

Teaching in Charter Schools



By Michelle Exstrom

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With passage of LD 1553 in Maine in 2011, 41 states and the District of Columbia now have adopted legislation that allows charter school creation and oversight. While authorization, funding and facilities are significant to charter school success, so, too, is staffing; effective teaching is the key to successful student achievement. State legislators who hope to boost student success by providing more school choice through creation of charter schools also will want to consider whether state charter school policies ensure effective teaching in those schools.

The Current State of Teaching in Charter Schools

Demographics. Charter schools tend to attract a different kind of teacher. According to the latest data on teacher characteristics from the National Center for Education Statistics,¹ charter school teachers are more diverse; there are almost twice as many black and Hispanic teachers in these schools. They also are less experienced. Thirty percent were in their first three years of teaching, and 75 percent had taught for less than 10 years.² In traditional public schools, only 15 percent of teachers are in their first three years of teaching, and 43 percent have less than 10 years of experience.³ Some data indicate charter school teachers are more likely to have graduated from a competitive or selective college, as defined by Barron's Profiles of American Colleges.⁴

Licensure. Requirements for licensure or certification are quite different for charter school teachers. Teachers in traditional public schools must be licensed or certified to teach through traditional or alternative programs recognized by the state or district. This varies by state for charter schools, however. According to the National Center for Education Statistics,⁵ only 23 states require that all charter school teachers be licensed through traditional or alternative means. Fourteen states require only a certain percentage of charter teachers in each school to be licensed, varying between 30 percent and 90 percent. Four states and the District of Columbia have no requirement for licensure or leave this determination to the approving entity for each charter school.

Charter Schools in the States

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately managed and semi-autonomous schools of choice. They do not charge tuition. They must hold to the same academic accountability measures as traditional schools. They receive public funding similarly to traditional schools. However, they have more freedom over their budgets, staffing, curricula and other operations. In exchange for this freedom, they must deliver academic results and there must be enough community demand for them to remain open.

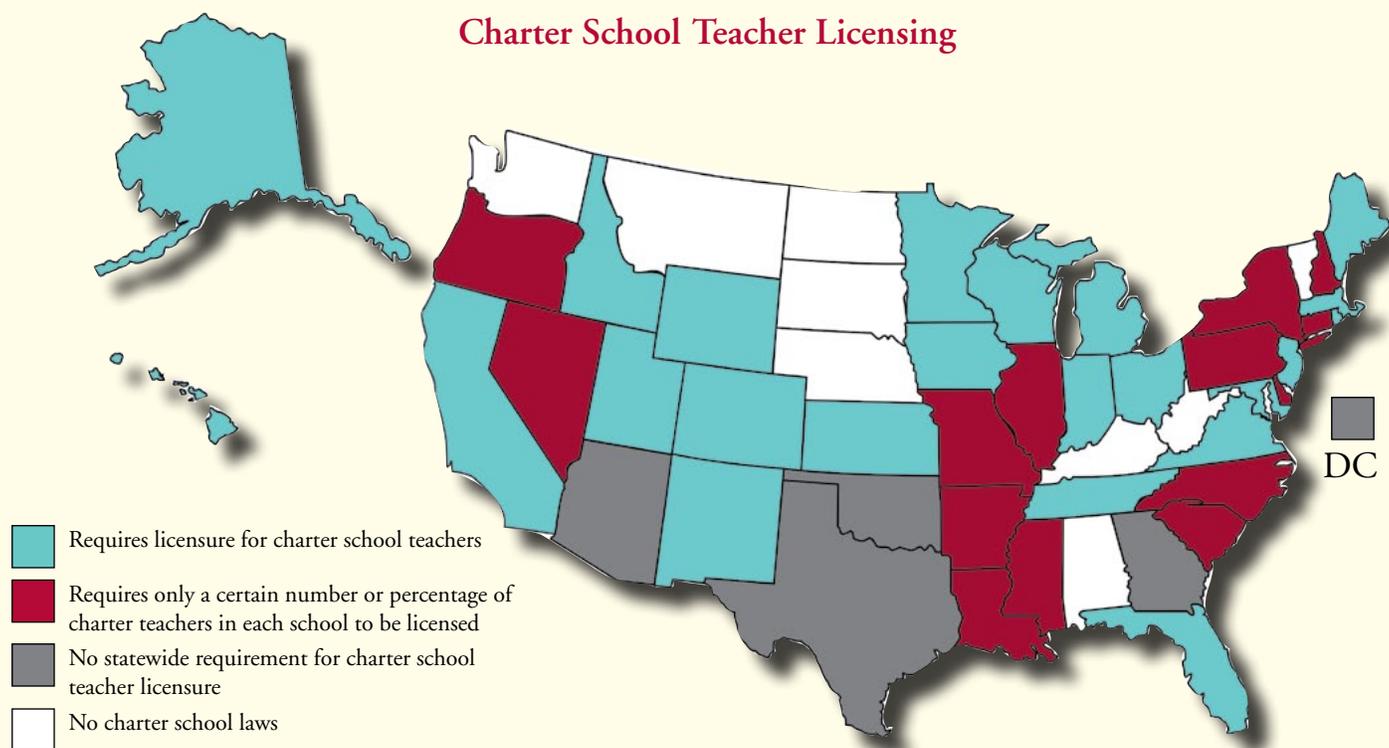
The number of charter schools has continued to grow since the first charter law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Some have delivered great academic results, but others have closed because they did not deliver on promised results.

