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# Charter School Authorization in California

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LEGISLATIVE ANALYST'S OFFICE

Presented to:  
Senate Education Committee  
Hon. Benjamin Allen, Chair





## **Basic Rules for Charter Schools in California**

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### **State Law Enacted in 1992 Allows Charter Schools to Operate in California**

- State intended to offer parents an alternative to traditional public schools and encourage local leaders to experiment with new educational programs.



### **Charter Schools in California Must Meet Three Basic State Requirements**

- All charter schools must (1) provide nonsectarian instruction, (2) charge no tuition, and (3) admit all interested California students up to school capacity.

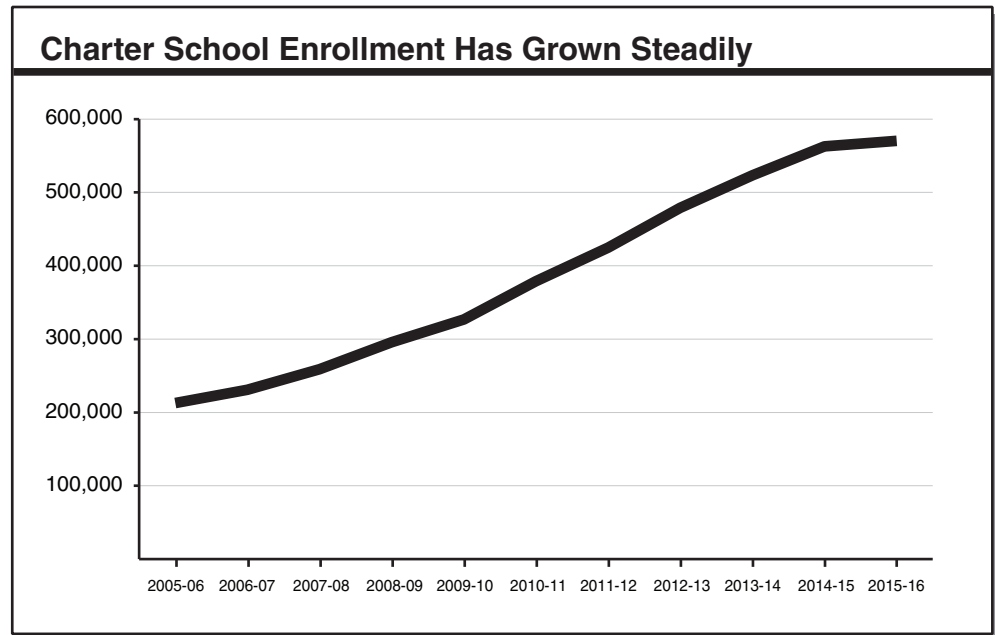


### **Accountability Based on Charter Process**

- To both open and continue operating, a charter school in California must have an approved charter setting forth a comprehensive vision for the school.
- Though charter schools must adhere to the tenets of their charters, they are exempt from most of the state laws and regulations that apply to traditional public schools.



## Characteristics of California Charter Schools



- In 2005-06, 560 charter schools served about 200,000 students (3.4 percent of the state’s K-12 enrollment)
- In 2016-17, 1,232 charter schools served about 580,000 students (9.7 percent of the state’s K-12 enrollment).



### **Most Charter Schools Are Small Yet Located in Urban Areas**

- The median charter school enrolls about 250 students. The median non-charter public school is almost double in size, enrolling about 525 students.
- Together, nine Bay Area counties, Los Angeles County, and San Diego County account for more than 60 percent of all charter schools and charter school enrollment in the state.



## **Types of Charter Schools**

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### **Charter Schools Can Be Conversions of Existing Public Schools or New Startup Schools**

- About 15 percent of charter schools are conversions.
- About 85 percent of charter schools are startups.



### **Charter Schools Offer Two Types of Instruction**

- About 80 percent of charter schools offer traditional, classroom-based instruction.
- About 20 percent of charter schools offer some form of independent study, such as distance learning or home study.

## **Charter Process**

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### **Interested Groups Initiate Charter Schools Using Petition Process**

- Petitions must be signed by a sufficient number of interested teachers or parents.
- Petitions must set forth a comprehensive vision for the school, including: its educational program, student outcome measurements, student discipline policy, employee policies, governance structure, and fiscal plans.



### **Each Petition Must Be Submitted to an Authorizer**

- In most cases, an interested group submits its petition to the school district where the charter school will be located.
- If a group would like to open a charter school serving students from multiple districts within a county, the group submits its petition directly to a county office of education (COE). These “countywide benefit” charter schools must be startups, not conversions.
- If a group would like to open a charter school serving students from multiple counties across the state, the group submits its petition directly to the State Board of Education (SBE).



**Authorizers Determine Whether to Approve Petition**

- An authorizer may deny a petition for one of five reasons: (1) proposed educational program is unsound, (2) petitioners are unlikely to successfully implement their program, (3) insufficient signatures, (4) proposed school violates one of the three basic requirements for all charter schools, or (5) petition does not include a reasonably comprehensive vision for the school.
- A charter school that is rejected by its district may appeal to its COE. If rejected by its COE, the school may appeal to SBE.
- Countywide benefit charter schools initially rejected by their COE may appeal to SBE.
- Initial authorization is for a period up to five years.



## Types of Authorizers

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### **Districts Authorize Large Majority of Charter Schools**

- Districts authorize about 86 percent of active charter schools, whereas COEs authorize about 12 percent and SBE authorizes about 2 percent.



### **Variation Exists in Charter Schools Per Authorizer**

- More than half of all authorizers in California oversee one charter school.
- Together, California's two largest districts (Los Angeles Unified School District and San Diego Unified School District) oversee more than one-quarter of all charter schools in the state.

## Ongoing Oversight of Charter Schools

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### **Authorizers Are Responsible for Ongoing Oversight**

- At a minimum, each authorizer must fulfill five basic responsibilities: (1) identify a contact person at the charter school; (2) visit the charter school at least annually; (3) ensure the charter school completes all required reports, including the Local Control and Accountability Plan; (4) monitor the charter school's finances; and (5) notify the SBE if a charter is renewed, revoked, or the school closes.
- Authorizers typically charge a fee of up to 1 percent of charter school revenue to cover the cost of their oversight activities.



### **Charter Schools Are Subject to Regular Review and Renewal**

- At the end of the initial authorization period, the authorizer must decide whether to renew the charter. The criteria for the renewal process generally is similar to that for approving a new charter.
- State law requires charter schools to demonstrate a minimum level of academic performance before they can have their charters renewed.
- These performance standards have not been updated to reflect changes to the state assessment and accountability system.