

Privately Operated Charter Schools in America: History and Analysis

By [Dr. Shawgi Tell](#)

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Privately-operated non-profit and for-profit charter schools have been around for 30 years[1] and are legal in 45 states, Washington DC, Puerto Rico, and Guam. To date, five states have been able to fend off these segregated outsourced schools that siphon billions of public dollars a year from under-funded public schools.

About 3.3 million students are currently enrolled in approximately 7,400 charter schools across the country, which make up less than eight percent of all schools in the country.[2] At 1,300, California is the state with the most privately-operated charter schools.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, 3,100 charter schools run by unelected individuals closed between 2000-01 through 2017-18 (see [this](#)). That is a very high number of closures, especially in an 18-year time span. On average, that is about 172 privately-operated charter school closures per year.

It is not clear why, but the data chart from the federal government does not include the number of privately-operated charter schools that closed between 2018-19 through 2020-21. It also excludes the number of privately-operated charter schools that closed between 1991-92 through 1995-96, as well as the number of privately-operated charter schools that closed between 2001-02 through 2003-04.

The U.S. Department of Education provides data for only 18 of the 30 years that privately-operated charter schools have existed. About 11 years of data is left out. The three main reasons why privately-operated charter schools close are: financial malfeasance, mismanagement, and poor academic performance. Corruption, fraud, racketeering, and embezzlement are rampant in the charter school sector from coast to coast. News of arrests of charter school employees appears in the news nearly every week.

Assuming, conservatively speaking, that about 172 charter schools close every year on average, when 172 is multiplied by the 11 years outside the 2000-01 through 2017-18 time frame provided by the U.S. Department of Education, we get an additional 1,892 charter schools closed. This brings the grand total of closed charter schools to about 4,992 charter

schools over a 30-year period. This is a reasonable estimate. No matter how you slice it, though, that is a lot of failed and closed charter schools—and in a short period of time. Does this sound like success? Should such a phenomenon continue to be endorsed, expanded, and celebrated? Great instability has haunted the segregated and deregulated charter school sector for three decades and upended the lives of thousands of poor and low-income black and brown families. If the last 30 years is any guide, hundreds more charter schools will fail and close in the coming years, leaving even more families out in the cold and more public schools without much-needed public dollars.

Supplementary Note

It is helpful to recall that, besides widespread corruption, nepotism, and failure in the deregulated charter school sector, privately-operated charter schools, on average, have fewer nurses and more inexperienced teachers than public schools, and they usually pay both less than their public school counterparts. Several states do not even require charter school teachers to be certified and many charter school teachers have no employer-provided retirement plan. Moreover, non-profit and for-profit charter schools frequently engage in discriminatory enrollment practices and typically oppose any efforts by teachers to unionize. Charter schools also tend to offer fewer programs, resources, and services than public schools. And while the academic performance of many brick-and-mortar charter schools is unimpressive, the academic track record for cyber charter schools remains abysmal. In addition, all charter schools are run by unelected individuals and many spend millions of dollars on advertising (just like a private business). Last but not least, accountability, oversight, and transparency remain stubborn problems in the segregated charter school sector.

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Shawgi Tell, PhD, is author of the book “Charter School Report Card.” His main research interests include charter schools, neoliberal education policy, privatization and political economy. He can be reached at stell5@naz.edu.

Notes

[1] Minnesota established the nation’s first charter school law in 1991 and opened the nation’s first charter school in 1992.

[2] It is worth noting that student waitlists at charter schools are frequently inflated and unreliable. In fact, many seats regularly go empty at many charter schools.

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