improvement.
3. Establish an exploratory committee or founding group to examine the issues and processes of developing a local charter school.

This short paper demonstrates that developing school choice is a large community project and a lengthy process that was beyond the scope of a single KLA project. The purpose of this project is to generate public interest and financial support so that the school choice process can begin over the next several months. There are currently many community members and leaders interested in becoming engaged in developing school choice. There also exists an opportunity for future leadership classes to become involved in processes which could strengthen our education system and benefit our community for years to come.



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