



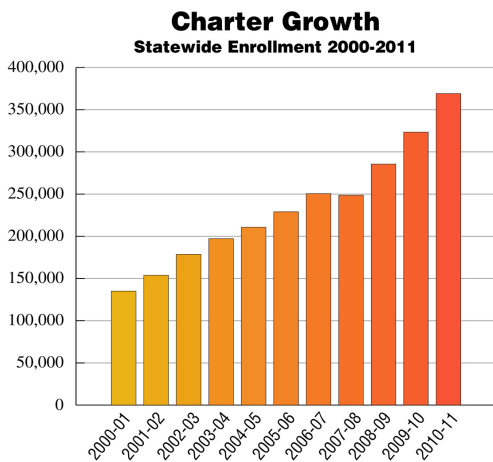
THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of July 11-15, 2011

Information Left Out of the Charter School Debates

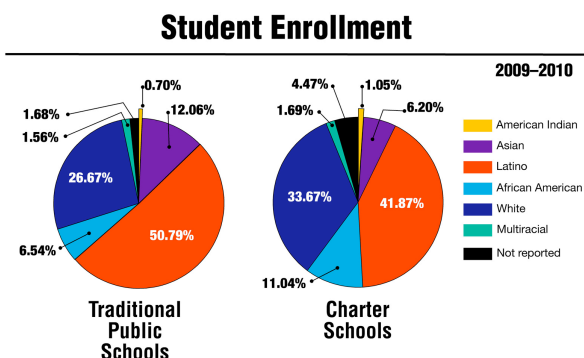
By UCLA IDEA



Charter schools are growing in number, and a decision this week by the California Board of Education may increase the pace. The board approved regulations for the “Parent Trigger law,” which would ease conversion of traditional schools to charters at certain low-performing campuses. A dozen other states are considering similar laws that allow a majority of parents to restructure or close existing schools. Many of these initiatives are supported by local groups that receive significant funding directly or indirectly from The Heartland Institute, a conservative group working for “free market solutions.”

A lot of hope for equitable reform is being placed in the charter movement, generally—without clear evidence that the charters will improve conditions for the poorest and most underserved students. Meanwhile, proven school reforms are disastrously neglected; the years pass by without meeting most schools’ needs for fully qualified teachers, reasonable class sizes, adequate instructional time and other basics.

A common observation of charters is that some select those special education, English learner or poor students whose education is less costly or difficult than similarly labeled students in non-charters. Conversely, the non-charter, traditional schools typically serve more challenging students although this distinction isn’t made clear in many school reports. For example, the public data might not distinguish between a special education student who is disruptive to classmates and one who adjusts easily to school routines.



Clear and timely data on student characteristics and demographics are important for assessing the adequacy and fairness of charter school resources. For example, a child whose four-person family earns \$40,000 qualifies for free and reduced-price lunch—but so does a child whose family earns less than the federal poverty level of \$22,350. Data highlighting the proportion of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch might show that charter schools serve similar students to traditional public schools even as the schools enroll students

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who vary widely in the learning supports and services they require.

It's urgent that we understand whether and how the increase in the number of charter schools (currently, charters enroll about 370,000 California students) affects education in all public schools. The success of a few charters offers little comfort if accompanied by broad school *system* decline and inequality.

Until data and accountability systems improve, the public will not be able to tell whether claims of charter superiority are achieved by better teaching, superior organizational design, better funding, free-market competition, selective enrollments, or if the claims are simply unfounded. Likewise, the

public will gain little benefit from valuable lessons to be learned from charter school successes as well as failed charter experiments. A bill authored by Assemblywoman Julia Brownley (D-Santa Monica) aims to make charters more accessible by increasing demographic requirements that would more closely mirror the communities they serve. The Brownley bill is one step in the right direction.

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