

POLICY *report*

Goldwater Institute

No. 258 | May 21, 2013

Arizona Charter Schools: A Vision for the Next 20 Years

By Jonathan Butcher

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past 20 years, Arizona teachers, parents, and community leaders have created more than 500 charter schools—independent, tuition-free public schools that operate with fewer regulations in exchange for higher levels of transparency. Some of these schools are among the highest-achieving schools in the nation, with their students routinely topping nationwide comparisons.

With so many charter schools in operation, however, performance can vary from school to school. The variation has led researchers from Stanford and WestEd, along with the *New York Times*, to criticize Arizona charter schools.

But reports of a decline in Arizona charter school quality have been exaggerated. Key indicators suggest that charter schools remain a powerful tool for improving student achievement:

- Both low-income Arizona charter school students and average charter school students outperform their traditional public school peers on a national assessment.
- A higher percentage of charter schools earned A's on their school report cards than did traditional schools in 2011 and 2012, the first two years of Arizona's school report card system.
- Charters represent a disproportionate number of the highest-performing public schools in Arizona.

Results such as these should encourage lawmakers to remove roadblocks that prevent charter schools from serving more students. For example, some districts have vacant or underused facilities that they refuse to make available to charter schools. Arizona School Facilities Board data show that in more than half of the traditional schools (54 percent) in the 10 largest Arizona school districts, at least 1 out of every 4 available seats is empty. Lawmakers should make sure vacant public school buildings are sold or leased to the highest bidder, charter school or otherwise.

Further, to prevent widespread stagnation among charter schools, lawmakers must be careful not to impose the same regulations on charters that they impose on traditional schools. These requirements create fewer choices for parents because charters will not be free to use innovative approaches to teaching and learning that are serving students so well today.

Arizona must hold charter schools accountable for student achievement and financial integrity. Charters that are consistently low performing or fail to meet certain achievement levels or manage finances properly can be closed. And with every charter school that is closed for academic reasons, the quality gap between charter schools and traditional schools will grow. Remaining charter schools will be more likely to perform at a higher level than similar traditional schools. Encouraging charters to innovate and serve students while holding them accountable for results will create an education environment that prepares students for success.

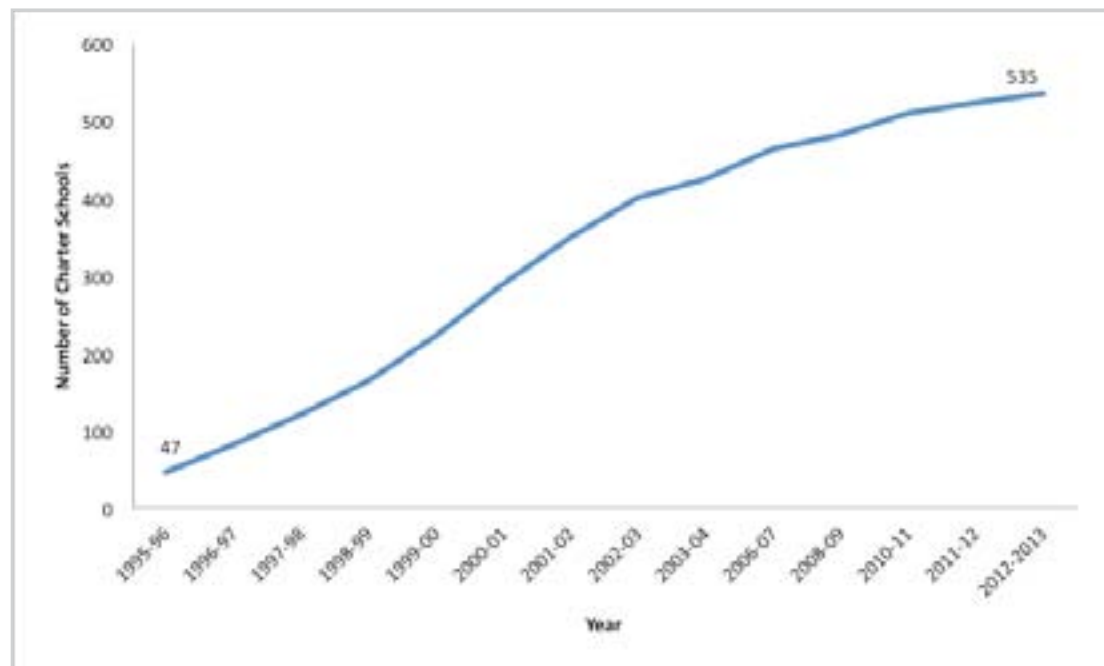
Introduction

Charter schools are tuition-free, independent public schools created by teachers and community leaders. Charters are exempt from many of the rules governing traditional schools, including rules on the hiring and firing of teachers and some curriculum requirements, giving them freedom to innovate and meet their students' specific needs. Regulations and other requirements, however, are steadily creeping up on charters and making them less distinguishable from traditional public schools. In exchange for their autonomy, charters are held to the highest standard of academic and administrative accountability: They can be closed for low performance or financial mismanagement.

When lawmakers created Arizona's charter school law in 1994, the law had two purposes: "provide additional academic choices for parents and pupils" and "provide a learning environment that will improve pupil achievement."¹ Data demonstrate that Arizona's law has succeeded in meeting both of these objectives.

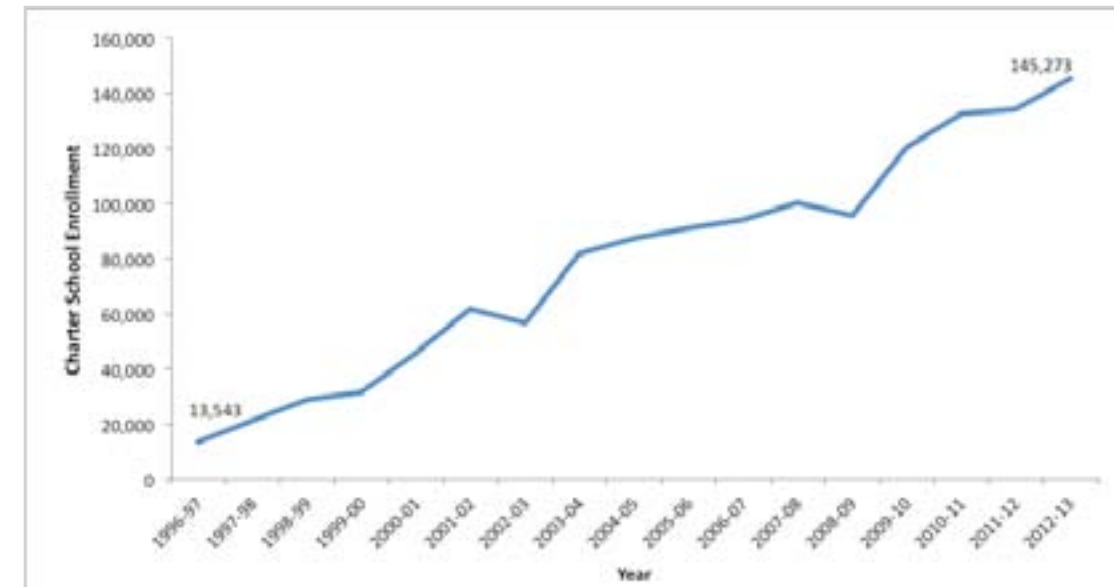
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Figure 1: Number of Arizona Charter Schools, 1995-2013



