



# Community (Charter) Schools in Ohio

Brief prepared by Jennifer L. Sader, March 2007

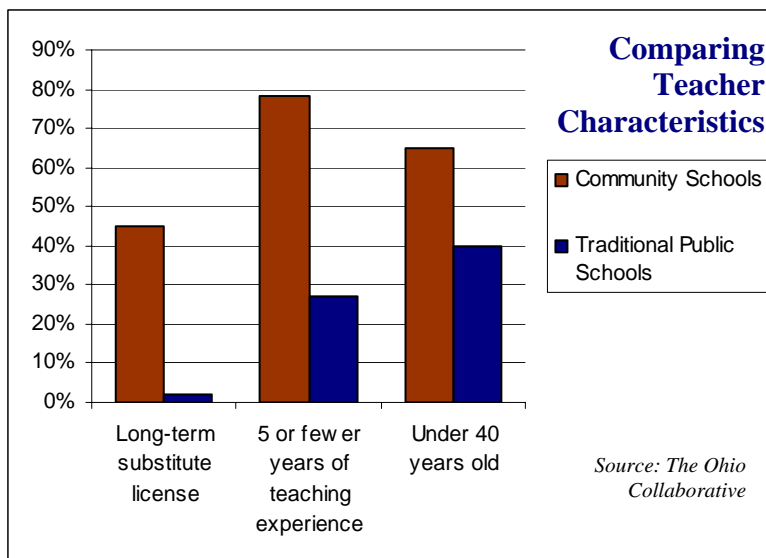
## Child & Family Issue Brief

Ohio's community schools, also called charter schools, are independent public schools overseen by the Ohio Department of Education. Each community school is operated by its own governing board. Community schools were created to allow parents more options for the education of their children. Ohio is the sixth-largest charter school state in the nation, and Dayton has the highest percentage of children in charter schools of any city in the nation, at 28%. In 2006, Ohio had 305 charter schools serving about 72,000 students.<sup>1</sup> Charter schools can be converted public schools, new startups, or virtual schools. In Ohio, charters can be sponsored by public or private entities, including school districts, vocational agencies, education service agencies, public universities, and education nonprofits. Positions in the debate over charter schools have tended to be highly polarized, with supporters favoring charter schools as a means to expand school choice, and opponents arguing that charter schools divert resources from public schools. Recently, however, concerns about the performance of Ohio's community schools have prompted calls for more oversight and accountability from both sides of the aisle.

### *Points of Concern:*

- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in August 2006 reported: "After adjusting for student characteristics, charter school mean scores in reading and mathematics were lower, on average, than those for public noncharter schools. The difference was smaller in charter schools affiliated with a public school district."<sup>2</sup>
- Recent, high-profile fraud cases involving Ohio charter school administrators have raised concerns about financial accountability. Examples include:
  - The State Auditor's Office found that more than \$800,000 in state and federal money for a defunct charter school was misspent or otherwise unaccounted for. Records show that the founders of the school spent funds on upscale women's clothing and other luxuries and that multiple \$10,000 checks were written for cash.
  - The indictment of officials from another charter school, which has been closed, for defrauding the state of \$2.2 million.
  - The indictment of the superintendent of a well-regarded charter school for using charter school funds to remodel his home.<sup>3</sup>
- Ohio House Bill 79, passed in December 2006, created criteria to close poorly-performing charter schools after July 1, 2008, with the stipulation that closed schools can not reopen under another sponsor. Schools that specialize in dropout recovery are exempted.

