

# Issue Brief

## The Renaissance of Urban Education: Charter Schools in America's Cities

By Todd Ziebarth

Senior Policy Analyst

National Alliance for  
Public Charter Schools

**A growing body of data shows that the charter model can and does work at scale.**



National Alliance for Public Charter Schools  
1101 14th Street, NW Suite 801 Washington, DC 20005  
tel: 202.289.2700 fax: 202.289.4009  
[www.publiccharters.org](http://www.publiccharters.org)

Anecdotes abound about individual charter school success stories. There's Noble Street Charter High School in Chicago, where 80 percent of the school's graduates are attending colleges and universities.<sup>1</sup> There's KIPP DC: Key Academy, the highest performing public middle school in the District of Columbia.<sup>2</sup> And, there's Bronx Preparatory Charter School in New York City, which is both exceeding state standards and outperforming its surrounding

district.<sup>3</sup> No doubt, these are stars, achieving terrific success with almost entirely disadvantaged student populations.

But now that over 3,600 charters are serving more than one million students, with over half reporting waiting lists, we need more than a few shining examples. We need to know whether chartering—which provides expanded freedom to public schools in return for a commitment to meet higher standards

of accountability—is working for a broad range of students, especially in cities where the movement is gaining momentum.

Charter opponents once argued that charter schools couldn't work over the long run, or that they would survive by “creaming” the best students.

1 National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

# Charters are succeeding with their target populations. In these cities, charter schools are achieving notable results with low-income students of color.

Faced with years of stellar results from leading charter schools, their argument took a new tack: Some charters were “islands of excellence” within oceans of lackluster schools. While a charter school here and there might succeed, they contend, the charter model won’t work “at scale,” meaning that a system of charters won’t match the results of the success stories.

Yet a growing body of data shows that the charter model can work for way more than a few lucky kids. In each city highlighted in this issue brief—Chicago, D.C., Indianapolis, Buffalo, and New York City—the charter school sector is delivering promising results, and at a scale that exceeds the size of most conventional school districts. Looking across these cities, several things stand out:

- **The aggregate performance of charter sectors in these cities is higher than that of the traditional school sector.**

Whether it’s measured by snapshot school results or year-to-year school growth, charter schools as a whole are outperforming non-charters in these cities.

- **Individual charter schools are among the top performers in each city, and often rival the highest-performing schools in surrounding suburban districts.**

These high performers are setting important examples of what public schools can achieve with disadvantaged students. They’re shattering low expectations and breaking through long-standing barriers that have prevented large numbers of at-risk students from achieving educational success. And the charter model itself is playing a critical role in these schools’ success. Its flexibility and accountability is allowing individuals with nontraditional backgrounds and relentless attitudes to create high-achievement cultures. These charter schools are setting new standards for what’s possible—and about what we should expect from all of our public schools.

- **Charters are succeeding with their target populations.**

In each city, charter schools are achieving notable results with

## Fact

► **These promising charter sectors didn’t happen by accident, but are instead a result of strong political leadership, good charter laws, effective authorizing practices, and helpful local organization activities.**

low-income students of color—precisely those who’ve often been “left behind” in traditional settings.

- **Charters still have work to do.** While these charter communities have shown promise, the goal of educating every child to high standards is far from met. Charter educators can’t be satisfied with being better than struggling school districts. They must continue to aim higher and work harder to move greater numbers of students toward a high-quality education.

This issue brief details encouraging, solidly documented results from five cities. It’s critical to note that these promising charter sectors didn’t happen by accident, but are instead a result of strong political leadership, good charter laws, effective authorizing practices, and helpful local organization activities in each locale. We’ll also look at these ingredients for each charter vanguard.



## Growing Charter Success In Five Cities

**In Chicago, D.C., Indianapolis, Buffalo, and New York City, the charter model is proving that it can and does work at scale—not yet providing educational choices for the entire metropolis, but working boldly enough to create wider change.**

**In a few cases, the cities' charter sectors now exceed the size of most conventional school districts. While Chicago's 15,000 charter students comprise just 4 percent of the city's public-school enrollment, as a separate district they would outstrip 95 percent of American school districts.<sup>4</sup>**

**There's also accumulating evidence that the charter model is working at a larger than citywide scale. A number of state-based studies, for example, suggest that the charter model is succeeding on a statewide basis.<sup>5</sup> But in this issue brief, we'll confine our comments to cities, in part because we can more clearly identify the factors that are contributing to charter success in them.**

