

# What do Washington parents think about their students' charter schools?

By Heather Casimere and Lydia Rainey

## Introduction

In 2014, the first public charter schools opened in Washington state. Since then, the sector has been beset with controversy largely devoid of the opinions of some people with important experience: the parents of enrolled students. To begin to remedy this, the Center on Reinventing Public Education conducted a mixed-methods study that asked parents how they selected their student's charter school, how they perceived their student's school, and areas they thought could be improved.<sup>1</sup> The findings in this brief reflect the opinions of the parents who participated in our survey and focus groups during the 2021-22 school year.

In all, our data come from more than 250 parents with students enrolled in 11 of Washington state's 16 charter schools. While our data mostly come from parents in western Washington, parents from eastern Washington participated in both the survey and focus groups. Similarly, on the survey and in the focus groups we spoke to parents from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

The results from this study cannot be considered representative of all Washington state charter parents or parents whose students may have unenrolled from charter schools. The findings in this brief only reflect the opinions of the participating parents.

Overall, the parents who participated in our survey and focus groups ("study parents") reported high levels of satisfaction with their student's school. Study parents reported selecting their student's school because they were looking for an alternative to the large, traditional public school. Once their student was enrolled in that school, parents reported coming to value that the charter school facilitated one-on-one attention, created an environment conducive to learning, and taught a wide variety of skills. Parents also voiced a few concerns, namely the impact of staff turnover on their student's progress and a lack of resources, particularly for extracurriculars.

In fall 2021, we sent a survey to parents at seven Washington charter schools. We received responses from 236 parents, or approximately 15% of the parents who received the survey.<sup>2</sup> To better understand what we heard from parents in the survey, we conducted focus groups with 26 parents with students enrolled in six schools in spring 2022. Schools distributed our online survey and focus group invitations directly to parents.

<sup>1</sup> For other reports in the series: [https://crpe.org/focus\\_areas/charter-schools-and-public-school-choice/](https://crpe.org/focus_areas/charter-schools-and-public-school-choice/).

<sup>2</sup> We cannot calculate the exact response rate since this was an anonymous survey delivered directly to parents by schools.

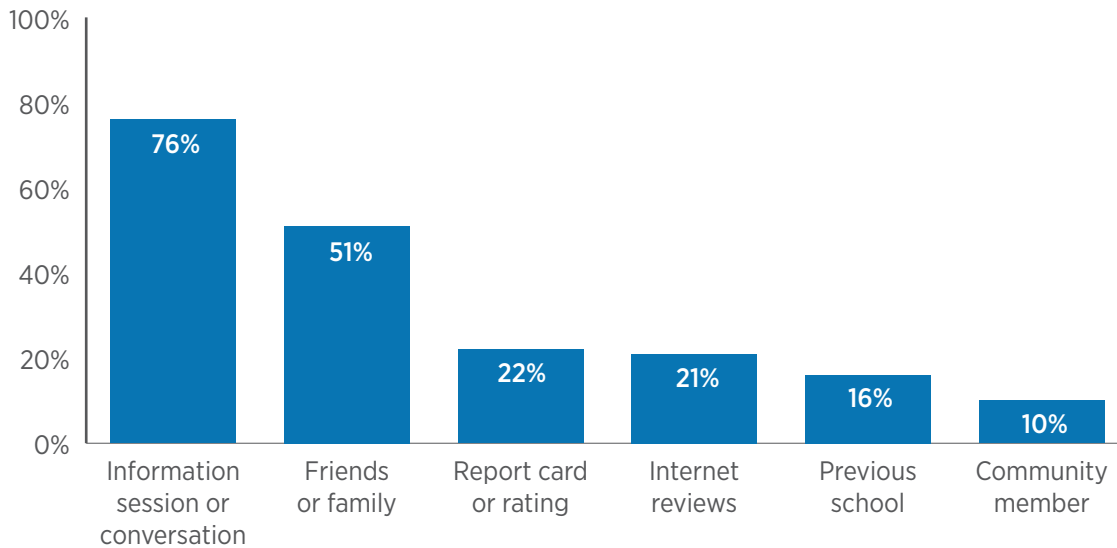
## Parents seek out charter schools after difficult experiences in traditional public schools

On both the survey and during focus groups we asked parents a number of questions about how they choose their student's charter school.

