

Pennsylvania Public Charter Schools: Myth Versus Fiction

When it comes to Pennsylvania charter schools, there are some common misconceptions that leave people mistaking fiction for fact.

Let's look at the myths circulating and the facts to help debunk some of these deceiving myths and set the record straight about Pennsylvania's public charter schools.

Myth# 1: Charter Schools get more special education funding than they use to provide special education services.

Fact: Recent information communicated in recent weeks has distributed vast amounts of information that mislead the public and our legislators about how special education dollars are spent in charter schools. The key to understanding their deceptive figures is based on their telling only a small part of the funding story. The tuition money given to a charter school for a child that qualified for special education also includes the normal (regular education) rate of tuition for general education services as well as auxiliary services specifically indicated in the student's IEP. This "voodoo math" or false representation of how special education is funded has created much confusion for years.

Myth #2: Charter schools are not public schools.

Fact: Charter schools are public schools.

Much like traditional public schools, public charter schools are tuition free for families and publicly funded. Also like traditional public schools, public charter schools are non-sectarian and have nondiscriminatory enrollment. Both types of schools are accountable to state and federal regulations and are governed by a Board of Directors comprised of public officials.

Myth #3: Charter schools take funding away from traditional public schools.

Fact: Charter schools do not take funding away from traditional public schools.

Contrary to popular belief, charter schools don't take money. The money follows the student from their home school district to a public charter school when a parent makes a choice for their child's public school education to take place in a charter school.

Myth #4: Charter schools 'cherry-pick' the best students from traditional public schools.

Fact: Charter schools serve all students.

There are no selective enrollment requirements when it comes to charter schools. Charter schools must randomly select students utilizing a lottery system to select students for enrollment. Once students are selected the Charter schools must accept all students, including English learners and students with special needs. Charter schools holding lotteries to enroll students, utilize numbered waiting lists if there are not enough student seats to meet demand.

Myth #5: Charter schools do not answer to the public since their boards are not elected.

Fact: Charter schools are directly accountable to the authorizing school board or the Pennsylvania Department of Education who have the authority to renew or not renew a school's charter.

Once appointed, a charter school board member, just like a traditional public school board member, is a public official who must comply with the PA Ethics Act and file an annual statement of Financial Interest Form. Also, the board must comply with the PA Sunshine Law regarding open meetings.

Myth #6: Charter schools are not accountable.

Fact: Charter schools are the most accountable public school systems in Pennsylvania with the threat of closure as the ultimate accountability.

Both public and charter schools must have certified teachers, have students participate state exams, provide periodic reviews, annual financial audits, Annual Fiscal Audits and quarterly reporting (Federal, IDEA pass-through Funds and other Funded Grants received), annual fiscal reporting to the PDE (PDE-2028 and PDE-2057) and annual state compliance PIMS reporting, Annual monthly financial reporting and bond covenant verification to bond trustee for facilities debt service.

However, if charter schools do not perform well and are not fiscally responsible, their charter can be revoked by their authorizing school district or parents can choose to leave the charter school for another education opportunity.

Myth #7: Charter schools are large for-profit companies.

Fact: Pennsylvania requires all brick and mortar and cyber charter schools to be organized as public, non-profit corporations.

Myth #8: Charter schools get more money than other public schools.

Fact: Charter schools receive less funding than traditional public schools.

In the 2016-2017 school year, charter schools across Pennsylvania received approximately 77 percent of the funding that traditional public schools received. This means that charter schools operate with less public funding than traditional public schools.

Myth #9: Charter schools do not enroll special education students.

Fact: Charter schools enroll a similar ratio of special education students as public schools.

In the 2016-2017 school year, 17.61 percent of charter school enrollment was special education students, while traditional public schools had enrollment of 16.37 percent special education students.

Myth #10: Charter schools do not have highly qualified and certified teachers

Fact: Charter schools are required to have fully certified teachers.

Myth #11: Charter schools are exempt from state mandated testing.

Fact: Charter schools Students are required to take state mandated tests.

Myth #12: Charter schools underperform or do not do as well as students in the traditional school districts.

Fact: Most charter schools do an excellent job providing high quality, innovative education.

However there are a few charter schools that underperform, just like their traditional school district counterparts. Both instances should be addressed equally.

Avon Grove Charter School has an excellent track record for continually meeting the state academic standards