### Chicago

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is one of the leading district authorizers of public charter schools in the nation. Through the solid work of its charter schools office, the mayor-controlled CPS currently oversees 22 charter schools operating on 35 campuses across the city. These schools serve about 15,000 students, of whom 91 percent were students of color and 82 percent were low-income in 2004-05.<sup>6</sup>

#### **To date, the city's charter sector has achieved some notable results:**

- In 2003-04, all charters had higher attendance rates than the schools their students would have otherwise attended.<sup>7</sup>
- All 13 elementary charters outperformed the schools their students would have attended in 2003-04, as measured by the Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT).<sup>8</sup>
- In 2004-05, 10 of 13 elementary charters had higher percentages of students meeting or exceeding standards on the ISAT compared to CPS at large.<sup>9</sup>
- Between 2001-02 and 2004-05, seven of nine charter elementary schools improved faster than CPS as a whole on the ISAT.<sup>10</sup>

## The nation's capital is a hotbed of charter school activity.

- All six high school charters outperformed the schools their students would have attended in 2003-04, as measured by the Prairie State Achievement Exam.<sup>11</sup>

- In 2003-04, all six high school charters had higher graduation rates than the schools their students would have attended.<sup>12</sup>

- In 2003-04, charters outperformed comparable neighborhood schools on 79 percent of relative student performance measures (114 of 145), as measured by CPS. These indicators included test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates. For the four years that CPS has calculated this figure, charter schools have outperformed neighborhood schools on 70 to 80 percent of the measures.<sup>13</sup>

### Why such success?

- City and district leaders support charter schools. Mayor Richard Daley and CPS Chief Executive Officer Arne Duncan view chartering as an important trigger for broader school improvement efforts.

- CPS involves the whole community in chartering. Universities, the business community, and non-profit neighborhood groups are rolling up their sleeves, providing start-up support, advocating on the schools' behalf, and running schools themselves.

- CPS is a proactive, selective, and protective authorizer. Instead of waiting for groups to propose new schools, CPS actively seeks out potential operators and clearly describes its vision of a successful school in its requests for proposals. CPS only approves charters with a strong chance of success, denying between 80 and 85 percent of applications. Plus, it is unafraid to close sub-par charters, having shuttered two schools thus far.<sup>14</sup>

Inspired by charter success, city and district leaders adopted the Renaissance 2010 initiative in June 2004. Under this initiative, CPS will close up to 20 low-performing high schools and 40 to 50 low-performing elementary schools and reopen them as 100 or more small schools within six years. One-third of the new schools will be charter schools, one-third will be contract schools, and one-third will be "performance schools" operated directly by the district. To date, six new charters and six new campuses have opened under Renaissance 2010, with six more new charters scheduled to open in September 2006. With only two charter schools left under the state-imposed cap of 30 charters for CPS, the future role of charters in Renaissance 2010 is in jeopardy.



### District of Columbia

The nation's capital is a hotbed of charter school activity. Currently, there are 51 charter schools on 63 campuses in Washington, D.C., serving almost 18,000 students. About 25 percent of public school students are enrolled in public charter schools in D.C., one of the highest percentages in the nation. Ninety-nine percent of charter students in D.C. are students of color and 78 percent are eligible for free and reduced price lunch.<sup>15</sup>

Two entities are allowed to authorize charter schools in D.C. The D.C. Board of Education has authorized 17 schools on 21 campuses, serving about 4,000





students, while the D.C. Public Charter School Board, one of a small number of independent chartering boards in the nation, has authorized 34 schools on 42 campuses, serving about 14,000 students.

Results from the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—otherwise known as “The Nation’s Report Card”—show notable progress for the D.C. charter sector. Charters are outperforming non-charters across the board in reading and math, in 4th and 8th grades, and for all students, African-American students, and low-income students. (See Table 1, p.8)

In addition to these promising snapshot results, charters also improved their performance at a faster rate between 2003 and 2005 in reading and math in 4th grade (trend results weren’t available for 8th grade) for all students, African-American students, and low-income students. (See Table 2, p.8)

While the charter sector is outperforming the non-charter sector in D.C., it still has work to do to attain the national average for charters.

D.C. benefits from one of the nation’s best charter laws, which includes a non-district authorizer, equitable operations funding, significant autonomy, and per-pupil facilities funding.<sup>16</sup> The non-district authorizer—the D.C. Public Charter School Board (PCSB)—has been a particularly critical component of the D.C. charter movement. A recent federal government report highlighted two important aspects of the charter board’s oversight practices: (1) the PCSB targets additional oversight on new charter schools and those where problems had been identified and (2) the PCSB grants more flexibility to well-managed schools.<sup>17</sup> Both authorizers have also closed low-performing charters.

