

Issue Brief

Familiarity Breeds Content: As the Charter Movement Grows, So Does Public Approval

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INTRODUCTION

Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, "A government can be no better than the public opinion which sustains it." The same is true of any reform movement, including the 15-year advance of public charter schools. Support from the broader public is needed if charter schools are to enjoy public policies conducive to growth.

A review of recent national and state-level polling data suggests that as the movement is expanding and

people are becoming more familiar with charter schools, support is growing as well. "To know them is to love them" may overstate the case, but the trend is moving in that direction.

THE PARADOX OF EDUCATION POLLS

Virtually every national public opinion poll conducted over the past decade on the overall state of our public school system finds that Americans

believe that public schools are "mediocre." Lower-income residents and people of color consistently give them far worse marks. Yet the public tends to give higher ratings to the public schools in their own community.

Charter schools only entered this mix in the early 1990s, and they complicate the polling puzzle even further. If people are skeptical of public schools outside their own

communities, what might they make of charter schools that break through traditional neighborhood boundaries and accept students throughout whole cities? Moreover, the public's image of the charter model itself remains clouded; there is still widespread misinformation about their nature and operations.

Several detailed national and state polls have been conducted over the past decade, measuring not only the public's attitudes toward charter schools but also toward the concepts that charters introduce into public education. What these polls show is that that public support for charters is growing while opposition is declining. It's also evident that the more the public knows about charters, the more they like them. And the public overwhelmingly supports the core components of public charter schools.

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CHARTERS: THEN AND NOW

One of the earliest charter-school polls was commissioned in 1999, when National Public Radio teamed with Harvard's Kennedy School of Government to assess the public's attitudes toward the young charter

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school movement. For many respondents, charter schools were little more than a concept at the time. Even so, when given a definition of a charter school, 25% of respondents favored their expansion, with 12% opposed – a two-to-one margin of approval. But the elephant in the room, a phenomenon that has challenged the charter school movement since, was the vast Undecided bloc: 63% of the broader public remained "unsure" or "didn't know" if they favored or opposed charter schools.

A year later, the annual Phi Delta Kappa survey of national attitudes toward the public school system started including questions on charter schools. Describing charters as operating under a "contract that frees

them from many of the state regulations imposed on public schools and permits them to operate independently," Phi Delta Kappa found that 42% supported their expansion, with 47% in opposition. Notably, it would be the last time that a major, objective national survey found that opposition to charter schools outweighed support. (Of course, the question itself might have produced this result, contrasting charters with "public schools" although charter schools are public schools themselves.)

Fast Forward. Between those early surveys and today, the charter movement has grown by leaps and bounds, moving from just under 1,500 schools to more than 4,000 currently. Two recent national surveys provide quite positive news about

public reaction in this environment of much greater familiarity.

The Economist in 2007 found that by a more than a two-to-one margin (52% to 21%), the public favors the expansion of the charter school movement. *Education Next* found an even greater margin of support, with the public favoring the expansion of charters by 42% to 14%. Support is even greater among African Americans (47% to 12%) and Hispanics (48% to 17%). However, the Undecided number is still perplexingly large, as 42% of Americans remain unsure about charters (41% for African Americans and 35% for Hispanics).

But perhaps that indecision is prudent, given the alarming rate of pure misinformation that crops up in other findings. According to *Education Next*, three in five Americans don't know that charter schools can't charge tuition or teach religion. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools found that 22% of the national public believes that charter schools drain money from the "public" school system. In a state poll, 27% of urban New Yorkers thought charter schools are private schools.

AS THE MOVEMENT GROWS, SUPPORT GROWS WITH IT

Phi Delta Kappa conducted a series of five national polls between 2000 and 2007, and may provide the most consistent barometer of public attitudes toward charter schools. They show support for charter schools consistently rising 18

percentage points over that period (42% to 60%) while opposition declined 12 percentage points (47% to 35%).

The State Picture. Statewide polls have provided a more mixed, yet largely positive picture. Oddly, the scales seem out of balance in some cases; opposition may be declining more quickly than approval grows, or holding steady while approval soars. It appears that changes in public attitudes are not a zero-sum game.

- **California** saw support for charter schools remain constant at 42% from 2004 to 2007, while opposition to them dropped five percentage points (15% to 10%).
- **Massachusetts** saw support for charter schools rise an astounding 26 percentage points from 2003 to 2006 (41% to 67%) while opposition has remained stagnant at 25%.
- **Michigan** saw support rise two percentage points from 2002 to 2007 (54% to 56%, within the margin of error) while opposition declined nine percentage points (32% to 23%).
- In **Pennsylvania**, support for charter schools grew four percentage points from 2005 to 2006 (61% to 65%) while opposition to them declined two percentage points (28% to 26%, within the margin of error).