Sources: Arizona Charter School Association Newsletter, January 2011, <https://azcharters.org/monthly>; Matthew Ladner, Ph.D., "School Choice in Arizona: A Review of Existing Programs and a Road Map for Future Reforms," Goldwater Institute Policy Report No. 222, March 4, 2008, p. 21, available at <http://goldwaterinstitute.org/sites/default/files/SCRONLINE.pdf>; Jeanne Allen, Alison Consoletti, and Kara Hornung, Eds., "Charter School Laws Across the States 2008," Center for Education Reform, 2008, p. 10, available at http://www.schoolinfosystem.org/pdf/2008/05/charter_school_laws.pdf; Arizona Charter School Association Newsletter, September 2012, https://azcharters.org/ckeditor_assets/attachments/693/09_september.pdf; Arizona Charter School Association Newsletter, January 2013. Note: 16 charters were closed between 1995 and 1999.

Figure 2: Arizona Charter School Enrollment, 1996-2013



Sources: Arizona Charter Schools Association, May 2012 Newsletter, <https://azcharters.org/newsletters> (May 18, 2012); Jeanne Allen and Alison Consoletti, *Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools*, Center for Education Reform, January 2010, p. 8, <http://www.edreform.com/2012/01/26/annual-survey-of-americas-charter-schools-2010/> (May 18, 2012); Jeanne Allen, Alison Consoletti, and Kara Kerwin, *The 2009 Accountability Report: Charter Schools*, Center for Education Reform, February 2009, p. 8, http://www.edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/CER_2009_AR_Charter_Schools.pdf (May 18, 2012); National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "Dashboard," <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/dashboard/?wicket:interface=:16:::> (May 18, 2012); Bryan C. Hassel and Michelle Godard Terrell, "The Rugged Frontier: A Decade of Public Charter Schools in Arizona," Progressive Policy Institute, June 2004, p. 5, http://www.dlc.org/documents/AZ_Charters_0604.pdf (May 18, 2012). Arizona Charter Schools Association, January 2013 Newsletter.

By 2013, 535 charters were operating in Arizona, enrolling 145,273 students.

Since 1994, charter schools have seen remarkable growth (see Figures 1 and 2):

- One year after the law was enacted, 47 charters were in operation.²
- By 2013, 535 charters were operating in Arizona, enrolling 145,273 students.³
- Arizona charter schools make up 25 percent of the total number of state public schools.⁴

Should charter school growth trends continue at this pace, the Arizona Charter School Association reports that "charter school enrollment could double by 2020."⁵

The latest data available show that the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (ASBCS), Arizona's independent authorizer, has authorized 515 charter schools, while the Arizona Board of Education has authorized 38. Five school districts have also authorized schools, but no district has authorized more than four schools.⁶ State colleges and universities can also authorize schools. Charter contracts are valid for 15 years before being subject to review (renewed contracts are valid for 20 years), but charter authorizers must conduct preliminary reviews after five years.⁷ In the preliminary reviews, charters are held accountable for their academic performance and financial health. If the charter does not meet the authorizer's predetermined level of adequate performance, the school must create a "Performance Management Plan" and outline ways in which it will attempt to improve student outcomes.⁸

Exponential charter growth has also been seen around the country. Twenty-one years after the nation's first charter school opened in Minnesota, 42 states and the District of Columbia have charter school laws.⁹ More than 5,700 charter schools operate in the United States, and account for 5 percent of all U.S. public schools.¹⁰ Some 1.6 million children (approximately 3 percent of the nation's students) are enrolled in charters.¹¹

This growth has resulted in tremendous savings for taxpayers because, with few exceptions around the country, charter schools operate at lower funding levels than traditional schools.¹² Each state's funding formula operates differently, but in 2011, Arizona charters were funded at \$1,578 less per child than traditional schools.¹³ Based on the latest figures available for per student spending, the 145,273 students attending Arizona charters in the 2012–13 school year saved state taxpayers \$225 million.

Student Achievement

Recently, critics have pointed to analyses of Arizona charter school achievement as evidence that charter schools are not improving student achievement. Martin Orland of WestEd said, "They [Arizona charter schools] haven't moved the needle [on student achievement]."¹⁴ In 2010, the *New York Times* cited Arizona as a state "where accountability is minimal" and one that "has many poorly performing schools."¹⁵ The *Times* also says that, nationally, "mediocrity is widely tolerated" among charters. In 2012, Armando Ruiz of Espiritu Community Development Corp. (a charter school management company) told the *Arizona Republic* that Arizona's charter movement has "lost its edge" because charters have "settled on average."¹⁶

These broad generalizations overlook the impact that specific charter schools are having on student achievement as well as average scores among disadvantaged student groups and the average among all charter students.¹⁷ For example, BASIS Tucson is ranked second among U.S. high schools by *U.S. News & World Report*, and BASIS Tucson and BASIS Scottsdale rank in the top five according to *Newsweek/The Daily Beast*.¹⁸ In 2012, charter schools made up nine of the top 15 schools in Maricopa County based on the percentage of students scoring at or above the "passing" level in math.¹⁹ In Pima County (which includes the Tucson Unified School District), six of the top 15 schools based on the percentage of students scoring at "passing" or above in math were charter schools. These figures are consistent with Goldwater Institute findings from five years ago, when charters made up four of the top 10 elementary schools in Maricopa County, "all of the top seven middle schools... , and six of the top 10 high schools... , including the top four."²⁰

On average, Arizona charter school students have posted strong results for many years. A 2004 study by Lewis C. Solomon and Pete Goldschmidt for the Goldwater Institute found that "charter school students, on average, began with lower test scores than their traditional public school counterparts, and showed overall annual achievement growth roughly three points higher than their non-charter peers. Charter school students who completed the 12th grade surpassed traditional public school students on SAT-9 Reading tests."²¹

