

LAUSD Charter Schools: Frequently Asked Questions

What are charter schools?

A charter school is a public school¹ established upon the basis of a charter. The charter is an extensive, performance contract with an authorizer (i.e., the Board of Education). A school's charter includes descriptions of plans for its educational program, measureable student outcomes, assessment procedures, governance, personnel policies, admissions policies, health and safety procedures, and many other elements. The typical term of a charter is five years. A school can earn an unlimited number of five-year renewals to its charter.

Why did the California Legislature establish charter schools?

The California Legislature enacted the Charter Schools Act of 1992 to authorize the establishment of charter schools. Section 47601 of the Education Code states the seven purposes of the Charter Schools Act.

It is the intent of the Legislature, in enacting this part, to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, pupils, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently from the existing school district structure, as a method to accomplish all of the following:

- (a) Improve pupil learning.
- (b) Increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving.
- (c) Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods.
- (d) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.
- (e) Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.
- (f) Hold the schools established under this part accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes, and provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.
- (g) Provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.

How are charter schools different from traditional District schools?

Although each charter school has a character all its own, the major differences between charter schools and traditional District schools may be summarized in terms of autonomy, accountability, and choice.

- **Autonomy:** Charter schools are exempt from many of the laws and regulations that apply to other public schools. Although charter school students participate in the STAR program and pursue the California Content Standards, school leaders have broad choice in terms of curriculum, textbooks, pacing, class schedules, and instructional methods. Charter schools also have great control over financial and personnel decisions. These areas of autonomy are intended to reduce "red tape" and allow schools to focus on performance rather than compliance.
- **Accountability:** In exchange for increased autonomy, charters accept high levels of accountability. In addition to being accountable for specific laws and regulations, a charter school is accountable for fulfilling the commitments in its charter. Thus, a charter school is accountable for its performance in student achievement, fiscal management, and school operations, as well as providing a safe and

¹ A charter school is a public school that has been given freedom from state education regulation. In exchange, the school must be accountable for student achievement and fiscal solvency. A license to operate, a "charter school," is granted by the Local School District, County Office of Education, or State Department of Education.

appropriate educational environment. If a charter school consistently fails to meet performance standards, it can be closed.

- Choice: Charter schools provide a means for school choice within the public school system. State law prohibits school boards from requiring any student to attend a charter school or any employee to work at a charter school. Thus, families can choose a school to meet their educational needs and teachers have choice in where and how they practice their profession.

How are charter schools different from private schools?

Charter schools are public schools, receiving primary funding from the state and supplementary funding from the federal government. As with other public schools, charter schools shall not charge tuition and must be non-sectarian in all policies, programs, and practices. The Education Code prohibits the conversion of a private school to a charter school.

Which students can enroll in a charter school?

The Education Code states that a charter school must admit all students who wish to attend the school. It shall not discriminate against any student on the basis of ethnicity, national origin, gender, or disability. If the school has more new applications than it can accommodate, it must hold a public random drawing (i.e., a lottery). In the case of an over-subscribed school, LAUSD students receive preference in enrollment. A charter school shall not select students based on aptitude or socio-economic status.

What are the different types of charter schools in LAUSD?

Charter schools may be either “independent” or “affiliated” and either “start-up” or “conversion.” An *independent* charter school operates independently of LAUSD in almost all respects, including finances. An *affiliated* charter school functions under the auspices of the LAUSD Board of Education. LAUSD typically administers all funding programs for affiliated schools. A *start-up* charter school begins its existence with the Board’s approval of its charter petition. A *conversion* charter school existed as a traditional LAUSD school before converting to charter status. Thus, there are four types of charter schools: (1) independent start-up, (2) independent conversion, (3) affiliated start-up, and (4) affiliated conversion.

How many charter schools are there in LAUSD?

As of the 2011-12 school year, LAUSD authorized 198 charter schools. Among these schools were 166 independent start-up schools, 13 independent conversion schools, 1 affiliated start-up school, and 18 affiliated conversion schools.