Most study parents told us on the survey that they gathered information about their student's school through either a school information session, conversation with staff, or through word of mouth channels, either from family or friends with experience or knowledge of the school. Lesser used sources of information included school report cards or ratings, internet reviews, and through their students' prior school or community.

**Figure 1**

Where parents got information about their student's school, percentage agree or strongly agree by type

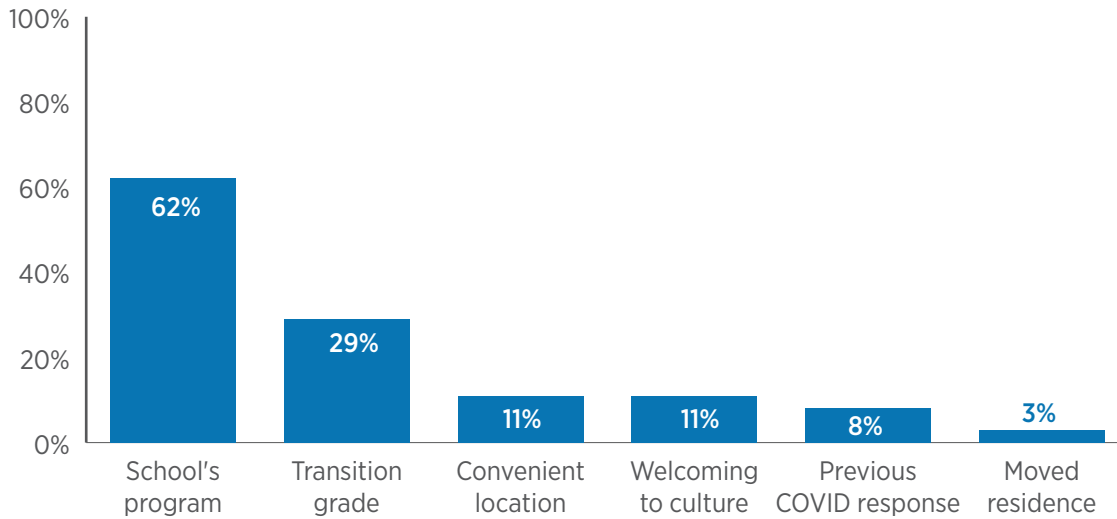


When asked why they enrolled their student in the school, parents who responded to the survey overwhelmingly said that they enrolled their student because “the school’s program and curriculum are a good fit for my child.” To a lesser extent, they said they chose the school because they were at a transition year (“my child started kindergarten, 6th, or 9th grade”), the school is welcoming to “my family’s cultural heritage,” the school was convenient, they were dissatisfied with how their previous school had handled the Covid-19 pandemic, or that they had moved.

## WHAT DO WASHINGTON PARENTS THINK ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS' CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Figure 2

Why parents chose their student's school, percentage by reason



During the focus groups, we heard similar sentiments. Most study parents told us that they were actively looking for a new school for their student when they heard about their school from friends, family, or a trusted advisor—although a few parents reported that they learned about their school from their own research or via the school's own marketing (e.g. lawn signs). To get additional information on the school they reported attending school-run information sessions and, if the school was not brand new, visiting the school with their student.

When we asked study parents why they chose their student's school, these parents echoed our survey findings but added more nuance. They reported that they were interested in their school's program, but only insofar as it was not like the program that was offered at their traditional public school. In the words of one parent, "We were searching around after bad experiences with public school. We were looking around for other options, and a friend, whose kids had attended the school, highly recommended [the charter school]." These findings echo those in another [CRPE report on special education in Washington charter schools](#).

