

MERIDIAN MAGAZINE

Education Series, Part Seven

Charter Schools

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By Darla Isackson

My purpose in the remaining articles in this series is to share responses from parents who report firsthand experience with various educational options along with helpful information about each possibility. My hope is to increase awareness so we will all be able to make better informed educational choices. The most important guide when we are attempting to make these important decisions will always be the Holy Ghost. Since each child and each situation is unique I am not recommending any particular option over another, only providing information.

I had frequently heard the name “Charter Schools,” but for a long time assumed they were simply a different kind of private school. However, they are actually privately run, tax funded public schools. I have been fascinated to learn how many there are, how varied they are, and how many parents have responded with positive reports of their children’s experiences in charter schools. While there are obvious pros and cons, charter schools seem to be “filling the gap” for many parents who want an alternative to regular public schools, can’t afford private academies, and do not feel that independent home schooling is their answer.

Charter School Web Sites

If you go to www.charterfriends.org, you will find a state-by-state directory of charter support organizations and contacts. (For example, for Utah it may tell you to go to www.usoe.org, then click on “charter schools.”) You will also find a link to the National Charter School Alliance where you can request additional information (info@charterfriends.org). You will find links to national charter school web sites that contain the history of the charter school movement, and a directory of all the charter schools in each state.

A reader said that her favorite web site for garnering general information about charter schools is The Center for Education Reform: <http://www.edreform.com/>. I found that web site quite helpful. It offers the latest news on Charters, facts, resources, commentary, etc. I gleaned the following information from this site:

- enrollment in public schools is over 46 million
- enrollment in private schools is over 5 million
- enrollment in charter schools is over 579 thousand
- enrollment of home schoolers is now over 1 million

Steadily increasing numbers in the private, charter, and home schooling sectors mean that parents can more easily get the information and support they need for any of these options they may choose.

Overview of Charter Schools

All but six states now have specific charter laws and guidelines. The Center for Education Reform (www.edreform.com) offers detailed information and even a ranking of the nation's strongest to weakest laws, and state by state charter law profiles.

While guidelines differ, the overall concept is the same state to state. Coleen Ary from Simi Valley, CA, sent me an article that ran in the *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called "Charter schools 101: A crash course" (Thursday, July 6, 2000). Although the statistics are outdated, I haven't found a better summary of the charter school concept. The following outline is based on that article but includes updated information I have gathered from other charter school web sites.

What's a charter school? Charter schools are the charter airlines of education. Just as charter airlines are not subject to the same stringent federal transportation requirements as big carriers, charter schools are independent public schools which are accountable to the chartering authority. The idea came about because of the belief that public schools need reform and that they do not fill the needs of every student.

Many parents who have children in charter schools have reported that these smaller, innovative schools can be a viable alternative because they are largely unencumbered by the policies and mandates of traditional public schools, yet are still tax supported. This of course means that the parents do not have to shoulder additional financial burdens in order to obtain their children's education.

How Does a Charter Get Started and How Do They Work?

Parents, community groups, corporations, educators and individuals can start charter schools. They generally require a director, a principal, and at least a percentage of certified teachers. Web sites for each state will generally provide the application form which you can print, information about deadlines for public charter school program startup, information on implementation and dissemination grants, technical assistance, etc. Utah's site offers information on TAP--the Technical Assistance Project funded by a federal charter school dissemination grant. This organization focuses on organizational development services and provides additional support for Utah charter operators struggling to scale the various learning curves of establishing and operating their schools. They also offer a publication from the Annie E. Casey Foundation called *Creating New Schools: The Strategic Management of Charter Schools*. The author Peter Frumkin outlines the major tasks to managing a charter, and the most important ways to measure and produce high performance.

Charter schools are usually housed independently--some in modest, small quarters such as a suite of rooms in a strip mall, others in spacious buildings. Some states allow for virtual charters and parents have found creative ways to band together and meet the requirements and use the computer curriculum for home schooling. Some families I quote in this article tell about online charter programs.

The school district or a state board must approve the application for a charter. Utah has created a state board for the specific purpose of reviewing charter applications. Since charter schools are public schools, they cannot restrict admission, although they can establish certain criteria for acceptance and dismissal. (For example, the Success Charter school in Granite School District in Salt Lake City requires that the student be on probation from the courts in order to attend. No other students qualify.) A charter school is likely to have a special focus, such as programs concentrating on science/technology, arts, architecture, or even the needs of at-risk students. They are typically small [in the year 2000 median size of charter schools in the country was 132 students vs. 486 in public school] and tend to focus on elementary and middle school years.

