

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Work in progress: Audit description

Charter Schools: Identifying and supporting at-risk students

Charter schools have aimed to serve marginalized students through innovative approaches since their inception. However, lawmakers, families and even some charter school advocates have raised concerns about how effectively charter schools identify and serve at-risk students, such as English language learners, special education students and children from low-income families. Although many of these students achieve test scores similar to or better than scores achieved by students in traditional public schools, it remains unclear how well individual charter schools identify and support them.

As of January 2025, 17 publicly funded, nonprofit charter schools operate statewide, serving around 5,000 enrolled students. Advocates claim charter schools' flexible, innovative approaches could serve to inform new educational approaches for future, widespread adoption, despite resource limitations. Critics have questioned whether charter schools truly enroll and serve students with the greatest needs. Finally, there remain concerns about unelected charter school boards being less accountable to students and parents.

Each school operates under a unique charter agreement with its authorizing body, which outlines strategies to identify and support various at-risk student populations. When successful, these processes could serve as valuable models to improve how all schools serve vulnerable students, ultimately strengthening the overall education system and ensuring that all children have the support they need to succeed.

Preliminary scope and objectives

This audit will examine processes for identifying and supporting at-risk students at four charter schools, selected on the basis of location, size and a higher percentage of at-risk students: Catalyst Public Schools, Innovation High School, Pinnacles Prep and Rainier Prep. This audit will answer the following questions:

1. To what extent do selected charter schools meet requirements and use leading practices to identify and support at-risk students?
2. Have the selected charter schools used innovative methods to identify and serve at-risk students that other schools could adopt?



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