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## Utah Charter School Study

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Recently, the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) at the University of Utah completed a study of charter schools in Utah for the Utah State Legislature. In this study, we collected data from surveys of charter and district administrators and charter and district board as well as parents, and interviews with a broad spectrum of charter school, district, and state administrators and board members from across Utah. We gathered information about charter school purpose, authorization, governance, laws and regulations, training and technical assistance, as well as the reasons parents enroll or withdraw their children from charter schools. This article addresses the primary conclusions of the report, including policy considerations relevant to Utah's charter school program. This article is excerpted from the full study report, which is available at <http://elp.ed.utah.edu/policy/index.htm>.

First, this study demonstrated that many parents of students who currently attend charter schools chose to leave traditional public schools because they were dissatisfied with their local schools and/or districts. As one parent noted, charter schools are "an affordable alternative to the failing public school system." The areas of greatest concern and dissatisfaction for parents were lack of individualized attention, lack of success or progress for their child, class sizes, safety concerns generally, lack of accountability for student learning, and interactions with district or school officials who were reportedly unwilling to work with parents to find solutions. While many participants questioned whether charter schools were as "unique" and "innovative" as they considered themselves, evidence from this study suggests that we should consider what it takes to be innovative or unique. For example, much of what can be gleaned from this study illustrates that frequently parents, charter administrators, and boards believe that the unique and innovative feature of charter schools is the ability of parents to exercise their right to choose the school their child should attend. In light of the dissatisfaction among parents with traditional public schools and the fact that many current charter schools have what would be considered a traditional (sometimes referred to as a "back-to-basics") approach, perhaps greater understanding of these issues and communication with parents/guardians would be beneficial to serving students and improving all public schools.

Second, an interest in and desire for charter schools exists, but growth of charter schools should be contingent upon the resources and infrastructure to support reasonable and "responsible growth." In fact, with regard to whether charter schools should be expanded, the participants in this study suggested that further attention needs to be given to issues of expanding charters based on the ability of the state to support that expansion with fiscal resources, additional training, and additional technical assistance. Moreover, responsible growth would not lead to the destruction of traditional public schools.

Next, another significant issue addressed by participants was a concern over conflicts of interest, particularly with regard to the involvement of legislators in the expansion, authorization, and operation of charter schools. The legitimacy of efforts to have "responsible growth" of charters would be improved vastly if the conflicts of interest, such as those identified by participants, were eliminated.

Fourth, participants of this study emphasized the need for a clear, transparent authorization process, which is consistent with the two preceding conclusions. Participants specified important

criteria that should be used to authorize schools, such as a sound business plan, a sound educational program, and requirements for qualified personnel. They also suggested the need for an expanded timeline for authorizing charter schools so that sufficient time is available for the school to open, prepared and organized around its mission. This suggested feature of the authorization process would allow schools ample time to plan and prepare for opening charters and would give the host district enough time to plan for changes in staffing or facility utilization due to charter school openings. This conclusion is consistent with the desire of participants to avoid negatively affecting the available resources and services in traditional public schools.

Fifth, the majority of participants in this study indicated that charter schools should be accountable to the public to operate high quality schools, accountable for high student performance levels, as are traditional public schools, and accountable for the purposes they identify in their charter and for the purposes that are specified in state law. For instance, while a few participants noted that bureaucracies and micro-managing should be avoided, many parents, administrators, and board members noted the need for additional oversight and increased accountability. The types of accountability participants believed warranted additional attention included financial, student performance, qualified teachers, and serving the mission of the charter. For instance, a parent/guardian explained, "The idea of a charter school is great - especially those that are unique but they need to be managed by the right people and hire better teachers."

Sixth, insufficient resources and the costs of duplicated services resulted in concerns about the ability of the state to support and operate two systems (i.e., charter schools and traditional public schools). In response to this concern, many participants recommended the elimination of the "dual system" between charters and traditional public schools. If this were heeded, perhaps alternatives to the current system could be sought. For example, eliminating the current dual system between charters and districts may (1) open additional choice opportunities for parents/guardians within the district, thus potentially expanding the programmatic alternatives for students in both the charter as well as traditional school environment, (2) increase the availability of resources to charters who can then utilize the district (and state) infrastructure, and (3) improve autonomy of charters while increasing accountability. Moreover, eliminating the dual system creates less of a zero-sum environment.

Seventh, participants identified the need for extensive professional development and technical assistance both prior to opening charter schools and on an ongoing basis. While some aspects of operating charter schools are distinct from the traditional public schools, most are the same and could be addressed within the existing structure of support and technical assistance for the traditional public schools. This suggestion emerged within discussions of eliminating the dual system of schooling and having charters, as schools, operate within their host districts.

Finally, the findings from this study illustrated a number of disagreements regarding the implications of reported competition between charter schools and traditional public schools. For instance, there is a perception among many charter board members, charter administrators, and parents of students in charter schools that charter schools infuse competition into the educational arena and raise the expectations for all schools. Advocates for charter schools believe this type of market competition results in increased quality among all schools. Yet, other participants throughout the study raised significant caution in declaring the competition created by charter schools successful or beneficial. For instance, many believed that charter schools, as they currently exist, lead to segregation, are not needed, drain resources from the operation of public schools generally, and have not demonstrated that they provide an education for students that is either different or better.

Given the previous point as well as the combined findings of the charter schools study, clearly further research is needed on charter schools in the state. For example, whether charters actually do serve as a means to improve traditional public schools and whether they are actually

making a difference in the operation of traditional public schools was not addressed in this study. Consequently, the degree to which charter schools are operating in competition to the traditional public schools and the ways in which that competition affects traditional schools is unknown. Next, to date, an evaluation of the quality of charter schools in the state has not been conducted. As a result, there remain a number of questions regarding (1) the ways in which charter schools operate, including how they adhere to their stated purpose and those specified by state law; (2) the degree to which they provide unique or innovative experiences that public schools do not offer; (3) the success of charter schools in individualizing the curriculum and improving student performance; and (4) how parents become more engaged in charter schools and decision making at charter schools. Moreover, empirical research has not explored how student performance in charter schools or other organizational factors compare to that of the traditional school. Additional research and evaluation studies of charter schools would provide valuable information about the operation and outcomes of charter schools and ways to improve the charter school program in the state.

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