### Indianapolis

Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson is the only mayor in the country with the power to authorize charter schools. There are currently 12 mayor-authorized charters open, with five more scheduled for fall 2006. These charters serve over 2,700 students, 74 percent of whom are students of color and 66 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

From the looks of things, the mayor has made good use of his chartering authority:

- In 2005, students in the mayor-sponsored charter schools outperformed students in non-charters in the Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) almost across the board. In fact, the cumulative results for the nine charters open in 2005 were the same or higher on 12 of 16 English and Math tests in the 3rd through 10th grades.<sup>18</sup>
- In looking at the performance over time of two cohorts of students, mayor-sponsored charters also outperformed IPS non-charters from 2003 to 2005. The group that moved from 3rd to 5th grade gained 30 percentage points in charters, versus one point in non-charters. The cohort that moved from 6th to 8th grade gained 12 percentage points in charters and two points in non-charters.<sup>19</sup>

The mayor’s office has vacuumed up “best practices” from authorizers around the nation, and applied some innovations of its own. Peterson’s model accountability system works with schools to establish expectations, then monitors progress, reports to the public, and makes informed decisions – which have included the closing of a struggling charter.<sup>20</sup> The mayor’s office has created a charter facilities financing program in partnership with the City Bond Bank. The City of Indianapolis guarantees that loans will be repaid, but the actual funding for loans comes from City Bond.

In partnership with the national nonprofit Building Excellent Schools, Mayor Peterson's charter shop is building local leadership capacity by recruiting the best and brightest and training them to run new charter schools. It is also replicating proven national school reform models by actively recruiting successful charter management organizations to start charter schools in Indianapolis.

### Buffalo

Fifteen public charter schools serve more than 5,500 students in Buffalo; that's about 13 percent of public school enrollment in the city. According to a recent *Buffalo News* analysis, charters in Buffalo decisively outperformed the city's traditional public schools on the four key state tests. Not only are their test results superior, but several charter schools also experienced far greater rates of yearly improvement than traditional public schools. Notably, most of the charters have significantly higher proportions of pupils who live in poverty than other Buffalo public schools.<sup>21</sup> (See Table 3, p.8)

While the Buffalo Board of Education has authorized two charters, the State University of New York (SUNY) and the New York State Board of Regents have granted the vast majority of Buffalo charters. SUNY has been a particularly effective authorizer. It has taken its authorizing duties seriously—both in approving and in overseeing charters—and has not been afraid to close charters that haven't lived up to their promises.

Though the school district itself has been a lukewarm authorizer (with its own chartering ambitions thwarted by a hostile union), the city's charters are providing impetus for change. Buffalo's new superintendent, James Williams, has a refreshing attitude about charter competition. Shortly after taking office, he stood before local business and charitable leaders and said: "I'm not afraid of charter schools. I want to learn from them."<sup>22</sup> True to his word, his newly announced reform agenda borrows heavily from the practices of the city's successful charters. Elements of that agenda include staffing processes based on interviews not seniority, mandatory summer school, extensive after-school tutoring, longer school days, and student uniforms.<sup>23</sup>

### New York City

In 2003, with the significant backing of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City's Schools Chancellor Joel Klein announced his intention to support the creation of 50 new charter schools by 2007, serving students across all grades. As of September 2006, there will be 60 charters open in New York City. A vast majority of the students in New York City's public charters are low-income and students of color.<sup>24</sup>

Compared to the traditional public schools that charter students would otherwise have attended, public charter schools are moving ahead smartly. In 2005, charters outperformed non-charters in their surrounding districts in both read-

ing and math and in both the 4th and 8th grades. They also showed higher increases from 2004 to 2005 in three of the four categories. (See table 4, p.8)

In addition to serving as an authorizer (with New York State Board of Regents sign-off), the district is supporting public charter schools in several critical ways. In hopes that charters can serve as models for all public schools, the district is giving each new charter school free access to district facilities, start-up funding of \$200,000 to \$300,000, and additional special education funds. According to Chancellor

## Fact

► In 2005, New York City charters outperformed non-charters in their surrounding districts in reading and math in the 4th and 8th grades.

Klein: "At their core, charter schools embody the three ingredients that are necessary for any successful school—leadership, autonomy, and accountability."<sup>25</sup>

SUNY's chartering practices and district support play important roles, but the city's charters also benefit from an aggressive state charter association, and a rare technical-assistance resource—the privately-funded New York City Center for Charter School Excellence, on whose board the Chancellor sits.

