

Charter School Accountability



Executive Summary

Accountability in public education describes how states and communities ensure that schools are effectively using public dollars to meet their students' needs. Public school quality is usually measured by student performance (e.g., test scores), but can also include measures of transparency and community satisfaction. The specific ways in which states hold public school districts and charter schools accountable vary based on (1) who oversees school performance, (2) which state-level rules and regulations govern school operations, and (3) which schools are authorized to operate.

Highlights

- Missouri **charter schools report directly to state-approved sponsors**, while traditional public school districts are governed by local school boards. **Missouri charter schools are exempt from several of the rules and regulations that govern traditional public schools.**
- Every publicly funded school in Missouri receives an **Annual Performance Report (APR)**. APRs are used to **determine the accreditation status of traditional public schools** and in the **reauthorization/closure determination for charter schools.**
- Charter school accountability policies in other states address **which state rules can be waived and if waivers are automatic.** Other policies specify **who qualifies as a charter school sponsor and how charter school authorization/closure is handled.**

Limitations

- There is debate over how to best measure accountability in public education. Most states use test scores as the primary accountability metric; however, others argue that student improvement and parent satisfaction are more appropriate metrics.
- Due to significant differences across state policies, it is difficult to determine which charter school accountability provisions are most likely to improve school quality.

Research Background

Accountability for public schools in Missouri

Governance: Traditional public school districts are governed by local school boards, while charter schools are authorized and managed by state-approved sponsors.¹ Missouri's charter school sponsors include higher education institutions (e.g., University of Missouri, Washington University), local school boards (Kansas City & St. Louis Public Schools) and the [Missouri Charter Public School Commission](#) (MCPSC).² Sponsorship by district school boards is one approach to hold charter schools directly accountable to the community's locally elected officials. While its

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members are appointed and not elected, independent sponsoring entities like the MCPSC are another approach meant to improve sponsor quality and accountability.

Rules & transparency: Missouri charter schools are exempt from several of the rules and regulations (e.g., instructional requirements, school board composition) that govern traditional public schools.³ Charter school advocates argue that the flexibility created by these exemptions promotes school innovation and improves personalized learning, especially when responding to sudden changes like the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ Critics argue, however, that fewer rules lead to decreased transparency & increased fraud. While Missouri requires annual audits for its charter and non-charter public schools, there are recent examples of specific charters inappropriately spending state funds (e.g., unsupported employee bonuses & credit transactions) and not providing sufficient oversight of accounting and hiring practices.⁵

School performance: The Missouri State Board of Education uses Annual Performance Reports (APRs) to evaluate public school performance in the state. For school districts, APRs are used to determine a school's accreditation status, while charter school APRs are primarily used to determine reauthorization or closure.⁶ While the risk of school closure is a strong accountability measure, a major critique is that closures are a particularly destabilizing consequence and disproportionately affect minoritized students.⁷

Different state approaches to charter school accountability⁸

Governance: Some approaches to increasing charter school accountability are minimizing the role of for-profit operators and management companies and encouraging charter school sponsorship by local school districts or independent commissions/boards.

- **Restrictions on for-profit operators.** Concerns about fraudulent reporting, financial mismanagement and conflicts of interest are often raised when for-profit groups operate charter schools. Some states (e.g., Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee) include statutory language to ensure that charter schools cannot be operated by for-profit providers/management companies.
- **Expanding school district partners.** Another approach to increasing charter school accountability is encouraging charter school sponsorship by school districts with locally elected boards. Some states (e.g., Alaska, Maryland), only allow school districts to sponsor new charter schools. While Texas doesn't require school district sponsorship, it recently passed financial and accountability incentives for district-charter [partnerships](#).

Rules & transparency: Most states, including Missouri, waive several of the rules and regulations that govern school districts and specify a minimum subset of statutes that cannot be waived (e.g., state health & safety, civil rights).

- **Restrictions on automatic waivers.** Several states have specific provisions to ensure that charter schools comply with specific rules and regulations for open meeting and records laws, teacher certification, school calendars, class sizes and ratios or school discipline.
- **Waiver applications.** Rather than automatically waiving rules, some states (e.g., Kansas, Tennessee) require charter schools to apply for waivers of specific rules in their application. Other states (e.g., Alabama, Illinois) have an application process for any public school to request that specific rules be waived.

School performance: States use different approaches to ensure that charter school authorization and closure reflect the state’s academic performance standards. While tying performance to the ability for schools to be open is a direct form of accountability, there are concerns about the destabilizing impact of school closures and their disproportionate impact on minoritized students.⁷

- **Authorization criteria.** Some states limit the number of schools that a sponsor can authorize (e.g., Wisconsin), while others set overall caps on enrollment or the number of charter schools (e.g., Illinois). Capping charter school expansion directs resources to existing schools, but critics argue that limits competition in the charter school market.
- **Renewal/closure criteria.** Most states determine closure criteria based on failure to uphold charter agreements, academic challenges, financial mismanagement, fraud or other legal violations. In some states (e.g., Connecticut, New York), charters can be terminated if the school does not demonstrate an effort to recruit and retain high-need student populations, including those who receive free or reduced price lunch, have a history of low academic performance or require special education.
- **Community input.** In Georgia, the state board can move to terminate a charter if the majority of parents/guardians vote to request its closure; faculty/instructional staff can also vote for closure in Georgia and North Carolina. Enrollment, or how many families choose a given charter school, is another way in which families can hold schools accountable for satisfactory performance.

References

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