- Contrary to the largely positive picture nationally and in other states, Indiana and Ohio both saw negatives rise over time. 47% of **Indiana** residents in 2006 supported expanding charter schools, down nine percentage points from 2004. Opposition to charter schools in Indiana has risen from 20% to 34% over the same period.
- In **Ohio**, support for charter schools did manage to grow one percentage point (51% to 52%) from 2005 to 2007, while opposition to charters rose four percentage points (34% to 38%), both within the margin of error.

It would be wonderful to discern a direct relationship in these data between performance and popularity, but that may overreach. For example, California's charters often show faster student gains on the state's Academic Performance Index than other public schools. Does that fact

Fact

- ▶ In Massachusetts, support for charters rose from 41% to 67% from 2003 to 2006.



explain why approval is constant while opposition drops? Conversely, does the presence of what the National Alliance and its partners called "a persistent group of under-performing charters" in Ohio contribute to the growing distaste for them among that state's voters?

It is important to point out that all of these public opinion polls were commissioned by surveying a representative sample of the public. All of them reported a "margin of error" averaging between 3.5 and four percentage points. Those findings that fell within the margin of error should be interpreted accordingly.

THE MORE PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT CHARTERS, THE MORE THEY SUPPORT THEM

In some cases, pollsters themselves help clarify the meaning of "charter schools" by providing a definition – ideally, one that's both accurate and neutral. In 2006, for example, the National Alliance's poll used a definition drawn directly from the respected *Education Week* newspaper.

In every major national and statewide poll commissioned on charter schools, "informed support" – support for charters after hearing a definition of them – was higher. According to the National Alliance's 2006 poll, for instance, when read a simple definition of public charter

schools, support for their expansion grew 37 percentage points, from 37% to 74%.

"Informed support" for charter schools crosses all demographics and backgrounds of respondents. It tends to be strongest among parents, minorities, respondents under 50 years of age and people who generally give public schools lower ratings.

THE PUBLIC SUPPORTS KEY CHARTER SCHOOL CONCEPTS, BUT LANGUAGE MATTERS

The most important message of these surveys may not be what they say about charter schools – especially since so many people are unsure and uninformed – but about the concepts they're built on.

The public strongly endorses accountability for results, choice, site-based control, and innovation. According to polling commissioned by the National Alliance (2006), 90% of the national public believes that parents, teachers, and students should be held accountable for results. 88% think public schools should be able to make quick, effective changes, including dismissing bad teachers. (In fact, according to a 2005 New York survey, even 72% of New Yorkers who are members of a union believe that public schools should be able to get rid of ineffective teachers.) 85% of national respondents believe that parents should be given more options for where to send their children to school.

Other concepts that poll favorably include mandatory parental involvement, teacher pay being tied to performance, and site-based flexibility over curriculum.

But the polling also suggests that charter advocates need to tread carefully around some semantic traps. Being able to shut down a failing charter school is a core accountability concept; but those surveyed approve of closures by only a small margin (52%), according to the National Alliance survey. Yet 82% endorse putting failing schools "under new management." And although charter proponents (and the authors of many state charter laws) see competition as a healthy spur to reform, the public is skeptical. Just 34% of those polled in a 2005 California survey, for example, thought schools should have to compete for students (with women objecting more strenuously than men).

Perhaps the hardest message of all is that after 15 years of effort to tell the story, the public's grasp of charter schooling is still limited. According to several of the national and statewide polls, the percentage of the public that knows "a great deal or quite a bit" about charters remains in the teens. Even in states with mature charter school movements, where news coverage has been plentiful, the charter-savvy numbers inch up only slightly: 27% of Washington D.C. residents, 24% of Californians and 19% of Ohioans report knowing "a great deal" or "quite a bit" about charter schools. The big exception is Colorado, which is known for a positive climate toward charter schools, where 91% of the public report basic knowledge about charters.

NATIONAL SUPPORT FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS IS GROWING OVER TIME

Do you favor or oppose charter schools?

National Totals

	'00	'02	'05	'06	'07
Favor	42%	44%	49%	53%	60%
Oppose	47%	42%	41%	34%	35%
Don't know	11%	13%	10%	13%	5%

Source: Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup 2007

INFORMED SUPPORT: PEOPLE LIKE WHAT THEY HEAR ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS

When read a simple definition of charter schools, support grows:

State	Before	After	Change
National	37%	74%	37 percentage points
California	42%	72%	30 percentage points
Colorado	52%	69%	17 percentage points
New York	34%	61%	27 percentage points





PUBLIC CHARTERS HELP PUBLIC EDUCATION

Americans believe in public education. Even though the charter movement has a way to go in educating the public that charter schools are public schools, the public tends to give the nod to charters if they believe they're helping advance public education. For example, 80% of Californians favored charter schools when told that their successes are being shared with the broader public school system so that every

student benefits. 73% of Coloradoans believe that giving parents more public school choices would improve the overall public school system. By an almost three-to-one margin (54% to 20%), Detroit residents believe that charter schools are good for the overall public school system.