The parents we spoke with in the focus groups were looking for an alternative that had a smaller, more manageable environment for their student and one that provided one-on-one attention and differentiated instruction according to student needs. As one parent reported, "We were looking for a smaller middle school environment than our neighborhood school. I had a good teacher friend out of state who had come to the area... She told us about the school."

Many parents wanted a school that was not going to treat their child like an afterthought, or, as one parent put it, "as though every student [fits in] one box and if [your student] doesn't fit in it, you're just getting pushed through the cracks." They also were looking for a school that was going to make sure their kid succeeded and to address their individual learning needs. Another parent shared, "this [charter] school really shows how much they care for the individual student."

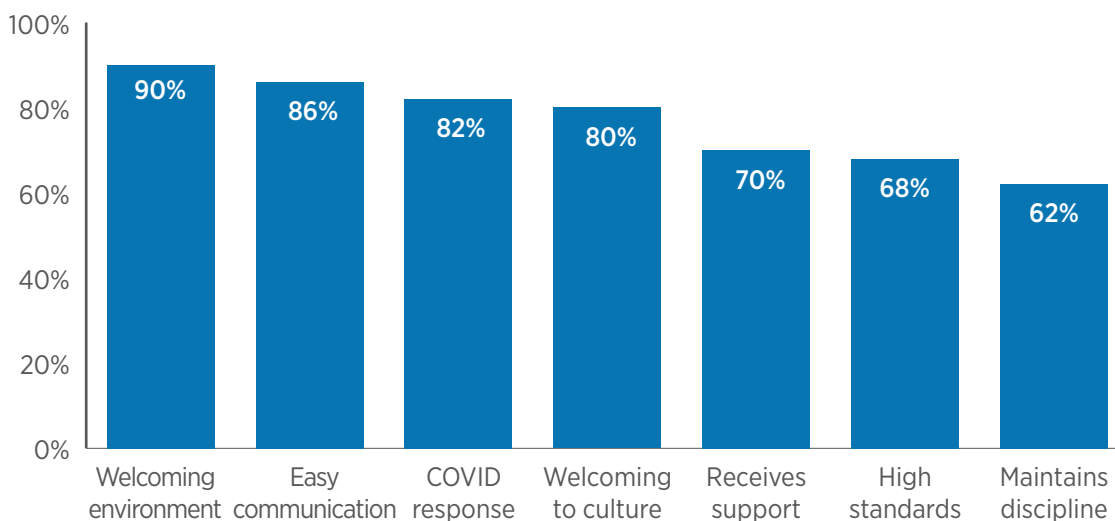
## Parents value one-on-one attention and supportive environments

We asked study parents what they valued about their student's school on both the survey and during focus groups.

On the survey, the vast majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that: their student's school was welcoming; communication with school staff was easy; school staff valued their home culture; there were supports for their student's success; school staff had high academic standards; and the school maintained good discipline.

**Figure 3**

What parents value, percentage agree or strongly agree by reason



The parents with whom we spoke in focus groups similarly reported that as they got to know their student's school, they continued to value the aspects that originally drew them to the school (i.e., small size and one-on-one attention) but also came to appreciate that:

- their student reported feeling known by adults at the school;
- the school cultivated a culture of respect, that they valued diversity, and created a safe environment for students and adults;
- the school devoted time to supporting students' "soft skills" like teaching them how to learn or having social-emotional development woven into their curriculum or educational program;
- that their students were learning how to function in the real world through elements of their school's program; and
- for parents who had students with IEPs, their school's handling of their IEP and IEP meetings.

One parent captured several of these sentiments, "I feel like [staff at his school] generally treat him like they want him to succeed and are willing to take the time to help him succeed. He's not a number, he's a person, you know... He's able to get more of that one-on-one with the teacher. He actually enjoys going to school."

## WHAT DO WASHINGTON PARENTS THINK ABOUT THEIR STUDENTS' CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Another parent articulated their satisfaction with the school's culture and value of diversity: "We are enjoying the culture. We came from a school which was all white. She wasn't learning the way she is now. I appreciate that, because I think that is going to make her a more well-rounded person."