How Long Have They Been Around and How Many Are There?

Charter schools began in 1991 when Minnesota passed charter legislation. At the time the Pennsylvania article appeared (July 2002) , 37 states had passed legislation allowing for charter schools, and there were 1,700 charter schools in the country. As of January 2004, 2,996 charter schools are operating in the United States. (In another place on the same site (www.edreform.com) the number was said to be 2,357).

How Accountable Are Charter Schools to the Regular Public School System?

Charter schools may be free from mandates requiring them to have all certified teachers; in Pennsylvania in 2000, 75% of teachers had to be certified, none had to belong to a union. In Philadelphia, charters are accountable only to their own board. Students are required to pass standard tests in order to assure that the schools are doing their job.

How Are They Funded?

Since charter schools are part of the school system, most of their money comes from the school district's budget. In the year 2000 in Philadelphia, the district was spending about \$6,900 on each student; and paid about \$5,200 of that per-pupil expenditure to the administrator of the charter school for each student who enrolls in that charter school. Charters also can get federal funds under Title 1.

Why didn't the district turn over the entire \$6,900 per pupil? Because a variety of programs are included in the district's per pupil cost that charters do not become involved with, such as special education programs, adult education, student transportation, facilities acquisition, debt service, etc.

One mother from Oregon expressed concerns about this method of funding. She said, "To me the issue here is "do I really want the government MORE involved in my life?" That is always a concern, but so far, many parents with children in charter schools have reported positive experiences without undue government imposition.

Do Charters Add to the Financial Struggle of the Public School System?

The theory behind charters is that though the money moves with students transferring from public to charter schools, so does the cost of educating them within the larger system. Fewer students mean fewer teachers and resources needed for the larger schools, and so the district can operate more efficiently and cost-effectively. Critics of charter schools complain that this theory may work in smaller school systems, but such economies of scale don't work in a large system.

What Are Parents Saying about their Children's Involvement in Charter Schools?

Stephen and Terri Andreasen from Ft. Walton Beach, Florida:

"We have had our children in publicly funded charter schools for the last four years. We love the smaller-school environment and the way that translates into the teachers and administration really knowing and caring about the students. However, two of the main reasons for our children attending the charter schools is 1 - the dress code; and 2 - rules (discipline) that are expected

and enforced.

“Concerning the dress code, we were so dismayed the first year our daughter attended a public middle school and watched female students in extremely revealing attire, which was against the dress code outlined in the handbook, walk right by administrators who did nothing about it. And this was at the first of the school year, it only got worse as the year progressed. [Our charter school requires uniforms and] we felt with uniforms, the students aren't constantly obsessed with what they or others are wearing, and not being distracted by the apparel (or lack thereof) of other students.

“We truly feel that today's youth are not expected to show respect for adults, and this is very evident in the public schools. In the charter schools our children attend, they are expected to answer with respect. There are many rules of conduct, which are enforced. All of the students benefit from this type of environment . . . We have had great experiences with charter schools.”

Stacey Cahill from Redding, California:

Hi! Your articles on education just came to my attention and I just wanted to mention one other avenue for education that has worked very well for us, Public Charter schools. All of our children have attended or are attending Redding School of the Arts on Redding CA. Although they don't teach religion, the majority of the children and parents involved in the school are conservative Christians (including the directors), it is a K-8 school and has a little over 200 students. It has very few of the problems that public schools have, and operates much like a large family. There are quite a few of these type Charter schools in our area and I think they are a great solution for those who don't want to or can't do some of the other options you mentioned.

Here is our web site: <http://www.rsarts.com/>

Karen Morgan

Another concept I have seen is in Ohio where a school is chartered, and the lessons are delivered electronically through lap-tops that the school provides to every student. Each family is given a stipend to pay for additional lessons in music, art, and the like. Since the school "building" is a virtual building, all the money for the school is spent on teaching staff, and the materials for the students. Each student has a teacher assigned, who grades their assignments online. Periodically, the teacher will schedule a class trip, and give the time and dates, and everyone gets together on that day for an educational excursion to places such as the zoo, museum, or other learning location. My sister-in-law has enrolled her children in this "school" and says it is the best thing she's ever experienced.”