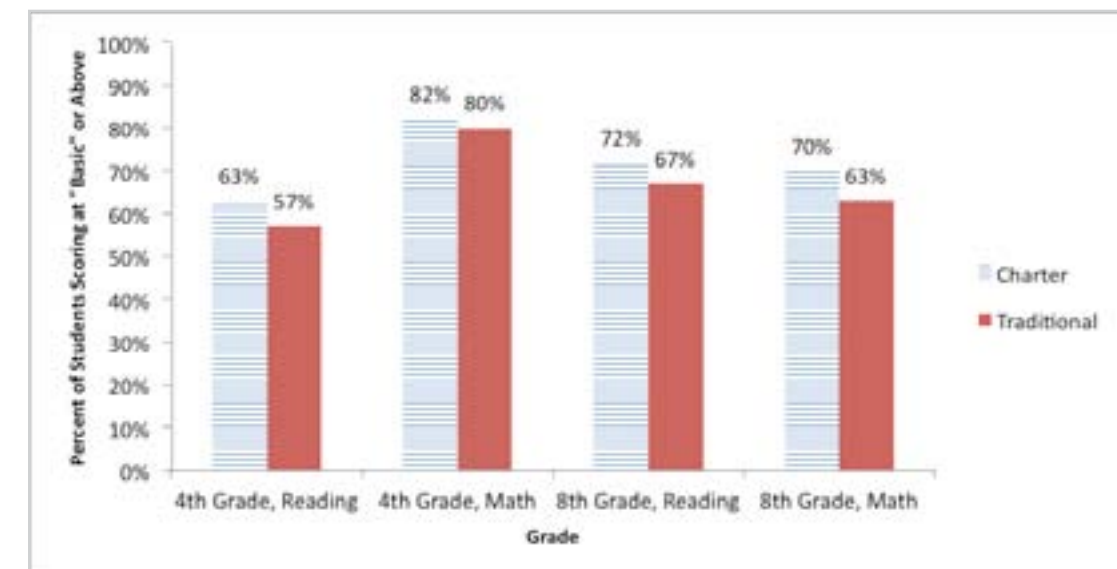
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The latest data from the Nation's Report Card, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), show that Arizona charter students from low-income families compare well to similar students in traditional schools.²² In fact, children eligible for the Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRL) program attending charters outperform similar students at traditional schools. (Student eligibility for the FRL program is based on family income levels, making it a general indicator of a family's economic status.) As Figure 3 and the analysis that follows below indicate, a higher percentage of children eligible for FRL who attend charter schools score at the "Basic" level or above in both math and reading among fourth-graders and eighth-graders on a national assessment than their peers attending traditional schools.

By comparing students eligible for FRL, the results represent the average low-income student in Arizona. Comparing these students is significant because those who oppose charter schools insist that charters will recruit or attract the highest-performing students from traditional public schools, which will cause traditional school achievement results to decline. For example, Diane Ravitch, professor of education at New York University and a charter school critic, says, "The students who are hardest to educate are left to regular public schools, which makes comparisons between the two sectors unfair."²³ By comparing students that meet certain income thresholds, this comparison controls for economic factors that are often used to distinguish between high-scoring and low-scoring students. While this is not a perfect method for comparing student scores, it allows for a useful analysis of similar students attending different schools.

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Figure 3: FRL Students Scoring Basic or Above, Arizona Charter Schools vs. Traditional Public Schools



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, "NAEP Data Explorer," available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx>.

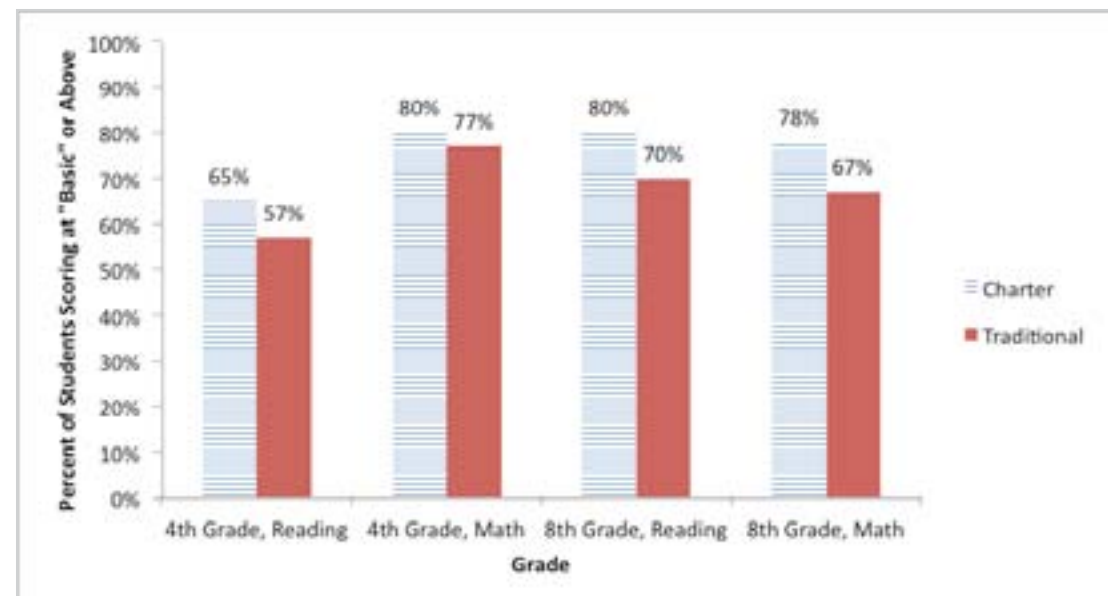
These results are consistent for all students and FRL students when the achievement level is raised from “Basic or Above” to “Proficient or Above” for all subjects and all grades except FRL student reading scores in 8th grade.

The latest NAEP results show a higher percentage of charter students eligible for the FRL program scored at basic or above on the nation’s report card (fourth and eighth grade are the only grades tested on these assessments). In fourth-grade reading, 63 percent of charter school students scored at “Basic” or better compared to 57 percent of traditional students. Likewise, 82 percent of low-income charter students scored at the “Basic” level or better on the fourth-grade math portion, compared to 80 percent of traditional students. Among eighth-graders, 72 percent of low-income charter students scored at “Basic” or above in reading, compared to 67 percent of traditional students, and in math, 70 percent of charter students scored at “Basic” or above compared to 63 percent of traditional school students.