Because state laws enable and govern charter schools, state legislatures are important to ensuring their quality.

This series provides information about charter schools and state policy topics, including finance, authorization, limits to expansion, teaching, facilities and student achievement.



Charter School Teacher Licensing



Source: National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012.

Turnover. Charter schools are more challenged by turnover than traditional public schools. High teacher attrition is detrimental in any school setting. It can result in instability within a school and high costs to the district and state. Recent research by the National Center on School Choice found that the rate at which teachers leave the profession and move between schools is significantly higher in charter schools than in traditional public schools, likely due to the differences in teacher characteristics.⁶ The National Center points out that charter schools tend to hire teachers who are at greater risk of leaving the profession and switching schools because they are younger, less likely to have an education degree or state licensure, and more often work part-time. Dissatisfaction with working conditions also contributed to turnover, since the unique environment often may not meet teacher expectations. Involuntary attrition is significantly higher in charter schools due to the lack of barriers to teacher dismissal and to a school's possible instability. The National Center also found that new charter school

start-ups experience significantly more teacher attrition and mobility than those that are converted from traditional public schools. Charter school teachers also may be more vulnerable to leadership changes. According to the National Charter School Research Project, a school's identity often is tied to its founder or leader. If the leader leaves, this may create uncertainty and uneasiness among school staff.⁷

Compensation. Teacher compensation does not vary widely between charter and public schools, and charter schools often do not base compensation on performance. Because charter schools were designed to allow for more innovation, many education experts had hoped that such schools would develop more creative approaches to teacher compensation. Some assert that, if fewer laws, regulations and union contracts bound charter school management, schools could more easily create systems where teachers are rewarded for their skills and demonstrated effectiveness. According to a 2006 analysis of the Schools and Staffing

Survey, charter schools are significantly more likely to pay higher salaries for a particular skill or qualification, including teaching in hard-to-staff schools and subjects and holding National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification.⁸ Two-thirds still report teacher pay is similar to that of traditional public schools, where salaries are based on a system that rewards only for years of service and level of education. The National Charter School Research Project argues that charter schools can and should develop a more creative approach to compensation.⁹

Collective Bargaining. Collective bargaining rights differ for charter school teachers. Such rights for teachers can be a determining factor in support for or opposition to charter schools. These schools often are not unionized, and teachers do not collectively bargain for their salary and benefits. On one hand, this frees charter school management to make decisions about compensation and staffing that benefit the individual school and unique students. This can, however, leave charter school teachers vulnerable to unfair employment practices and without a collective teaching voice. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 20 states and the District of Columbia exempt charter schools from collective bargaining agreements, and only Iowa holds all charter schools to all existing school district collective bargaining agreements. The remaining 20 states with charter schools fall somewhere between the two extremes.¹⁰

Hawaii, for example, holds charters to existing agreements, but allows modification if the exclusive union representatives and the local charter school board enter into supplemental agreements that contain cost and non-cost items to facilitate decentralized decision making. Some states hold new charter schools that are sponsored by the school district or converted from existing schools to the district's collective

bargaining agreements and exempt new start-ups or those sponsored by another management organization. Other states—including Alaska, Connecticut and Maryland—hold charter schools to existing agreements, but allow additional school-specific negotiation.