## Policy Recommendations

**In more and more cities, the charter movement is heading toward scale. But numbers alone miss the point. What we want are sectors of high-quality charters, building on the promising returns from the five cities profiled in this paper. To get charter success at scale, we recommend the following:**

### **Expand the supply of high-quality school leaders.**

The one sure commonality among all successful charters? People: the students, parents, teachers, and administrators who day-in and day-out put the work in and get the job done. School leaders are the linchpin, and in the opening years of the charter movement, many heroic leaders stepped into uncharted territory and created outstanding schools. As the movement heads toward scale, we need to be more deliberate in ensuring that talented, able individuals are ready and willing to lead successful charters. Taking a cue from Mayor Peterson in Indianapolis, public officials and the charter community should be intentional about expanding the pipeline, through purposeful efforts to recruit, train, and support a diverse pool of effective school leaders.

### **Cultivate political leaders who can lead the charge toward taking charter success to scale.**

Governors, mayors, and nontraditional superintendents are often the strongest advocates for taking char-



ter success to scale in a particular city. It's really hard for those inside the existing system to sponsor change of this magnitude, and current political leaders are too often financed by those who oppose charters. The charter community must find and support emerging leaders who not only support charters "in principle," but also come through in a clinch. Needed are leaders who will vote to lift a cap – or who will support an authorizer's tough decision to close a popular but low-achieving school.

### **Work with state policymakers to create a policy environment that will support charter success at scale, especially regarding caps, authorizing, funding, and facilities.**

Charter schools are creatures of state legislation. As charter supporters know all too well, the mere existence of a charter school law in a state does not necessarily equate to charter success at scale.

Regrettably, the movement made some bad bargains in order to get early laws enacted – and now it's time to do the hard work of getting needed revisions. That means working with state leaders to create new policies that will contribute to charter success at scale: removing caps, achieving fiscal equity, and promoting high-quality authorizing, including through the creation of non-district authorizers.

### **Persuade non-district authorizers to take charter success to scale in a state's lowest-performing urban districts.**

Non-district authorizers have the advantage of not being beholden to existing school systems, and they ought to press that advantage for the benefit of students. In each of the cities highlighted in this issue brief, the existence of high-quality non-district authorizers (or, in Chicago's case, a nontraditional district authorizer) is a critical ingredient to taking charter success to scale. Charter advocates should work with existing or new non-district authorizers—such as universities, colleges, and independent special-purpose chartering boards—to identify the longest struggling urban districts in a state and develop strategies for taking charter success to scale in them, incorporating many of the promising authorizer practices developed in the five cities profiled in this paper. Among these are unyielding high standards for charter approval and a willingness to close low-performing charter schools.

### **Recruit local organizations in cities to play important roles in the scale efforts.**

As these five cities illustrate, there are critical roles for local organizations to play in taking charter success to scale. Universities and colleges, community and neighborhood organizations, businesses and foundations, and specialized charter support organizations can all make substantial contributions – from helping develop a pipeline of

stellar teachers and innovative principals to providing start-up technical assistance and funding supports.

### Discern which charters are working for which students, and do more of them.

Policymakers are rightly concerned about how charters are generally doing. But they shouldn't stop there. Even where charter sectors are showing strong overall performance, some schools are doing better than others. The beauty of the charter model is that it encourages more of the schools that work and gets rid of those that don't. As policymakers think about taking charter success to scale, they need to be asking much more assertively: What kinds of schools are succeeding with what kinds of kids? While it's important to keep promising start-ups coming (since upstart visionaries give our movement its creative juice), policymakers should pay close attention to what works, and do more of it in the expanding charter sector.

## Conclusion

Collectively, the five cities' experiences discussed in this paper lend credence to the notion that the charter model can work at scale, for large numbers of kids, in constellations of high-performing schools. Such results won't happen by accident, though. It will take deliberate and thoughtful actions by school leaders, local organizations, authorizers, and political leaders. In cities across the country, the time for these actions is now.

