



Performance Audit

Charter School Accountability and Opportunities for Collaboration

Background

Charter schools are tuition-free, publicly funded schools available to all children from kindergarten through high school age. Washington's 10 charter schools served approximately 2,400 students during the 2017-18 school year. In 2016, the Legislature directed the Office of the Washington State Auditor to evaluate the frameworks used to ensure charter schools are held accountable to the academic outcomes of their students. The audit reviews whether the frameworks comply with state law and leading practices, but does not evaluate student academic outcomes. This audit also evaluates whether charter schools have the foundations in place to ensure they adhere to government transparency laws and the extent to which they collaborate with districts and traditional schools.

Have charter schools enrolled the types of students they intended to serve?

The Charter School Act emphasizes serving at-risk students. Charter schools varied in their enrollment of certain groups of at-risk students. When compared to the rest of their local school districts, almost all charters enrolled higher percentages of low-income students, students of color, and students with disabilities, though most enrolled a smaller percentage of English language learners. About half of all charter schools enrolled a more diverse student population than the local school district.

Three issues explain why some charter schools lagged in enrolling at-risk students: they have limited influence on enrollment, they are still not well known, and schools are unable to fully use resources such as weighted enrollment preferences. Finally, two charter schools were unable to provide data for certain types of students they intended to serve.

In the 2017-18 school year, 10 charter schools enrolled more than 2,400 students



To what extent do charter schools, traditional schools and school districts collaborate and coordinate?

Collaboration among charter schools, districts, and traditional schools can garner efficiencies and other benefits for students and their families, but it is not without challenges. Charter schools that were authorized by the local school district had the most-developed relationships with the district. There was less collaboration between charter schools and traditional schools when an outside entity served as the authorizer.

Are charter schools complying with teacher certification requirements and government transparency laws?

Charter schools are subject to many of the same laws and requirements that apply to traditional schools, including state and federal teacher certification requirements, and Washington's transparency laws. Based on the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's limited review of teacher certifications, charter schools have complied with state and federal requirements. Charter schools largely complied with specific requirements in the Open Public Meetings Act, with the most common issue involving training for all board members within 90 days of assuming their role. Charter schools met some, but not all, foundational requirements of the Public Records Act. While all schools trained and appointed a public records officer, seven of 10 schools did not establish or publish procedures on how the public could request public records; none provided a statement of costs, index of records, or list of exemptions.

Do performance frameworks in charter school agreements align with laws and leading practices?

The Charter School Act requires that performance frameworks include specific performance indicators, measures, metrics and a disaggregation of academic performance by student group. Leading charter school organizations suggest using common indicators for academic outcomes and mirroring state and federal requirements, among other things. Performance frameworks maintained by both of Washington's charter school authorizers align with state laws and leading practices.

State Auditor's Conclusions

Although charter schools have existed in many parts of the country for decades, such schools are relatively new to Washington. The state's charter school law was passed in 2012, and the earliest of the currently operating charter schools opened for the 2015-16 school year.

The purpose of the audit was to examine whether Washington's charter schools have the foundations in place to help ensure they are accountable to the public. We looked at whether charter schools have enrolled the types of students identified in their charters, whether they have complied with certain state and federal requirements, and whether their charter agreements include appropriate performance frameworks. We also examined the extent to which the charter schools and traditional schools work together. The results were mixed, which is not surprising given newness of the entire charter school system in Washington. It is worth noting that during the course of the audit, charter schools made efforts to address some of the deficiencies found as a result of this audit.

Unfortunately, the newness of the system also keeps us from addressing another question about Washington's charter schools – how effective are these schools at teaching students? As the system matures and more years of data accumulate, this is a logical question that should be addressed.

Recommendation to the Legislature

- ✓ Consider amending statute to allow the charter school authorizer to approve school admission policies and weighted enrollment

Recommendation to charter schools

- ✓ Establish all procedural requirements of the Open Public Meetings Act and the Public Records Act.

Recommendations to charter schools and their authorizers

- ✓ Continue exploring opportunities for weighted enrollment preferences in admissions policies as allowed by law
 - ✓ Track and measure enrollment of targeted student groups as allowed by law
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