What is LAUSD's role in working with charter schools?

In its role as charter authorizer, the Board of Education delegates three broad responsibilities to LAUSD staff:

- Review of petitions for the establishment of new charter schools;
- Oversight of charter schools under its authority; and
- Review of renewals and material revisions of charters.
- Sharing of effective practices

How does the District approve, revoke, and renew charters?

Each of these procedures is based on the Education Code and implemented by the LAUSD Innovation and Charter Schools Division (IICSD).

- For an initial charter approval, the petitioners submit their charter along with signatures of teachers and/or parents who are “meaningfully interested” in the charter school. The Board shall not deny the

petition unless factual findings support one or more of the following conclusions: (1) the charter school presents an unsound educational program, (2) the petitioners are demonstrably unlikely to successfully implement their program, (3) the petition does not contain an adequate number of teacher/parent signatures, (4) the petition does not contain affirmations of specific requirements of charter school law, and (5) the petition does not contain reasonably comprehensive descriptions of the 16 elements mandated by the Education Code.

- The Board, as charter authorizer, may revoke a charter when there is substantial evidence that the school (1) committed a material violation of any of the conditions, standards, or procedures set forth in the charter; (2) failed to meet or pursue any of the pupil outcomes identified in the charter; (3) failed to meet generally accepted accounting principles, or engaged in fiscal mismanagement; or (4) violated any provision of law.
- For a five-year charter renewal, a school submits a petition similar to that for initial charter approval. The renewal petition must meet the same requirements as a new petition and the school must meet state-mandated minimum criteria for academic achievement. LAUSD also evaluates the school's performance in student achievement and educational performance, governance and organizational management, fiscal operations, and fulfilling the charter.

The final decision on any approval, revocation, or renewal is within the discretion of the Board of Education. Petitioners or a school may appeal an unfavorable decision to the Los Angeles County Board of Education. An unfavorable decision by the Los Angeles County Board of Education may be appealed to the State Board of Education.

How does LAUSD conduct oversight of charter schools?

Oversight is also based on the Education Code and implemented by the IICSD. As part of oversight, the Education Code requires that a charter authorizer (1) identify a staff member to serve as contact person for the school, (2) visit the charter school annually, (3) ensure that the charter school complies with all reporting required by law, and (4) monitor the fiscal condition of the charter school. The IICSD employs a team of LAUSD educators and fiscal specialists to monitor charter schools' progress and attainment of measureable pupil outcomes, as well as compliance with all applicable laws and regulations, court orders, the terms of the charter, and financial reporting requirements.

What policies and procedures does LAUSD have for charter schools?

Currently, LAUSD operates under the *Policy for Charter Schools*, which the Board approved in June 2002. Also available on the ICSD website are procedures and forms presented in the "New Petition Packet," "Renewal Packet," and documents "For Charter Operators."

At the direction of Board members and the Superintendent, the ICSD has engaged external and internal stakeholders in a policy-revision process since late 2008. Upon Board adoption of the revised policy, the ICSD will develop an extensive set of administrative-procedure documents on new petitions, ongoing oversight, and charter renewal.

Does the Modified Consent Decree apply to charter schools?

Yes. Paragraph 95 of the Modified Consent Decree explicitly states that the Modified Consent Decree applies to all charter schools approved by LAUSD.

Who operates charter schools in LAUSD?

This varies by the type of charter school. LAUSD operates the affiliated charter schools. Each independent charter school has its own governing board. Governing board members typically may include administrators, teachers, parents, community volunteers, accountants, and attorneys. Many charter schools operate independently of any other incorporated entity; others are affiliated with local nonprofit agencies.

Nonprofit Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) constitute a growing segment among independent charter schools. CMOs operating multiple schools in LAUSD are the Accelerated School Family, Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, Celerity Educational Group, Crescendo Schools, Green Dot Public Schools, ICEF Public Schools, KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Magnolia Science Academy, and Partnership to Uplift Communities.