In June 2005, the Ohio Collaborative reported that community school teachers in Ohio were younger, less experienced, and more likely to hold a long-term substitute license. In addition, these schools experienced more teacher turnover than traditional public schools. At the end of the 2003-2004 academic year, more than half of the teachers in community schools left their positions, with almost 40% of them leaving teaching for good. In comparison, the highest turnover rate in traditional public school districts was 20% in “major urban – very high poverty school districts.”<sup>4</sup>



### Characteristics of Charter School Laws Associated With Positive Outcomes

- A rigorous approval process: “Allowing only strong applications with sound and feasible plans is one of the best ways to ensure strong charter schools.”
- Rigorous oversight: Effective oversight requires “the systematic collection of data” and “an ability and willingness by authorizers to act on those data.” True oversight is impossible when schools do not submit complete and accurate data, or when authorizers don’t have the motivation to act on the data they collect.
- Technical assistance for charter school administrators: This assistance is “critical for the success of charter school reforms,” and can include help in developing charter applications, assistance with compliance to regulations, creation and implementation of accountability plans, and training of board members.
- Minimal involvement of Educational Management Organizations: “No body of evidence by independent researchers and evaluators supports the belief that privatized management of charter schools or traditional public schools improves performance or efficiency.”
- Solid financial support: “Funding does matter, and states that can insure that more resources get to the charter schools in a timely fashion are more likely to have successful and strong charter schools.”
- Moderate growth: “It seems apparent that states that have reforms that are implemented more slowly end up having more favorable results.”
- Bipartisanship: “A charged political atmosphere is more likely to lead to reforms that are rushed in implementation – in part because of fear that the reform may not survive an election.”

Adapted from Miron, G. (2005). Strong charter laws are those that result in positive outcomes. Paper available through the Evaluation Center at Western Michigan University.

### Potential as positive change agents:

- A Cleveland charter school is among only nine schools in the nation chosen as a finalist for a \$3.5 million expansion grant from the Colorado-based Charter School Growth Fund. The school serves nearly 400 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, mostly from low-income families.
- Charters have a higher percentage of minority teachers than traditional public schools.<sup>4</sup>
- Charter schools have more flexibility to specialize, which allows schools to focus on specific needs or on specific subjects, such as the performing arts.
- Charter schools have been opened by traditional school districts to serve the needs of students who might have otherwise been at risk or dropped out of traditional schooling, for example, pregnant or parenting teens.
- In 2005, the Fordham Foundation reported that although traditional public schools still outperform charters in most Ohio districts, some individual inner-city charters outperform the district averages of traditional public schools.<sup>5</sup>



### ***Recommendations for Ohio:***

- Create stronger safeguards and monitoring systems to prevent financial mismanagement and fraud in charter schools.
- Create guidelines for reasonable administration and management costs to make sure that schools are not diverting too many funds from the classroom.
- Keep existing limits on charter school growth until these schools consistently meet state and national accountability standards.
- Reduce charter school teacher turnover by promoting professional development. Help teachers with only a long-term substitute license obtain full licensure.
- Create mentoring programs that pair new teachers with more experienced ones.
- Guarantee an adequate minimum level of funding to all schools to help make sure that all Ohio children receive a quality education.
- Provide more incentives for charter sponsors to be selective about the schools they authorize.
- Review the performance of sponsors and types of sponsors to see which are associated with positive outcomes.
- Give preference when authorizing new schools to administrators with a proven track record and strong, detailed school plans.
- Encourage more standardization and compliance between charter school reporting and traditional school reporting to facilitate comparisons of school performance.
- Provide parents with the good, easy-to-understand information needed to make informed choices.



### ***About the Author:***

Jennifer L. Sader is a graduate research assistant at the Institute for Child & Family Policy. She is a doctoral candidate in Higher Education Administration at BGSU.

*References: 1) Stevens, S. (December 21, 2006), "Stricter Charter School Rules OK'd, Cleveland Plain Dealer. 2) National Assessment of Educational Progress (August 2006), A Closer Look at Charter Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling. 3) Wagner, J.L. (January 5, 2007), Audit Faults Charter School, Cleveland Plain Dealer. 4) The Ohio Collaborative, (June 2005), Beyond the Numbers: Conditions of Teaching in Charter/Community Schools in Ohio. 5) Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, (October 2005), School Performance in Ohio's Inner Cities: Comparing Charter and District School Results in 2005.*



**The Institute for Child and Family Policy**

Bowling Green State University

16 Family & Consumer Sciences Building

Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

Phone: (419) 372-7825

Email: [icfp@bgsu.edu](mailto:icfp@bgsu.edu)

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/edhd/icfp>