

CHARTER SCHOOLS IN TENNESSEE: ISSUES OF INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY



Charter schools are publicly funded schools sponsored and operated by not-for-profit organizations. They are affiliated with a school district through a written contract but operate independent of many regulations that apply to traditional public schools.

Charter schools are created to function both as laboratories for educational innovation and as viable educational alternatives for parents and students. To help charter schools fulfill the laboratory function, policymakers must consider issues of school autonomy and dissemination of best practices. In order to help charter schools fulfill their intended function as an educational alternative for parents and students, policymakers should consider issues of sustainability for individual schools.

Conclusions - Innovation

- Neither the Tennessee Department of Education nor local school districts have established methods to identify and disseminate charter schools' best practices.
- Teachers in Tennessee charter schools and traditional schools use similar instructional practices, but charter schools increase instructional time in several ways.
- Tennessee charter school teachers had significantly higher positive perceptions of their schools' educational programs than their traditional school counterparts.
- Middle and high charter school students had higher scores than control students in 46 comparisons, with 11 being statistically significant differences. Control middle and high school students had higher scores than charter students in 25 comparisons, with four being statistically significant differences.
- Overall, elementary charter students had higher scores in the majority of 2007 TCAP Achievement comparisons, but few differences could be statistically attributed to attending a charter school.



Conclusions - Sustainability

- Tennessee's student eligibility restrictions may affect the long-term viability of individual charter schools.
- Limited facilities funding compromises the continued viability of charter schools.

Recommendations - Innovation

- The General Assembly may wish to authorize the Tennessee Department of Education, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and the Tennessee Board of Regents to create a charter school institute or research center in a state public higher education institution.
- The Office of Charter Schools and Choice in the Tennessee Department of Education, in collaboration and cooperation with charter schools, should identify charter school best practices and implement a system for dissemination.



- School boards of authorizing districts should hold regular meetings with charter school governing boards and/or principals.

Recommendations - Sustainability

- The General Assembly may wish to consider making eligibility for charter school enrollment less restrictive.
- The General Assembly may wish to consider revising the charter school statute to more precisely define the state and local charter school facilities funding responsibilities.
- The local education agencies (LEAs) may wish to allow charter schools access to unused or underused district facilities and land.