

# Public Charter Schools FACT SHEET

*Produced by Emerald Youth Foundation*

## **What are public charter schools?**

Public charter schools are independent, public schools that are free to be more innovative and are held accountable for improved student achievement.

Public charter schools are operated on “charter”—an agreement with the local board of education—by independent entities such as nonprofit organizations. The public charter schools must meet strict accountability standards spelled out in the charter.

## **Is there a difference between public charter schools and the voucher program?**

Yes, and Tennessee does not have a voucher program. Voucher programs are tools that states use to provide families a choice of which school a child will attend. The voucher program allocates a specific sum of money that can be used for part or full payment for the student to attend that school. The payment may be made directly to the school or to the family who then designates the ultimate recipient. Some voucher programs include private or sectarian schools, while others limit participation in the program to public schools.<sup>1</sup>

## **What makes charter schools public schools?**

Charter schools are public schools because they are:

- tuition-free and open to every student who wishes to enroll;
- non-sectarian, and do not discriminate on any basis;
- publicly funded by local, state and federal tax dollars based on enrollment, like other public schools; and
- held accountable to state and federal academic standards.

## **What is the advantage of public charter schools?**

Public charter schools often appeal to parents:

- whose children attend low-performing traditional public schools; and
- who do not have the resources to relocate to a neighborhood with a higher-performing traditional public school or to send their child to a private school.

This is borne out by the fact that public charter schools serve a growing percentage of students who live in poverty. In the 2012-13 school year, just over half of the students enrolled in public charter schools across the U.S. were living in poverty.<sup>2</sup>

Public charter schools are achieving better outcomes for several subgroups among this population. Public charter schools across the U.S. are outpacing traditional public schools in academic growth among African-American students, students living in poverty, and English language learners.<sup>3</sup>

## **How many public charter schools are in Tennessee?**

As of the 2013-2014 school year, there are 65 public charter schools in Tennessee. Total public charter school enrollment in Tennessee is about 14,500 students, or approximately 1.45% of the total statewide K-12 enrollment.

## How are public charter schools funded?

Public charter schools are funded—like traditional public schools—by local, state, and federal tax dollars based on student enrollment. When a student transfers from a traditional public school to a public charter school, the funding associated with a student follows him or her to the public charter school. Public charter schools do not add any new costs to the state's public education system.

## How do public charter schools work?

Public charter schools are free to innovate in ways that improve student achievement. Public charter schools may:

- Offer longer school days. With freedom to set their own operating hours, schools can offer classes in the evening, on weekends and during the summer months.
- Adjust curriculum to meet student needs, even providing new curriculum if students would benefit.
- Create a unique school culture or adopt a theme, such as STEM education, performing arts, project-based learning, college preparation, career-readiness, language immersion, civic engagement, or classical education, to name just a few.
- Develop next generation learning models, making innovative uses of technology and rethinking the definition of “classroom.” For example, students may study biology at the ocean shore, learn in virtual classrooms and use Skype to connect with experts around the world.

## What proof is there of public charter schools' success?

The level of education performance of a typical public charter school student when he or she enrolls in a public charter school has declined since 2009, meaning that public charter schools have to make up more ground just to get student performance on par with traditional public schools.<sup>4</sup> Public charter schools in Tennessee are making strides in closing that gap. A 2013 study found that Tennessee was one of ten states in which public charter school students outpaced traditional public school students in academic growth in both reading and math.<sup>5</sup>

Public charter schools are operated independently of each other, and their individual outcomes vary. Some do not achieve their desired outcomes and can be closed. Many achieve and even exceed their desired outcomes, and as a result, are replicated by other public charter schools. Some of the most effective charter school networks include Achievement First, Aspire, Breakthrough Schools, KIPP, Rocketship Education, and YES Prep. They regularly boast accomplishments such as outpacing state averages in math and reading achievement and having some of the highest-performing schools in their district and/or state.

*1* <http://www.tn.gov/attorneygeneral/op/2013/op13-27.pdf>, page 3

*2* CREDO at Stanford University, *National Charter School Study, 2013*, page 10

*3* *ibid.*, 17

*4* *ibid.*, 10

*5* *ibid.*, 16