

Uncommon Schools

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Frequently Asked Questions

What is a charter school?

A charter school is an independently run public school granted greater flexibility in its operations, in return for greater accountability for performance. The “charter” establishing a school is a performance contract detailing the school’s mission, program, students served, performance goals, and methods of assessment.

How many charter schools are there across the country?

There are nearly 4,000 charter schools serving more than one million students across the country. The first charter school opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1992. Today, 40 states and the District of Columbia have laws in place that allow for the creation of charter schools.

What is the difference between charter schools and other public schools?

Charter schools are public schools of choice, meaning that families choose them for their children. They operate with freedom from some of the regulations that are imposed upon district schools. Charter schools are accountable for academic results and for upholding the promises made in their charters. They must demonstrate performance in the areas of academic achievement, financial management, and organizational stability. If a charter school does not meet performance goals, it may be closed.

Are all charter schools the same?

No. Charter schools can vary a great deal in their design and in their results. Uncommon Schools creates schools based on the principles and practices that have proven successful in producing significant academic gains at high-performing, urban charter public schools across the country.

Who authorizes charter schools?

This varies from state to state, depending on the state’s charter law. In New York, there are three authorizers: the New York State Board of Regents, the State University of New York Board of Trustees, and the local districts. In New Jersey, there is one authorizer, the state Commissioner of Education. In Massachusetts, the state Board of Education authorizes charter schools.

Who can start a charter school?

Parents, community leaders, social entrepreneurs, teachers, school districts, and municipalities can submit a charter school proposal to their state’s charter authorizing entity.

Do charter schools serve a particular student population?

As public schools, charter schools are open to all students. Charter schools accept students by random, public lottery. Nationwide, students in charter schools have similar demographic characteristics to students in the local public schools. In some states, charter

schools serve significantly higher percentages of minority or low-income students than the traditional public schools.

How are charter schools funded?

As public schools, charter schools are tuition-free. They are funded based on enrollment levels and receive public funds on a per pupil basis. In some states, such as Alaska, Colorado, Minnesota, and New Jersey, they receive less than 100% of the funds allocated to their traditional counterparts for school operations. In other states, such as California, additional funds or loans are made available to them. In most states, charters do not receive capital funds to support facility expenses. Charter schools are entitled to federal categorical funding for which their students are eligible, such as Title I and Special Education funding. Federal legislation provides grants to help charters to manage start-up costs.

What is a charter management organization?

Charter management organizations (CMOs), generally speaking, are organizations that contract with an individual school or schools to deliver management services. These services typically include curriculum development, assessment design, teacher recruitment, professional development, systems implementation, back-office services, and facility services. Uncommon Schools is a nonprofit CMO that contracts with individual charter school boards of trustees. The organization's "bottom line" is that each school achieves at the highest level. All decisions are made in the context of what is best for the individual school to ensure outstanding academic results.

What makes the schools within the Uncommon network different from other schools?

Its schools share the following key attributes: a college preparatory mission; high standards for academics and character; a highly structured learning environment; a longer school day and a longer school year; a focus on accountability and data-driven instruction; and a faculty of committed and talented leaders and teachers. Schools within the Uncommon network are modeled on some of the highest-performing urban public charter schools in the country.

How does a family enroll a child at an Uncommon school?

Each of the organization's schools admits students through a random lottery. Schools do not have any selective admissions criteria.

Do teachers need to be certified to work at an Uncommon school?

Certification requirements vary on a state-by-state basis. In New Jersey, all teachers must be certified, and Uncommon Schools helps teachers navigate the alternate route process to secure their teaching credentials. In New York, while the state does not require that 100% of teachers be certified at each charter school, the rules under the "No Child Left Behind" Law mean that teachers need to get their licenses with reasonable speed. Uncommon Schools is able to ensure that its teachers are enrolled in a Master's program that provides provisional certification and, more importantly, high quality training.