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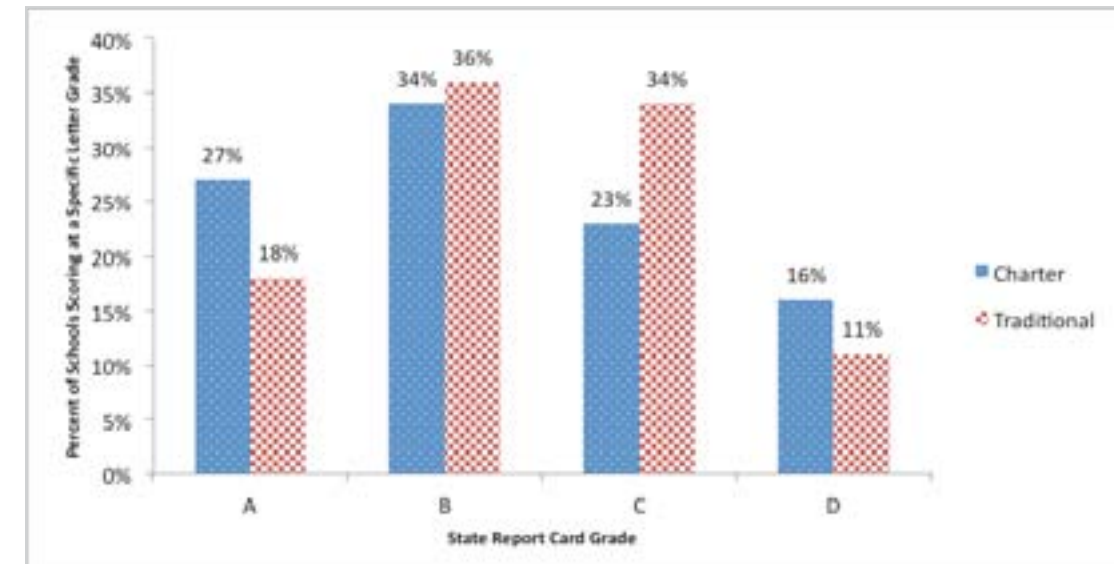
Likewise, a direct comparison of all Arizona charter school students to all other public school students in the state on the NAEP test shows that a higher percentage of charter students score at “basic” or above than traditional students.

Figure 4: All Students Scoring Basic or Above, Arizona Charter Schools vs. Traditional Public Schools²⁴



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress, “NAEP Data Explorer,” available at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/dataset.aspx>.

Figure 5: Arizona A–F Accountability, Charter and Traditional Public Schools, 2011



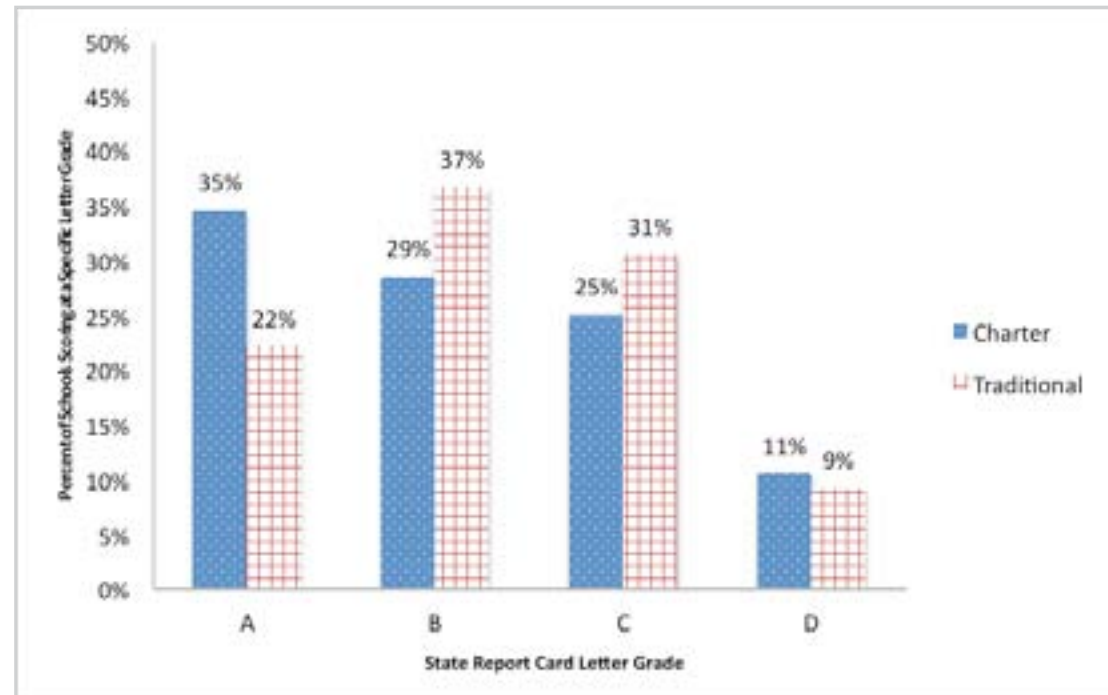
Source: Arizona Department of Education, “Research and Evaluation: A–F Accountability,” available at <http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/A-F-accountability/> (accessed May 29, 2012). Small schools, K-2 schools, and alternative schools did not receive letter grades in 2011.

These results only provide a one-year snapshot of student achievement, but another indicator that allows for comparison that includes changes in performance over time is Arizona’s new A–F school and district report card system. This system rates schools based on a combination of annual AIMS test scores and achievement growth over time (with additional weight for improved scores among the lowest-performing students in a school). A higher percentage of Arizona charters received A’s than traditional schools in both 2011 and 2012, the first years the A–F ratings were used (see Figures 5 and 6). A higher percentage also received D’s than traditional schools in both years, one indicator demonstrating the way in which Arizona charters have pockets of high achievement and pockets of low performance, with a large middle ground. This distribution is not unlike traditional schools, though again, a higher percentage of charters earned A’s (no school earned an F because schools must receive a D for multiple years before they will be graded as F).

