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Charter Schools Proliferating, Study Finds

District Has Most Rapid Growth; Advocates Say Movement Is Spurring Reform

By Valerie Strauss

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, February 11, 2000; Page A17

President Clinton will release a new study today showing that the number of public charter schools jumped about 40 percent in the 1998-99 school year--with seven out of 10 maintaining waiting lists--and that they now enroll more than a quarter-million students.

Though charter schools still enroll a relatively small percentage of public school students nationwide, the movement is growing in many areas, most rapidly in the District, which had more than 4 percent of its public school students enrolled in charters. Arizona had 4 percent and Colorado 2 percent, according to the Department of Education report, the most detailed yet on the charter school movement.

Charter schools are operated with public funds--and are tuition-free--but are permitted to operate outside the normal bureaucracy of traditional public school systems. Many of them are designed for a specific mission--for example, helping at-risk urban youths or training students to enter a particular trade.

When Clinton was first elected in 1992, there was a single charter school in the nation.

"I think the charter movement has spread farther and faster than any of the people who were involved in its beginnings ever envisioned," said Joe Nathan, director of the nonprofit Center for School Change at the University of Minnesota, who helped write the nation's first charter law in Minnesota.

Charter school advocates say they are vital to helping create more choice for parents who have grown dissatisfied with their traditional public school systems. They note that charters force traditional schools to improve to compete for students.

Charter opponents say charters drain the most motivated students from the traditional schools as well as necessary public funds needed for reform.

Thirty-seven states plus the District have passed charter laws; New York, Oklahoma and Oregon were the latest to do so during their 1999 legislative sessions. However, the data used in the report came from schools in 27 states, meaning the number of charter schools could be even higher.

During the 1998-99 school year, enrollment in charter schools increased in all 27 states, with the number of schools jumping 421, to a total of 1,484 as of September. When multiple branches of a school operating under the same charter were counted, the total number of charter school sites was 1,605. Twenty-seven charter schools closed during that period.

The study showed that nationwide, nearly 7 out of 10 charter schools have a student racial or ethnic composition similar to that of their surrounding district. However, in some states--including Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts and Texas--these schools enroll a much higher percentage of students of color than other public schools.

"This has been a very successful movement," said a White House source. "There is a lot of good evidence emerging that you see a good, positive, competitive dynamic. Schools are becoming more responsive to parents."

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Yellow Pages

WHITE HOUSE RELEASES STUDY SHOWING BOOM IN CHARTER SCHOOLS AND ANNOUNCES \$30 MILLION INCREASE IN CHARTER SCHOOL FUNDING

February 11, 2000

The White House today will release a new report detailing the growth of charter schools across the country, and will announce that the President's FY 2001 budget includes a \$30 million increase in charter school funding. Charter schools are independent public schools founded by parents and teachers, and open to all students. In exchange for high levels of accountability for student achievement, they are given more autonomy and flexibility than traditional public schools in staffing, curriculum and other areas. Today's report, produced by the Department of Education, reveals that charter schools are growing more widespread each year, and sheds light on the benefits they bring through smaller size and diversity. The President's FY 2001 budget includes a \$30 million increase for charter schools, bringing total funding to \$175 million annually.

NEW REPORT HIGHLIGHTS POPULARITY, SMALLER SCHOOL SIZE, AND DIVERSITY OF CHARTER SCHOOLS. Today's report shows that more than 250,000 students nationwide are now enrolled in charter schools in 30 states and the District of Columbia. (Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have now passed legislation allowing the creation of charter schools). According to the report, seven out of ten charter schools are so popular that they have waiting lists for students. The report also shows that most charter schools are small schools. In fact, the median enrollment of all charter schools is 137 students, compared to 475 for all public schools in the same states. Seven of ten charter schools are also newly created schools. Eighteen percent are pre-existing public schools that convert to charter status, while 10 percent are converted private schools. The report also reveals that charter schools enroll a slightly higher percentage of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than other public schools in their states and reflect similar racial diversity.

PRESIDENT CLINTON'S LEADERSHIP KEY TO GROWTH OF CHARTER SCHOOLS. President Clinton has long been a champion of charter schools. When the President was first elected, there was only one public charter school open in the United States. This year, according to today's report, 1,605 charter schools were in operation as of September 1999 – more than halfway to the President's goal of 3,000 charter schools. National leadership has played a key role in this rapid growth: federal funds have supported the creation of individual charter schools and helped disseminate best practices and strategies among these schools. Today the White House will announce that the President's FY 2001 budget includes \$175 million for the Education Department's Public Charter Schools Program – a \$30 million increase over last year's levels. Local charter schools use federal funds for planning and development, as well as for start-up costs, which are a major barrier to the creation of such schools.

CHARTER SCHOOLS: IMPROVING PUBLIC EDUCATION AND EMPOWERING PARENTS.

- **Public charter schools exemplify a standards-based approach to education.** Every charter school works with a public authority to establish clear performance standards. A charter school that fails to meet the terms of its charter is closed down. The Public Charter Schools program, which was reauthorized with the President's leadership in 1998, gives priority to states that have strong standards for academic accountability. Charter schools receiving federal funding must be measured by the same state assessments as any other public school.
- **Charter schools empower parents through public school choice.** States and districts around the country are using public charter schools, inter-district choice, and other innovations to offer students high-quality, well-tailored educational options. Public school choice can spur school improvement, and charter schools are key to an effective public school choice strategy. Surveys find high levels of support and satisfaction among parents of public charter school students. A recent national survey found that 65 percent of parents rated their child's public charter school as better than their former public school (and only 6 percent rated them worse).

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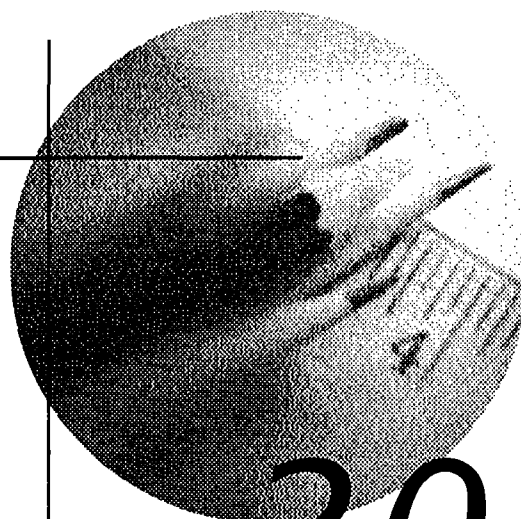
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