**Table 1: District of Columbia**

### Charters vs. Non-Charters on 2005 NAEP

Students	Charters	Non-Charters
4th Grade Reading	192	190
4th Grade Math	216*	210
8th Grade Reading	242*	237
8th Grade Math	250*	244

\*Statistically Significant Difference Between Charters and Non-Charters

**Table 2: District of Columbia**

### Change Student Performance for Charters vs. Non-Charters from 2003 to 2005: Percent Proficient

Students	Charters	Non-Charters
4th Grade Reading	8*	1
4th Grade Math	13*	5*

\*Statistically Significant Change From 2003 to 2005

**Table 3: Buffalo**

### Charters vs. Non-Charters: Percent Proficient

Students	2005		Change from '04 to '05	
	Charter	Non-Charter	Charter	Non-Charter
4th-Grade English	49%	39%	16.7	4.9
4th-Grade Math	76%	67%	17.3	4.0
8th-Grade English	28%	26%	(0.6)	0.2
8th-Grade Math	35%	24%	10.6	(8.7)

**Table 4: New York City**

### Charters vs. Non-Charters: Percent Proficient

Students	2005		Change from '04 to '05	
	Charter	Non-Charter	Charter	Non-Charter
4th-Grade English	62%	56%	15.5	8.2
4th-Grade Math	77%	75%	16.7	12.7
8th-Grade English	50%	30%	6.4	(3.3)
8th-Grade Math	65%	36%	(0.1)	(4.0)

#### ENDNOTES

1 Noble Street Charter High School's web site, [http://www.gold-entigers.org/aboutus/overview\\_results.html](http://www.gold-entigers.org/aboutus/overview_results.html), visited on April 17, 2006.  
2 KIPP DC: Key Academy's web site, <http://www.keyacademy.org/>, visited on April 17, 2006.  
3 Charter Schools Institute, "Report to the Board of Trustees: Findings and Recommendations of the Charter Schools Institute as to the Application for Charter Renewal of the Bronx Preparatory Charter School," Albany, NY: State University of New York, Feb. 8, 2005.  
4 See Lewis C. Solmon and Pete Goldschmidt, "Comparison of Traditional Public Schools and Charter Schools on Retention, School Switching, and Achievement Growth," Phoenix, AZ: Goldwater Institute, March 2004; RAND Corporation, "Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence From California," Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2003; Todd Ziebarth, "Peaks and Valleys: Colorado's Charter School Landscape," Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, Dec. 2005; Gary Miron, "Evaluating the Performance of Charter Schools in Connecticut," Kalamazoo, MI: The Evaluation Center, Feb. 2005; Gary Miron, "Evaluation of the Delaware Charter School Reform: Year 1 Report,"

Kalamazoo, MI: The Evaluation Center, Dec. 2004; Florida Charter School Review Panel, "Recommendations of the Florida Charter School Review Panel," Feb. 2006.  
4 National Center for Education Statistics, "Characteristics of the 100 Largest Public Elementary and Secondary School Districts in the United States: 2001-02," Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, September 2003.  
6 Illinois State Board of Education, "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," Jan. 2006.  
7 Chicago Public Schools, "Charter Schools Performance Report: 2003-2004," 2005.  
8 "Charter Schools Performance Report: 2003-2004," op. cit.  
9 "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," op. cit.  
10 "Illinois Charter School Annual Report," op. cit.  
11 "Charter Schools Performance Report: 2003-2004," op. cit.  
12 "Charter Schools Performance Report: 2003-2004," op. cit.  
13 "Charter Schools Performance Report: 2003-2004," op. cit.  
14 "Charter Schools Performance Report: 2003-2004," op. cit.  
15 Robin J. Lake and Lydia Rainey, "Chasing the Blues Away: Charter Schools Scale Up in Chicago," Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, June 2005.  
16 Friends of Choice in Urban Schools, "The Facts About D.C.'s Charter Schools," Oct. 6, 2005.  
16 Sara Mead, "Capital Campaign: Early Returns on District of Columbia

Charter Schools," Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, Oct. 2005.  
17 Government Accountability Office, "D.C. Charter Schools: Strengthening Monitoring and Process When Schools Close Could Improve Accountability and Ease Student Transitions," Washington D.C.: Government Accountability Office, Nov. 2005.  
18 Mayor's Office of Charter Schools, "Analysis of Changes in ISTEP+ Performance 2003-2005," Unpublished manuscript, April 2006.  
19 "Analysis of Changes in ISTEP+ Performance 2003-2005," op. cit.  
20 Bryan C. Hassel, "Fast Break in Indianapolis: A New Approach to Charter Schooling," Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute, Sep. 2004.  
21 Peter Simon, "Charters Outperform Buffalo City Schools," The Buffalo News, Oct. 30, 2005.  
22 Peter Simon, "Learning from Competition," The Buffalo News, April 3, 2006.  
23 "Learning from Competition," 24 op. cit. 82% were low-income and 96% were students of color in 2002-03.  
24 Robin J. Lake, "Seeds of Change in the Big Apple: Chartering Schools in New York City," Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, Sep. 2004.  
25 "Seeds of Change in the Big Apple: Chartering Schools in New York City," op. cit.