### Parents are satisfied with their student's school *and* offer improvements

Overall, study parents were very satisfied with their student's school. When we asked parents via the survey, 67% said they would "definitely" or "probably" recommend their student's school to a friend or family member. Parents who participated in focus groups were nearly unanimous in their satisfaction with their student's school. Illustrative quotes from parents included: "All I have to say is thank you;" "My kids are growing socially and emotionally;" and "My student said, 'I feel listened to by my teachers.'"

During focus groups, we also asked parents what they thought could be improved about their student's school. Here we heard four overarching themes:

- **Staff and teacher turnover:** We heard parents discuss how the departure of key school staff negatively affected their student's academic and social-emotional progress. Parents noted these losses were especially painful when the staff had been intended to "loop" or work with students over the course of multiple school years. Parents also wanted more information from schools about how their student's needs would continue to be met in the wake of teacher or staff departures.
- **Lack of resources:** Parents also wished that their student's school had more resources for sports or extracurricular activities; parents noted that these additional resources could help their student better make the transition from remote to in-person learning. Some parents expressed interest in improved facilities. In the words of one parent, "[I'd like to improve] access to resources because of the idea that we are taking away from the public school district—that doesn't cheat [the school], it cheats the kids."
- **Anti-charter bias:** Parents, especially those whose students had been enrolled in traditional public schools, noted a sense of anti-charter bias during their interactions in the broader community. Parents hoped the schools could do some outreach to their community to clear up some misconceptions about what charter schools are: "I would like to see improvement in advocacy for charter schools in regards to informing the public of what charter schools actually are."
- **Community violence:** Parents with students enrolled in schools that were located in urban centers also worried about violence from the surrounding neighborhood creeping into their student's school. One parent reported keeping their student home on occasion due to these concerns.

## Outstanding questions & implications

We heard from the parents who participated in our survey and focus groups that they were very satisfied with their student's school. These parents, while not necessarily a representative sample, show that many are finding charter schools to be a good option for their students and provide a positive counterpoint to difficult experiences they had in traditional public schools. These parents told us that they valued the one-on-one attention their student received and the school's environment and culture. At the same time, these parents also highlighted important challenges that they felt impacted their student's progress, mainly staff turnover and a lack of resources.

After eight years filled with tension and conflict surrounding the existence of charter schools and following multiple Covid-19-related disruptions, these schools remain but on shaky ground. Significant questions still loom over their future; this study leaves us with these four questions about the next steps for the charter sector in Washington State:

- **How can charter leaders continue to leverage what is going well?** With such positive feedback coming from parents, how can charter school leaders continue to leverage what is going well while continuing to grow enrollment? For example, how can they nurture word-of-mouth networks to boost enrollment and clarify that charter schools are public schools? Also, how can charter leaders maintain one-on-one attention and “small size feeling” even while continuing to grow?
- **How can charter leaders address parents' concerns?** Regarding staffing, how can leaders improve their communication and transparency around staff turnovers? Are there other community-based resources available (e.g., community organizations, churches) that can partner with schools to help create a sense of continuity in the face of inevitable staff turnover?
- **How are charter leaders communicating about their educational program?** Throughout the focus groups we were surprised with how *infrequently* parents mentioned the educational program (e.g., curriculum, instruction) of their student's school. In light of this, to what extent do charter leaders' explanations resonate with parents? Similarly, what impact measures are schools tracking, and how are they communicating these to parents and the broader community?
- **How are charters leaders supporting broader advocacy efforts?** Several parents offered to advocate for their schools and charter schools in general. Are there roles for the broader community, including parents, foundations, authorizers, and state-level advocacy groups, in supporting educational and advocacy efforts? Are there ways for parents to be more involved in communication and outreach efforts? Relatedly, are there national lessons on ways to address broader public opinion about charter schools?

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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