A select few charter schools not only show high levels of student achievement but do so with unique approaches to instruction, successfully serving as laboratories of innovation for other schools. For example, Carpe Diem, located in Yuma, Arizona, pioneered the hybrid instructional model, where students spend part of the day working at their own pace using online resources and part of the day with a teacher. The school ranked first in Yuma County in math and reading in 2010, a remarkable feat considering Carpe Diem is located in a low-income area that has traditionally posted low levels of student achievement.²⁵ Sixty percent of Carpe Diem students qualify for the federal Free and Reduced-Price lunch (FRL) program.²⁶ Carpe Diem is now opening campuses in Indiana. Charter schools’ ability to experiment with new teaching methods is one of the features that make charters so valuable to all students.²⁷

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Figure 6: Arizona A–F Accountability, Charter and Traditional Public Schools, 2012



Source: Arizona Department of Education, “Research and Evaluation: A–F Accountability,” available at <http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/A-F-accountability/> (accessed May 29, 2012). Small schools, K-2 schools and alternative schools are not included in this chart. Eight traditional schools received an F, while no charters received this score.

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Arizona’s Charter Law

For the past 15 years, Arizona’s charter school law has been considered one of the most effective in the United States. The Center for Education Reform and the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools have recognized Arizona’s law and highlighted its features.²⁸ The National Alliance named Arizona as one of the “Leading States” that had in its charter law the “essential components” of the organization’s ideal charter school law.²⁹ The Center for Education Reform ranks Arizona sixth on its “Parent Power Index,” which ranks states according to how many quality charter school options parents have, along with other indicators such as teacher quality and school choice options through scholarship programs or education savings accounts.³⁰

These high rankings are due, in part, to the changes made to Arizona’s law over time. Early analyses of Arizona’s law criticized the lack of accountability for charter schools. For example, in 2004, the Progressive Policy Institute said too few charters were included in the state’s accountability system using the state’s performance labels of “excelling,” “highly performing,” “performing,” and “underperforming.”³¹ That year, only 11 percent (52 out of 460) of charters were included in the performance ratings, so lawmakers and parents had little information on the charters not included. In 2011–12, all charters were included in Arizona’s new A–F state report card system, which replaced the previous labeling system.³²

Further, charter schools are being closed for financial and academic reasons. Arizona’s statewide authorizer, the ASBCS, reports that 123 charter schools were closed between 2006 (the first year data are available) and 2010.³³ Of the closed schools, 21 were closed for academic reasons or for academic and financial reasons, while 21 others were closed for strictly financial/non-academic reasons. The remaining schools on the list were closed for low enrollment or issues related to compliance with their charter. With every charter school that is closed for academic reasons, the quality gap between traditional schools and charter schools will grow. The charter schools that remain operational will increasingly be high-performing schools.

The statutes and policies governing the funding formula are also elements of strength in Arizona’s charter school law because these provisions are more efficient than the policies for traditional public schools. Arizona charters report their enrollment figures to the state department periodically throughout the year, and their funding levels are adjusted accordingly. As a result, charter schools are funded based on the students they are serving at the present time. In traditional schools, funding is based on the prior year’s enrollment, which results in funding empty seats in some schools or paying twice for students when students transfer in between reporting periods.³⁴ This lag in traditional public school reporting and funding wastes more than \$125 million in taxpayer money per year.³⁵

School Buildings

Arizona charter schools face two distinct disadvantages when compared to the support structure and laws governing traditional schools. First, charters must compensate for the lack of state assistance for facilities. While traditional schools receive funds for capital costs, charters do not receive capital outlay or school facilities funding, the primary sources of funds for renovation and building upkeep. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools cites the lack of support for charter school facilities as a reason Arizona’s charter law has slipped in rankings recently, saying the state could do more in the form of “funding and support for new facilities.”³⁶ Even though the recent financial crises depressed property values and allowed charter operators to purchase buildings for less money than in the past, the facility challenge remains: “Many charters . . . can’t solve the building problem, and thus never open despite having been approved,” reported the *Arizona Republic* in 2010.³⁷

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Around the country, charter schools face a similar plight. “From the Minnesota statute on, access to dedicated revenues for facility construction was the gravest omission from state charter-school laws,” writes former National Alliance for Public Charter Schools CEO Nelson Smith.³⁸ In South Carolina, the *Charleston Post and Courier* reported that “perhaps the biggest obstacle a South Carolina charter school faces is finding a building.”³⁹ *The Washington Post* editorial board wrote of the challenge facing District of Columbia charter schools: “It’s maddening to look across the street from the filled-to-capacity campus [of a charter school] at the empty classrooms of a former school and wonder if there isn’t more the city should be doing to help its best-performing charters find facilities that will allow them to expand and meet the need for their services.”⁴⁰

The Washington Post editorial board wrote of the challenge facing District of Columbia charter schools: “It’s maddening to look across the street from the filled-to-capacity campus [of a charter school] at the empty classrooms of a former school and wonder if there isn’t more the city should be doing to help its best-performing charters find facilities that will allow them to expand and meet the need for their services.”

True, charter school operators should have understood that support for facilities may not come from the state when they applied to open a charter. It is incumbent on charters and their authorizers to review anticipated funding levels prior to agreeing to open a school. Those charters that open do so with the understanding that they should be exempt from many state regulations but will be held to more rigorous accountability standards (such as closure if they fail to show student success) and may not receive the same amount of state funding.

But sometimes charter schools cannot use available public school buildings because school leaders actively prevent them from doing so. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the public school district spent over \$1 million annually to maintain 27 extra school buildings, and the district “refused sales to charter schools—on the grounds that they would compete with the district for students.”⁴¹ Eventually, and “despite the district’s objections,” legislators permitted the city to sell the buildings.

