

Frequently Asked Questions about Charter Schools in Washington, DC

Who introduced charter schools?

Congress imposed charters on DC in 1996. When they proved unpopular, Congress created a special Public Charter School Board to encourage the creation and expansion of charter schools. Charter schools are an example of Congress's disrespect for home rule and their undemocratic meddling in local affairs.

But aren't charter schools well meaning?

Charters were pitched as innovative models of reform that would help DCPS improve. There are some good and well-intentioned charter schools, but as a whole charters are part of a national movement to privatize all of our public institutions and services.

Aren't charter schools public?

Charter schools use public money, but every charter school is owned, operated, and governed by a private corporation and Board of Trustees. Many charters receive additional funding from private foundations and wealthy individuals, further weakening public accountability. Also, charters don't have to follow the rules and regulations of DCPS for enrollment and retention of students or for the hiring and firing of teachers and other school workers.

But can't anyone go to a charter school?

Charters are not neighborhood schools. Prospective students must fill out applications and are selected by citywide lottery. Often parents must attend meetings and agree to volunteer time or pay "activity fees" before their children can register. By selective outreach, specialized curriculum and niche marketing, charters can target specific types of students and ignore others. Once accepted, students can be expelled or encouraged to withdraw for social, disciplinary, or academic reasons.

Aren't parents just "voting with their feet" when they send their children to charters?

Not necessarily. DCPS buildings have been neglected and the school system overall has lost resources, staff, and programs. Most parents would choose the neighborhood school down the street if it was clean, modern, well-staffed, and well-maintained.

But aren't charter schools improving educational opportunities for students in the District?

No. Even charter advocates agree that "quality" remains a problem in charter schools, and public schools continue to outperform charters. Even worse, charter schools are creating a dual and unequal education system DC—charters enjoy political support, get large amounts of money from private corporations, and can decide who they want to remain in their school and who they don't. DCPS has to accept everyone, including students put out of charters. Far from fixing decades of political neglect and underfunding of our public schools charters have only made the situation worse.