

PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
Pat McCarthy

Evaluating How Charter Schools Identify and Support At-Risk Students

Washington charter schools are tuition-free, publicly funded schools open to all students. They must follow most state and federal laws but are exempt from certain laws related to curriculum requirements, school district policies and collective bargaining agreements. The state charter school law closely mirrors Initiative 1240 passed by voters in 2012, which emphasized charter schools' ability to better serve at-risk students. State law defines at-risk students as those who have academic or economic disadvantages and require assistance or special services to succeed in school. We focused on three at-risk populations identified in the law: homeless students, English language learners and special education students.

We evaluated four charter schools from across the state to determine how well they met requirements and adopted leading practices to identify and serve at-risk students. We selected schools based on whether they served at least some of our target populations. The requirements in state and federal law are in place to help ensure these student populations are identified and served appropriately. The leading practices we considered can help augment schools' success; they ranged from improved data tracking to better communication with students and families.

Audited charter schools met nearly all selected legal requirements for identifying and supporting at-risk students

Audited schools met nearly all requirements to identify and serve at-risk students but could improve by documenting all processes. For English language learners, schools mostly met requirements, but some lacked required plans. Schools also had practices to serve homeless students and to provide transportation.

However, the schools could improve their written guidance for coordinating with service agencies and providing transportation. In addition, schools generally met requirements to help identify and support special education students. Finally, all schools posted a required online complaint process for students and families.

The charter schools use many leading practices, including some particularly promising approaches other schools may find valuable

All four charter schools used many leading practices to identify and serve at-risk students. Their purposes range from achieving better data tracking and analysis to improving connections and communication with students and their families. The seven practices were drawn from both government and nonprofit research organizations:

Practice 1: Provide opportunities for effective small group learning settings. All four schools do so.

Practice 2: Offer extended learning opportunities outside regular school hours. Three schools do so.

Practice 3: Promote a culturally responsive learning environment. All four schools do so.

Practice 4: Effectively communicate and engage with parents and families. All four schools do so, but one may benefit from strengthening engagement with non-English-speaking families.

Practice 5: Use early warning data indicators to help identify and serve at-risk students. All four schools do so, but two could improve their processes.

Practice 6: Promote collaboration between general education and specialist teachers. All schools do so.

Practice 7: Implement multi-tiered system of supports. All schools partially implemented a multi-tiered system of supports.

We asked parents and students at three of the four audited charter schools for their perspectives on the effect the schools' practices had on supporting their children and other at-risk students. While their comments are not representative of all families' experiences at these schools, they described many and varied positive experiences. Some of the supports they mentioned might also be translated to the wider public school system.

State Auditor's Conclusions

This performance audit asked an important question, whether public charter schools in Washington met state requirements and adopted leading practices to identify and serve at-risk students. The answer is clearly positive, both for the school administrators who have implemented many leading practices in this area and for the families served by the schools we reviewed. We considered seven leading practices to identify and serve at-risk students, such as offering extended learning opportunities outside regular school hours or providing opportunities for small group learning. All four schools we examined followed, to varying degrees, six leading practices, and three schools followed at least partially all seven of the leading practices.

When we spoke with families in focus groups, we heard that the schools appeared to communicate and connect well. One student reported that his teachers worked closely with students struggling to meet high expectations. In another example, a parent and child expressed appreciation for the level of patience the teachers display with their students. As positive as these results are, it is always important to be transparent about the scope of our work. For this audit, we limited our focus to four of 17 charter schools in the state for the 2024-25 school year. We examined the processes in place to identify and serve at-risk students, but we did not conduct an analysis of the outcomes of those processes. While this report is therefore not a close examination of all charter schools, it nonetheless offers examples of approaches that could serve at-risk students in Washington's charter schools and traditional schools alike.

Recommendations

We made recommendations to all four audited schools to develop more detailed written policies and procedures that would provide greater assurance that school activities will be carried out as intended. These recommendations address both required activities and leading practices.