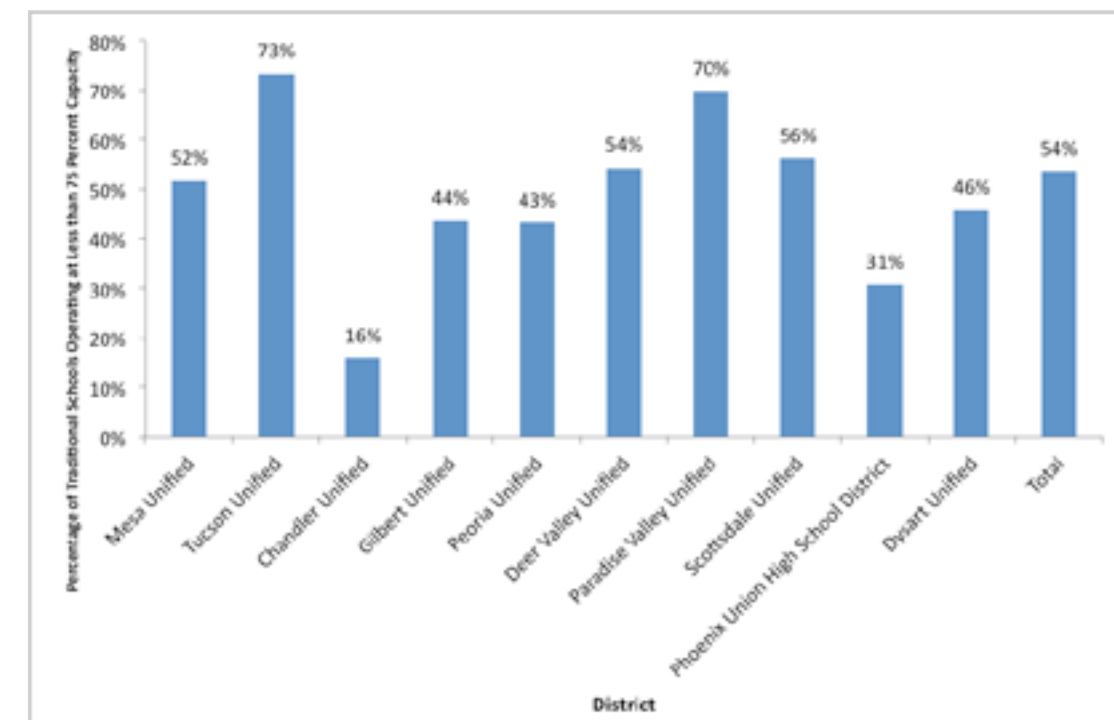
There is no central database for closed or repurposed public school buildings in Arizona. Available information must be gathered from the districts themselves or the School Facilities Board (SFB). Arizona’s largest school district, Mesa Unified, reports eight school buildings have been closed since 2008.⁴² The district’s report does not provide repurposing information for all of the closed schools. The next largest school district, Tucson Unified School District (TUSD), has closed 20 buildings since 2010. TUSD’s closure of and subsequent bidding process for the facilities is a prime example of how traditional school leaders interfere with charter schools’ replication.⁴³ In 2010, TUSD closed nine schools. By June 2012, the bidding and/or repurposing projects for these facilities were still incomplete.⁴⁴ In 2011, maintaining these nine empty buildings cost Arizona taxpayers some \$450,000 annually.⁴⁵ In December 2012, TUSD closed 11 more schools.⁴⁶ TUSD’s website says the district currently has 13,000 empty seats.⁴⁷ The empty buildings are attracting vandals who are also targeting homes located near the empty buildings.⁴⁸ This is happening while at least one Tucson charter is “bursting at the seams” with students and is prepared to expand: La Paloma Academy enrolls 1,600 students at its two locations and still has a waiting list.⁴⁹

Tucson district officials clearly stated their opposition to charter schools’ use of the empty buildings: “Personally, my feeling is if we couldn’t sustain a school there, we shouldn’t give someone else the opportunity to do so,” said Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) Governing Board Clerk Judy Burns.⁵⁰

“My goal is to put charter schools out of business,” TUSD governing board member Michael Hicks told a local TV station.⁵¹

Data from the SFB provide some indication of how many Arizona schools are operating over or under capacity.⁵² The SFB’s website contains information on the capacity for state school buildings, though not all school districts’ files are current. Some schools have changed names, been combined, or closed. As a result, we can only construct a partial picture of how much vacant space there is in public schools and how many buildings are empty. But we can use the data to begin to analyze the amount of districts’ empty space.

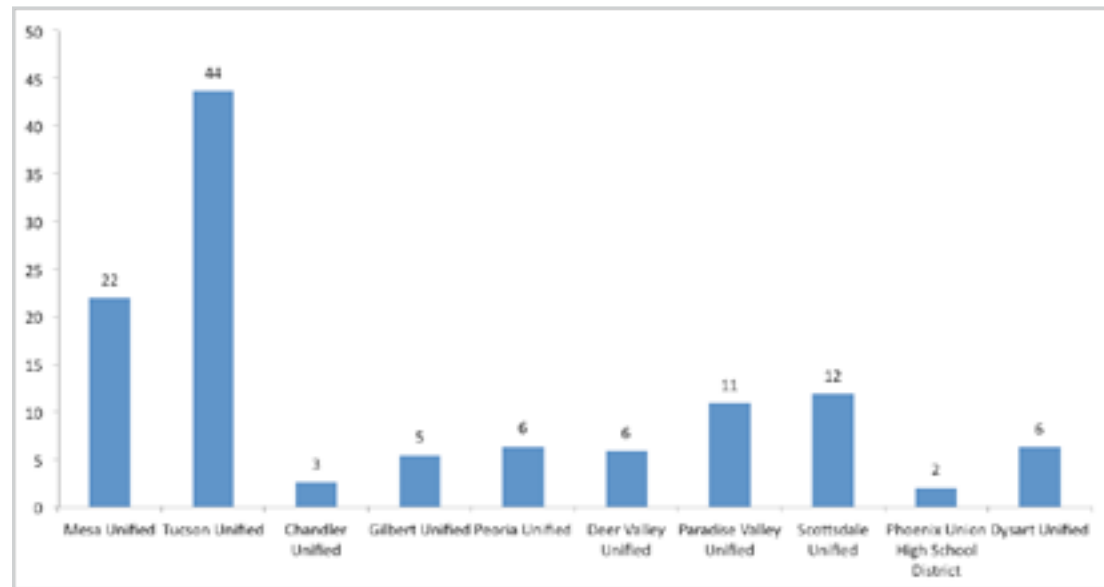
Figure 7: Percentage of Traditional Schools Operating at Less than 75 Percent Capacity



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Source: Arizona School Facilities Board Facilities Reports, “School Capacity Analysis,” <http://www.azsfb.gov/sfb/sfbscr/sfbda/daChooseTarget.asp?targetPage=daFacSchoolCapacity.asp>. When not provided by the School Facilities Board, school enrollment found from the Arizona Department of Education’s “2011–12 Enrollments” file, available at <http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures/>. Author calculations.

Figure 8: Equivalent Empty Traditional School Buildings



Source: Arizona School Facilities Board Facilities Reports, “School Capacity Analysis,” <http://www.azsfb.gov/sfb/sfbscr/sfbda/daChooseTarget.asp?targetPage=daFacSchoolCapacity.asp>. When not provided by the School Facilities Board, school enrollment found from the Arizona Department of Education’s “2011–12 Enrollments” file, available at <http://www.azed.gov/research-evaluation/arizona-enrollment-figures>. Author calculations.

