



**The New Mexico Coalition for Public Charter Schools**  
*Charting New Directions in Public Education*

## New Mexico's Public Charter School Movement: Achievements, Trends and Challenges

In 1999, New Mexico strengthened its public charter school law to allow the creation of completely new schools, public charter schools. In 2006, the Legislature allowed the state's Public Education Commission to authorize a charter school, rather than just local school districts. With these changes, the Center for Education Reform—a national charter school advocacy organization—ranks New Mexico's charter school law the 17th strongest of the nation's 44 charter school laws. Today, more than one million students across the country attend 3,400 public charter schools.

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools that operate under a contract, or “charter” with an authorizing agent. Founded by educators, parents and community leaders, they operate in a semi-autonomous fashion from other public schools. Charter schools are mission-focused schools that offer unique academic approaches to the students they serve.

In the last five years, student enrollment in New Mexico's public charter schools has grown by leaps and bounds, from approximately 2,000 students in 25 schools in 2001 to 10,700 students in 69 charter schools today. Charter school student enrollment is 3% of the total number of enrolled students in New Mexico public schools. It is estimated that close to 2,500 students around the state are on waiting lists to enroll in public charter schools. The ethnic breakdown in public charter schools mirrors that of the traditional public schools: 54% Hispanic; 11% Native American; 1% Asian; 36% Anglo.

With 6,700 students attending 37 schools, Albuquerque has the largest number of both public charter students and schools. They are found in all quadrants of the city and offer many diverse approaches to education: performing arts, core curriculum, service learning, military-based education, credit recovery, dropout prevention, and dual enrollment options, among many others. It is worth noting that twelve other Albuquerque public charter schools serve students dealing with challenging life issues such as early parenthood, chronic school failure, lifelong foster care, adjudication and homelessness. Yet Albuquerque still boasts some of the highest performing charter schools in the state, including Southwest Secondary Learning Center, Amy Biehl High School, South Valley Academy, East Mountain High School, and the Montessori Elementary School.

Across New Mexico, and taken as a whole, academic performance in public charter schools is mixed. The good news is that older public charter schools are outperforming traditional schools in terms of AYP. Eighty percent of public charter schools five years or older made AYP for two consecutive years. An evaluation of all charter schools, regardless of maturity, found a steady decrease in charter schools making AYP, although they still outperform traditional schools:

- In 2004-05 61% made AYP, in contrast to 67% of traditional schools.

- In 2005-06, 57% made AYP, in contrast to 47% of traditional schools.
- In 2006-07, 47% made AYP, in contrast to 41% of traditional schools.

To better gauge charter school performance, in spring 2007 the NM Coalition for Charter Schools commissioned a study of achievement conducted by Dr. Melissa Binder, Professor of Economics at the University of New Mexico. Using reading and math proficiency data from the Public Education Department's website for the years 2005-06, Dr. Binder compared charter student performance with conventional students in each major category: Anglo, Hispanic, African American, Asian, Native American, English Language Learners (ELL), Special Education, and Free and Reduced-Price Lunch. According to the study:

- Students in older charter schools outperform their traditional counterparts in every grade and sub-category.
- In the older charters, Hispanic students have *higher* proficiency rates in grades 4-8 in math and Reading; comparable proficiency rates in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade reading and in 11<sup>th</sup> grade math.
- As a group, charter students outperform traditional students in math and reading in grades 4 and 7.
- As a group, charter students have lower proficiency rates in math and reading in grades 3, 8, 9, and 11.

These findings suggest that both newer charter schools as well as the conventional public schools have much to learn from charter school practices.

Challenges facing New Mexico's public charter school movement include gaining access to equalized funding for facilities, overcoming stiff resistance to continued growth and autonomy and opposing an ever-increasing regulatory environment. Maintaining the vibrancy of the movement will depend on the continued support from the Governor's office and key legislators as well as charter schools themselves tightening their focus on offering quality choices for all public school students.