The ability of teachers in a particular school to organize and collectively bargain also may depend on whether the teachers technically are employees of the school or of the charter management organization. In a 2005 decision regarding labor relations in California charter schools, for example, a regional director of the Public Employment Relations Board ruled that the appropriate unit of teachers, for purposes of an election to organize under the Educational Employment Relations Act, includes all the teachers employed by the charter management organization across all its school sites.

State Policies that Support Effective Charter School Teaching

Preparation, Recruitment and Professional Development. Charter schools are, by definition, unique and may look very different from traditional public schools. They may use different curriculum, incorporate the latest digital technology, and even structure their staffing and daily schedules to meet their unique needs. Teachers who come from traditional preparation programs often are not prepared to teach in this environment and often do not envision this career path. A 2010 study by the National Center on School Choice found that few teacher applicants equally considered teaching in a charter school and a traditional public school. In fact, most completely avoided applying to charter schools or did so only as a last resort because they were unfamiliar with or unclear or confused about charter school structure and atmosphere.¹¹ One pol-

icy approach is to create an on-site, recruiting, training and professional development program so charter schools can educate and support teachers to meet their unique needs. This allows schools to develop aspiring teachers for a range of career options, including teaching, leadership and administrative positions.

The National Resource Center on Charter School Finance and Governance recently profiled the Teacher Intern Program and the Graduate School of Education of High Tech High, a charter school management organization in San Diego, Calif. This promising program allows teachers to earn their credentials while they also earn a salary and are trained in High Tech High's core design principles and educational vision. This program is proving successful. In its first graduating class in 2007, 60 percent of graduates were credentialed in math and science, which typically see severe shortages of qualified teachers. For the 2007-2008 school year, more than 2,000 applicants applied for only 51 positions, and its teacher workforce is more diverse than that of surrounding schools.¹²

Collective Bargaining and Compensation.

Some states allow charter school teachers to unionize so they can bargain for salary, benefits and working conditions; however, they are not held to the same agreement as all schools within the district. This approach allows both teachers and management to arrive at agreements that honor and recognize the individuality and unique attributes of the school, yet still provide teachers with a collective voice and representation.

A successful model is Green Dot Public Schools in Los Angeles, Calif. Green Dot is one of a few nondistrict public school operators in the United States that has allowed

teachers to unionize, and is the only one in California to do so. Green Dot boasts lower than average turnover rates, and teachers report high levels of job satisfaction and good working conditions. All Green Dot teachers pay union dues to the California Teachers Association and the National Education Association. The collective bargaining agreement contains only a few centralized policies—salary, health care, class size and number of work days. The following are key aspects of the contract.

- Teachers are given explicit decision-making authority in setting school policy, including the school's budget, calendar and curriculum.
- There is no tenure, seniority preference or probationary period for new teachers, and all teachers work under the protection of "just cause discipline and dismissal."
- Teachers work "a professional work day" rather than defined minutes.
- Flexibility is afforded to adjust the contract in critical areas over time; the contract is renegotiated every three years by Green Dot management and the local union and ratified annually by the teachers' union.¹³

States also can remove barriers, including collective bargaining requirements tied to the district, so charter schools can better design compensation structures to recruit and retain the teachers that fit their school vision. The schools can more creatively provide incentives and reward teachers who meet the school's student achievement goals and their individual improvement plans, instead of being tied to a model that links compensation to years of service and educational attainment.

Policy Questions to Consider

- Do traditional and alternative preparation programs and professional development providers in your state prepare and support teachers to teach in alternative settings, including charter schools?
- Do charter school teachers in your state report in surveys or research that they feel adequately prepared for and supported in their positions?
- Does your state require licensure or certification for charter school teachers? If not, how do you ensure that charter school teachers are adequately prepared and monitored for performance and discipline?
- Does your state require charter schools to abide by existing collective bargaining agreements? Does your state allow charter schools to individually bargain collectively with its teachers?
- Do your state policies allow charter schools to create alternative compensation and benefit models to use compensation as a tool to recruit, retain and reward effective teaching?
- Do your state policies allow charter school teachers to acquire tenure or a long-term employment agreement? In your state, has this helped or hindered a charter school's ability to make hiring decisions that are in the best interests of students?

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Notes

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William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place
Denver, Colorado 80230
(303) 364-7700

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., #515
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 624-5400

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