Figures 7 and 8 demonstrate the available space in the 10-largest Arizona school districts. Using SFB’s enrollment information (when available) and data from the Arizona Department of Education’s enrollment files, we can determine how many schools are operating under or over capacity. Figure 7 shows that 73 percent, or nearly three out of four schools, in TUSD are operating under 75 percent capacity. In Paradise Valley Unified, 70 percent of schools are operating under 75 percent capacity. Note that statewide public school enrollment in Arizona saw regular increases between 2003 and 2008, but enrollment has remained steady since 2008.⁵³

These data also help us determine the equivalent number of vacant buildings in these districts. Using the enrollment and capacity information to determine the average school size in a district and the number of empty seats, we find that TUSD has the equivalent of 44 empty school buildings. Mesa Unified has the equivalent of 22 empty buildings. To calculate these figures, we subtract the number of buildings included in the analysis for each district multiplied by the percent of capacity filled for district buildings from the number of buildings in the analysis:

$$\text{Number of buildings} - (\text{Number of buildings} \times \text{Percent capacity filled})$$

For example, in the Scottsdale Unified School District (SUSD), 32 buildings were used in the analysis, and the district was operating at 63 percent capacity:

$$32 - (32 \times 0.63) = 11.84$$

The number of equivalent vacant buildings in SUSD is rounded up to 12 in Figure 8.

Despite the thousands of charter schools operating across the country, including hundreds in Arizona, district leaders in some areas still consider charters to be a threat to the traditional system instead of offering new opportunities to children. Policy solutions to give charters better access to vacant facilities are offered in the final section of this paper.

Regulations

A second challenge charter schools face is increasing regulation. Without question, charters should be held accountable for their finances and student achievement, and as discussed above, national organizations have recognized Arizona’s charter law for offering charter schools flexibility and autonomy. The basic charter school regulations specified in Arizona law include:

- The requirement to submit a written charter application;
- Stipulate who can open a charter school;
- Rules for submitting an application;
- How charters are to be notified if they are noncompliant with accounting rules;
- Who can authorize a charter;
- The composition of a charter school board;
- Fingerprinting their employees;
- Requirements to hold public meetings;
- How to comply with federal, state, and local rules on health, safety, civil rights, and insurance;
- And requirements to provide a “comprehensive program of instruction” but a school may emphasize a “specific learning philosophy or style” or certain subjects.

Beyond these rules, none of which restrict classroom operations or how teachers teach, charters are “exempt from all statutes and rules relating to schools, governing boards, and school districts.”⁵⁴

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The empty buildings are attracting vandals who are also targeting homes located near the empty buildings. This is happening while at least one Tucson charter is “bursting at the seams” with students and is prepared to expand.

The Arizona Department of Education, consistent with new federal provisions, has implemented further regulations on charter schools that begin to resemble those of traditional public schools. The accountability list for charters includes five measures of academic accountability that include alignment to state academic standards and participation in the state test; five measures of financial accountability, including adherence to state budgeting requirements for schools; and nine items of “general accountability,” including compliance with regulations tied to federal funding.⁵⁵

Like traditional schools, charter schools must also submit an Education and Career Action Plan for every high school student that includes a “signed declaration,” an “attributes checklist,” an action plan for how the school is going to implement the plan for each student, as well as additional documents.⁵⁶

Finally, the Uniform System of Financial Records for Arizona Schools lists 18 annual due dates for various reports, including graduation-rate data, “career and technical education performance measure reports,” proposed budgets, announcements of when a public hearing will be held on a school’s budget, an announcement after the public hearing has been held on the budget, and petty cash reports.⁵⁷

Recent changes at the state and federal level are imposing more burdens on charter schools. Laws such as the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) statute—and now waivers from NCLB—have required all public schools to track and report an increasing amount of student data. Despite a promised exemption from the laws applied to traditional schools, charters have been automatically included as new requirements have been levied:

- In 2007, the Goldwater Institute filed suit against the Arizona Department of Education because the department wanted to require Arizona charters to adjust their curricula to conform to state standards.⁵⁸ The Institute was prepared to represent four of the 10-highest-performing charters in Arizona in the suit (five schools total), but the case was settled out of court and the department ended its attempt at regulatory overreach—but only for the schools named in the suit. The rest of Arizona charters are still subject to the department’s directives on how social studies is to be taught according to a schedule determined by the state. A critical part of all charter school laws is the freedom charters have to choose their own textbooks and direct their own instructional style, so the department’s actions are still a violation of the contract charters make with their authorizer.
- Also in 2010, Arizona agreed to adopt the Common Core State Standards, a national set of educational standards that defines the material on which students will be tested.⁵⁹ In order to prepare students, schools must make sure their curriculum is aligned with the new standards, which require changes in textbooks and teacher preparation programs.⁶⁰ Notably, studies indicate the Common Core standards are lower than Arizona’s previous standards for literary and non-literary texts.⁶¹

- Charters must number their courses and track who is teaching the courses and their students in exactly the same way as traditional schools. This new system, called the “Student-Teacher-Course Connection,” is another requirement imposed on Arizona schools due to the federal Race to the Top grant requirements (the Common Core standards also had to be adopted in order for Arizona to be competitive in the grant competition).⁶²

These regulations are preventing charter schools from being the unique alternatives to traditional schools they were designed to be, by forcing them to adapt to the same rules traditional district schools face.

How to Strengthen Arizona’s Charter School Law

To help charter schools succeed in the next 20 years and beyond, lawmakers should adopt several reforms to Arizona’s law.

Vacant buildings

School districts must be accountable to taxpayers for their vacant or underused buildings. Districts should be required to close schools that earned a D or F on their state report card and operate for two consecutive years at or below 50 percent capacity. These schools and any other vacant public school buildings should be sold or leased to the highest bidder within 18 months of closure but must remain on the market for at least four years if no buyer comes forward. If the leasee is a charter or private school, these schools would be responsible for any renovation costs and maintenance during the term of the lease.

Charter schools should be exempt from state regulations, academic standards and AIMS/PARCC

State leaders should consider three ways to return to charter schools their autonomy over basic school governance and operation. First, expand A.R.S. 15-215 to include all charter schools.⁶³ This statute, which Gov. Jan Brewer signed into law in 2012, allows school districts that have earned an A rating on their state report card to request exemption from state requirements. According to the statute, A-rated schools can request exemption from any statutes or rules except those dealing with teacher certification, health and safety, state standards or assessments, graduation requirements, special education, finances and procurement issues, and accountability measures such as the A–F report card system. Districts can identify the regulations that distract from their primary task of teaching students and ask the state board of education for reprieve.⁶⁴ In 2013, Gov. Brewer signed HB 2496, which allows A-rated charter schools to request exemption, a step in the right direction. All Arizona charter schools should be allowed to make use of A.R.S. 15-215,

Laws such as the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) statute—and now waivers from NCLB—have required all public schools to track and report an increasing amount of student data. Despite a promised exemption from the laws applied to traditional schools, charters have been automatically included as new requirements have been levied.