Jenny Hatch, LDS mother of five from Boulder, Colorado gave some interesting insights:

“The past sixteen years have truly been an "education" as we have experienced the full range of schooling options. Our history has been an evolution of sorts . . . [She tells about “unschooling,” trying public schools off and on, homeschooling, etc.]

Jenny continues, *“When our daughter was in second grade we enrolled her in a Core Knowledge Strand, which was a charter school which existed in our local neighborhood school. They let us set up one class for each grade (thus the name "strand") and this parent-directed program was an excellent option for our family for four years. We used Saxon math and true phonics (the open*

court curriculum). Core Knowledge is the series titled What Your . . . Needs to Know curriculum. It is an excellent curriculum in my opinion. Then we home schooled for three years until I had another baby. When the baby was four months old, I enrolled my daughters into a local Core Knowledge Charter school [while the boys had a combination of public school classes and home school classes] . . . This year I enrolled the boys into the same charter school. In a few days all four of my school-aged children will be attending Peak to Peak Charter School, <http://www.peaktopeak.org> and I will be happily at home taking care of my one-year-old, without the weight of the world on my shoulders.

“Our charter has the most intense character ed program in the state and daily the children are being taught good character in the areas of honesty, respect, etc. Yet our school district is the most liberal in all of Colorado and this year, despite many parents speaking at the school board meeting, the gay curriculums will be expanded once again. Not too much of this sort of stuff is going on in our charter school however.”

Even though Jenny’s experiences with charter schools have been largely positive she makes the following surprise statement: *“What have I learned from all of this? Mother’s should teach their own children to read before they send them to school. A charter school is no guarantee that a child will be systematically taught phonics, and the failures of the whole language curriculums are well documented. I wrote an [article on this topic](#) that appeared on a mothering web site.*

“From now on I won’t send a child of mine to any school, public, private, or charter until he or she is reading for pleasure, meaning that he or she happily goes into the library and checks out a stack of books, takes them home, and on their own initiative, reads them for the sheer fun of it. This has taken three years with each of my kids. I’ve found that I have no guarantee that any of my children’s teachers understand this issue. This was the most surprising thing about getting involved in the charter, I thought they would have a phonics litmus test for the teachers they hired for K - 3, but they didn’t. Once they are good readers, I believe they will be able to succeed in most any school, buffered by our daily spiritual efforts.”

Lisa Bishop, from St. Helens, Oregon:

“I am very excited and still a little nervous to get going with this school year because we have enrolled our 3rd and 5th graders in a charter school that is home-school focused. It is apparently the first of its kind in Oregon. The kids are assigned a teacher and community group of 15 kids and they will attend class one day a week. The other days I will be their teacher using curriculum provided by the school. The school will provide all testing and tracking, etc.

One drawback is the fact that no spiritual training can be counted as seat time. Because this is a publicly funded school, all curriculum must be secular. I still feel confident that I will be able to share our views with the kids and it won’t be hard to bring the gospel into the discussions as we study together. I don’t have to use spiritual materials to teach my children that God is part of everything.

I have dabbled in home schooling a little, once in particular to help out our struggling 5th grader until we could move to a more positive school environment. But I have always felt hesitant to tackle home schooling on a larger scale with six kids. This situation seems to be assuaging my fears about my inabilities and gives me the confidence to dive in. Perhaps if the charter school doesn’t turn out to be as wonderful as I am hoping, I will have gained the confidence to continue home schooling on my own.

We also have two daughters in public high school this year and I really don't want to pull them out. There are many positive things they get from attending school. The charter school has a secondary option which will be mostly online and distance learning. Our high schoolers (first one just graduated and on his way to BYU) have succeeded in public school, but it has been rough going at times. I have such a testimony of early morning Seminary. The kids don't even fight me to get up at 5 a.m. to attend. They know how much they need that spiritual boost and connection with those friends at the beginning of each day. Still, I wonder how much longer we will be able to tolerate the intense negative the kids face each day at school, so I am closely watching this charter school as an option for our younger ones when they reach high school."

Derrick Roach, from California

"I am the School Board President of Dehesa Charter School. My wife is also a teacher. We homeschool our three children. This may sound like a contradiction but when you examine the facts and understand the program you can see that there are options that allow parents to have their children attend a public school while still truly homeschooling. Dehesa Charter School currently has approximately 600 students and there is no campus. All instruction takes place in the home under the direction of the parents. The charter school is simply a mentor and helps parents facilitate the education of their students. The school serves families in the San Diego, Orange and Riverside county areas of Southern California. A large percentage of our student population is also LDS.