The 2006 Phi Delta Kappa poll concluded that, "Those who would implement the charter school concept should ensure that the public has a clear understanding of the nature of such schools." Hard to argue with that – but it's harder to do than we've thought. The public still doesn't know enough about charter schools, beginning with the threshold information that they are public schools.

However, the light bulb may be turning on a bit on that score: In

national polling commissioned by the National Alliance over a two-year period (2005-2007), there was a nine-point increase (32% to 41%) in the percent of the public that correctly identified charter schools as public schools. More than 15 years into the movement, it is clear

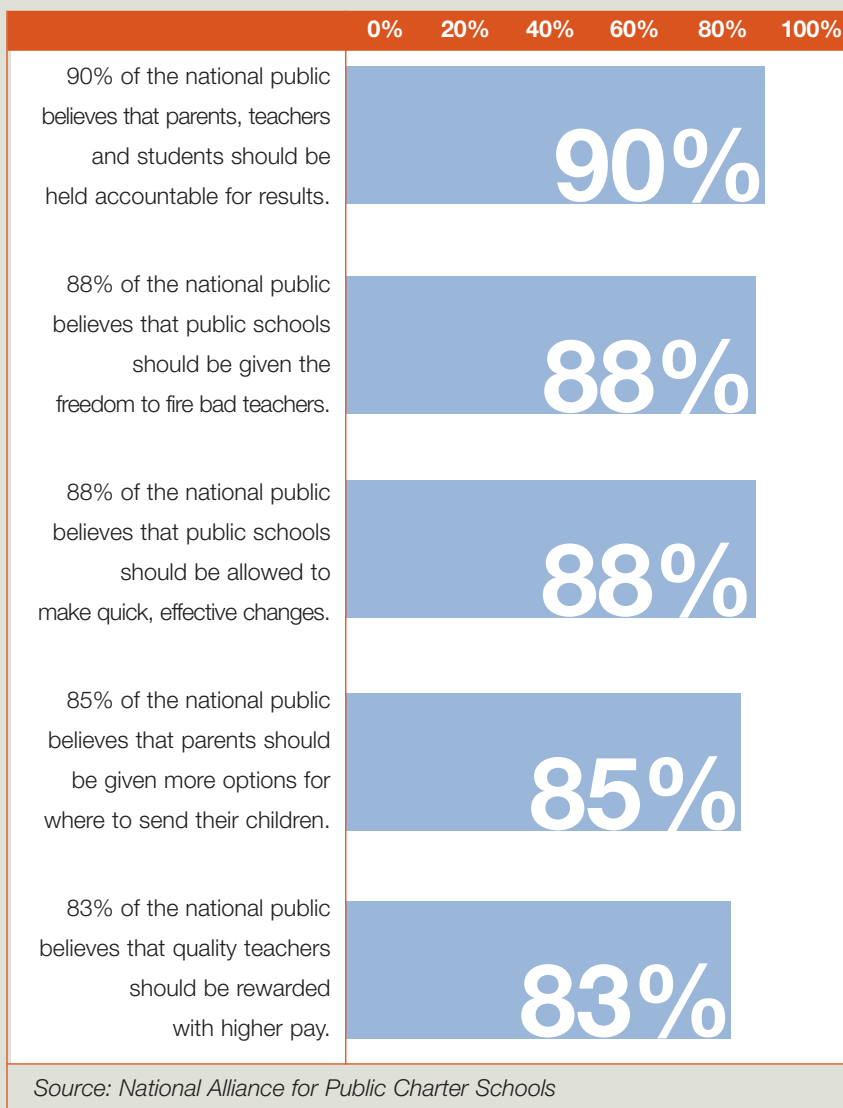
Fact

► By an almost three-to-one margin, Detroit residents believe that charter schools are good for the overall public school system.



that public support for charters is growing while opposition is declining. It's also evident that the more the public knows about charters, the more they like them. And the public overwhelmingly supports the core components of public charter schools. By working to accelerate these positive trends, charter supporters will increase their chances of winning the day on important battles like lifting charter school caps, obtaining equitable financing, and securing badly-needed support for charter school facilities.

THE PUBLIC SUPPORTS KEY CHARTER SCHOOL CONCEPTS



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