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and the rules listed as “off-limits” should be revised so that schools can request exemption from state standards and tests as long as a suitable replacement is found. Georgia has a similar law that creates a process for requesting exemptions from state regulations and proposing alternative accountability measures.⁶⁵

For example, charter schools should be free to substitute nationally norm-referenced tests produced by private entities such as the Stanford series of tests or the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for the state test. Currently, all Arizona public schools take the Stanford tests and AIMS, the state test (AIMS will be replaced by the PARCC test under the Common Core). The state accountability system, including A through F school grades, is based on AIMS. The state department of education should take the results from tests that charter schools choose and compare them so that parents, state officials, and schools know how schools using different tests compare to each other.

This process is not alien to testing and public schools around the country. A commonly used test produced by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) called “MAP” is used in 4,200 school districts.⁶⁶ For each state using the test, NWEA uses a method of comparison that allows teachers to see how a given MAP score compares to a state test score. Arizona’s Department of Education should use a similar method to compare test results between different assessments so that schools can choose the test that best fits their curriculum, then have their student performance compared to other schools. In fact, the Arizona Department of Education is currently cross-walking the scores from the AIMS test to the PARCC test in order to properly adjust the state’s A–F accountability system for the coming change to the new test. If the state is already doing such a comparison with these two tests, it should also be able to manage similar calculations for the wide variety of other assessments used across the country, such as the Stanford series or another national norm-referenced achievement test. Once the scoring methods are compared, future comparisons between Arizona schools and even schools in other states will become routine, no matter which test is used. Some states, dissatisfied with the new assessments under the Common Core, are even considering using the ACT (a college admissions test) instead of PARCC under the new standards.⁶⁷

Arizona lawmakers have recognized the importance of independent assessments—as opposed to state-designed tests—in tracking a student’s level of college readiness. In 2012, Arizona leaders passed a bill that would allow 12th graders to substitute an SAT or ACT score for an AIMS high school exit exam score.⁶⁸

Because charter schools are currently assigned the same state test as traditional schools, charters have the incentive to replicate traditional schools’ teaching methods and classroom approaches. Tests are the driving force behind curricular materials and teaching strategies, and if students in all schools must take the same tests, this inhibits innovative approaches to teaching. Charter schools should have the freedom to determine the best way to educate their students, not be coerced into teaching the same way traditional schools do to prepare for the same test.

Third, as a part of their review and reauthorization process, the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools (ASBCS) should add measurement indicators to their charter evaluations that deal with charters’ success at achieving the goals set in their mission statement. Currently, as a part of a charter’s application, each prospective school must write a mission statement. These mission statements set charters apart from one another and traditional schools because charters can choose to focus on different teaching styles or student needs. For example:

- Peoria Accelerated High School’s mission is to provide a “safe and nurturing high school experience for at-risk students. Peoria Accelerated offers a challenging curriculum with rigorous coursework including credit recovery opportunities.”⁶⁹ In addition to test performance, Peoria Accelerated could be allowed to earn points on its state report card for the number of at-risk students it serves and graduates and how many students successfully complete coursework in its credit recovery program.
- BASIS schools’ mission is to offer an “accelerated curriculum” and produce results competitive with schools in Finland, Canada, Japan, and Korea.⁷⁰ As a part of its state report card, BASIS could be able to earn points by reporting how well students compare to their peers in these high-performing countries.
- The mission of the Arizona School for the Arts (ASA) is to provide a “rigorous” study of the arts and evaluate students at the “conservatory level.”⁷¹ ASA’s report card could include indicators on how well students perform on fine arts exams and reviews.

By making charter schools’ unique missions a part of their review process, charters would be evaluated on what they set out to do and the students they designed their schools to serve, in addition to state indicators to which every school is held accountable. The state charter board should not use a school’s mission as a reason to keep a school open that has had consistently low levels of achievement across multiple years. Charters should still be held accountable for achievement levels, but a part of a charter’s evaluation should consider how well the charter met the goals the school set for itself before enrolling students.

Conclusion

Despite claims that Arizona charter schools have lost their edge, data show that low-income charter students, and all Arizona charter school average scores, are performing better than traditional-school students on a national test. This fulfills one of the purposes for charters stated in Arizona law: improving student achievement. In addition, the number of charter schools and their student enrollment have seen regular growth, fulfilling the other primary purpose for charters, which is to provide more school options for parents and their children.

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Charter schools still struggle to find school buildings to use as they expand and attempt to replicate their services for more students. Around the country and in Arizona, school districts make it difficult for charters to access empty public school buildings. Districts must be held accountable for the empty spaces in their public schools. With the equivalent of 22 empty school buildings in the Mesa Unified school district and the equivalent of 44 empty buildings in TUSD, state leaders should make sure empty or underused public schools are leased or sold to the highest bidder within a reasonable period.

Finally, as the number of rules and regulations increase for Arizona charter schools, lawmakers must make sure charters are not being forced to operate like traditional public schools. Charters should be free from rules imposed on district schools that direct their operations both in the classroom and front office. They should be free to identify regulatory burdens and request exemption. These improvements to Arizona’s charter school law can make charter schools and the students they serve more successful.

Appendix

Arizona’s SFB’s web page contains capacity and enrollment data for Arizona school district buildings.⁷² Some of the facilities listed are district office buildings or storage and repair facilities. These buildings were not included in the analysis because schools do not use them for instruction. For example, SFB’s report on TUSD lists one building as “District Storage,” and no student capacity or enrollment information is provided, so the building was not included in the district’s total in this study.

SFB lists 537 buildings in their reports for the districts used in this paper’s analysis (Arizona’s 10 largest school districts). Of these buildings, 453 (85 percent) were included in the results provided because these facilities were confirmed as academic buildings and their enrollment information was available from either SFB or, when not provided by SFB, the Arizona Department of Education.

	Mesa Unified	Tucson Unified	Chandler Unified	Gilbert Unified	Peoria Unified	Deer Valley Unified	Paradise Valley Unified	Scottsdale Unified	Phoenix Union High School District	Dysart Unified	Total
Total Buildings	93	133	51	41	43	40	52	39	18	27	537
Not counted	6	28	9	2	6	5	9	7	5	3	80
Percent of total not counted	6%	21%	18%	5%	14%	13%	17%	18%	28%	11%	15%
Total buildings in analysis	87	105	38	39	37	35	43	32	13	24	453

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