

LWVIL Charter School Study

Charter, contract, and traditional schools are terms we read about in the newspapers or see on the nightly news. To learn more about these new trends in schools the both the LWVIL and LWV of Chicago have conducted a study to find facts about these schools. During the month of October LWV of Chicago members will be taking consensus on charter schools. [Click here](#) for the Consensus Questions with brief explanations.

There are about 126 charter schools in Chicago and only 14 in the rest of the state. The LWV of Chicago Education Committee along with the state committee has been gathering information. We learned just what a charter school is and what differentiates it from a traditional school. Charter schools have autonomy over curriculum and budget. The staff of a charter school is employed by the school or a management company and are not subject to Chicago Teachers Union collective bargaining agreements. As a way around the limit on the number of charter networks, a new type of school was created, contract schools. When the school board has decided that a school is not meeting standards they hire a management company to take over the school and the entire staff is fired. We think a Contract School is essentially the same as a charter school. The traditional schools are subject to Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) collective bargaining agreements and do not have autonomy over budget and curriculum. Charter schools, contract schools and traditional schools are all public schools and they all receive public funding.

As the charter schools were studied it became apparent that there are areas of concern. The first is accountability, what reasons are there for not renewing a charter? At the present time charters come up for renewal every 5 years. Underperforming traditional schools have been closed or turned over to management companies, should this happen to charters as well? Traditional public school board members promise to protect taxpayer's assets, and are required to submit purchases to competitive bidding. Charter schools do not have to submit purchases to competitive bidding. Charter schools, by law are non-profit, but they hire for profit companies to manage the schools. Some of these management companies state that they are private companies and therefore don't have to open their books for analysis. Another question about charter schools is should they be accountable for following laws regarding discrimination, union organizing, and for insuring the separation of church and state? Several charters in Chicago are run by religious organizations and say that they only teach religion after school. The Concept Charter schools are run by a religious Turkish organization that is being investigated by the federal government. The Moody Bible Institute is also planning to open a charter in 2016.

How often should charters be evaluated? State law says every 5 years, but some charter organizations are asking for evaluation every 10 years. Who should approve or renew charters. The school board, the Illinois Board of Education or the State Charter Commission? The commission is appointed by the state board of education and can overrule a decision by the local school board. There is concern that the State Charter Commission may have a conflict of interest when deciding on charters.

Should charter schools be required to hire certified teachers? The present law requires 75% of the teaching personnel to be certified. Traditional schools have 90% certified teachers. The Chicago Board of Education has spent millions of dollars on Teach for America (TFA). This program recruits college graduates, gives them about a month of

training and then places them. Eighty percent of TFA teachers leave after 3 years. Teachers in traditional schools spend many more years in the teaching profession. Is there transparency of the potential conflicts of interest of governing board members of charter schools? Fiscal information is difficult to find. Because charters are run by private companies they often do not disclose their ties to contractors, building owners or sources of revenue. Charter schools receive public funds. Should they, therefore, be required to return equipment and materials that have been purchased if the school closes?

Funding for schools in the state is inadequate and there is concern that money allocated to charter schools is harming the traditional schools. Charters get a grant to pay startup costs in order to buy materials and supplies in addition to the per pupil funds. Funding for both charter and traditional schools in Chicago is dependent on number of pupils in the school. A new law requires the money must follow the student if the child changes schools.

There are several Virtual Schools in Illinois. A virtual school is one where the student works at a computer during day and may go to a classroom for one day. At present there is a moratorium on new virtual schools. Some K-12 Inc. charter school members have stated that virtual education for elementary students is home schooling. Existing law on charter schools does not allow home schooling to be considered for a charter. Have charter schools met the intended mission when they were first created? Are they sharing innovations with the traditional schools? Interviews at charters and public schools have shown a lack of communication between them. It has also been noted that there is very little innovation within most of the charter schools.

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