Derrick continues, "If you would like to learn more about our program and the benefits that parents and students have derived from the charter school, I can put you in touch with many different LDS families. For example I know of one student that was exceptionally brilliant but was failing in the tradition education system. In our program he flourished, graduated early and at the age of 16 entered Brigham Young University with a full scholarship. His sister is now 16 and will be entering BYU in the Spring under similar circumstances and with a full scholarship too. In her particular situation she was told to stop taking classes or she would loose the scholarship and would be considered a college transfer student due to the number of credits she accumulated.

"Our program is starting to draw attention from many different areas. In the near future a television station will be visiting our school to do a story about our unique program. Many charter schools give lip service and talk about a Personalized Learning Program. I feel that our school . . . truly offers a personalized approach and allows parents to actually homeschool instead of "pretending" to homeschool when in fact they are simply bringing the traditional classroom into the home.

"Please feel free to contact the school office if you would like to learn more about one of the options that LDS families in Southern California have available. The School Director is Terri Novacek and the office number is (619) 498-3020. Or you can email me with any questions that you may have.

Derrick W. Roach, President Dehesa Governing Board Dehesa Charter School droach@dehesacharterschool.org www.dehesacharterschool.org

An Oregon mother voiced a concern about government-funded homeschooling. She said, "We have pulled our children out of public schools and are homeschooling. This will be our fourth year. The option of the school sponsored Charter School has come up in the last district in which we lived . . . The children could benefit from it by using it for "consumables" like swimming lessons, music lessons, gymnastics or what not. Things that can't be returned should we move or opt out of the Charter. My feeling, however, is that if we begin to take money from the "system" for

education, we will be setting a dangerous precedent that will affect future generations of homeschoolers. The money always comes with strings attached, and those strings [can easily] become the noose if we aren't careful. The system will begin to assume that since homeschoolers want their money, that they will impose this regulation or that regulation in order to disburse the funds. If we start taking their money, the feeling is that more laws will be formed to take away more and more of the freedoms we now enjoy." Definitely something to think about.

Kathleen Hedgecock, from Peoria, Arizona:

"Three of my daughter Jenny's cousins in another state are in a program called Running Start: they attend the local college/university full time during their 11th and 12th grade years and earn dual credit. When these kids graduate from HS, they have two years of college credit under their belt as well. Jennie wanted that but it wasn't available. Then we learned of a Charter High School housed on the campus of a well-known private university which was offering just such a program. Jennie said, "That's where I want to go." and that's where she is. She says the dynamics of the school population is somewhat the same as the HS (people have tattoos and piercings, etc) although a uniform type dress code is required as well as "no odd colored hair." The noticeable difference is that a far greater portion of the students are sincerely interested in school and in going to college. Misbehavior is absolutely not tolerated (public schools, in general, have no such luxury). The curriculum is more traditional (they offered her a college level math class that only the oldest of my seven children had been offered in HS.

"Why do we continually think that cookie cutter education will fit everyone? . . . Charter schools have been a wonderful alternative for some of our kids. Are there kinks in the charter school plan? Yep, but parents deserve the right to select the type of education that best suits their kids. I worked on PTA boards, worked in the schools, but I still support whatever type of school is going to give my kids the best opportunity to succeed. Oh, and don't even get me started on the 'health' and sex-ed curriculums, or the English teacher who assigns "Why Gays should be allowed to marry" as an essay topic, or the Science teacher who says he can prove man evolved from the apes "No matter what other creation-garbage your parents tell you." It broke my heart every time I had to say to my kids "Your teacher is mistaken. He doesn't know all the facts. You do, and you are still required to treat him with respect." Kids deserve teachers who are worthy of their respect."

Kathleen concludes, *"Here's what I'd tell other parents (and I wish I'd learned it a bit sooner). Don't be afraid to stand up for what you have prayerfully determined is best for your child. Some regular public schools offer alternatives, check them out. Do talk directly to your kids' teachers. Be friendly and open. And one other thing: make your home the place where they feel secure, the spiritual center of their lives, because they need to learn to stand for righteousness. Strong testimonies will help them succeed in almost any atmosphere."*

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