

Washington Charters in the news!

Editorials

Charter schools show promise; there should be more of them in WA

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The Summit Sierra charter school cafeteria in Seattle in 2019. Sierra's is the first graduating class from a Washington charter school, along with peers who attended a sister campus in Tacoma. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times)

By [The Seattle Times editorial board](#)

Charter schools, still a fledgling group after a decade of operation in Washington, will remain at that scale unless the state Legislature takes action.

Considering the body's current composition — and the influence of the anti-charter teachers union within it — this is unlikely. That is a shame, and potentially a loss, for the 1,200 students on charter school waiting lists.

The state's window for authorizing more charters closed in 2021, and though it had allowed for 40 schools to open, only 24 did. Some flamed out and closed. Currently, there are just 17, serving about 4,800 students.

That tiny sample makes it tricky to answer the most important question about them: Are charters in Washington working as intended? The idea was to provide a publicly funded option for kids who were faring poorly in traditional public schools, particularly low-income, Black and Hispanic students, and those whose first language is not English.

An [exhaustive report](#) released in May by the state Board of Education suggests that, after a few stall-outs, the sector has begun to post promising results. Last year, Black students in charter schools scored higher on English exams than Black students in traditional public schools, and 50% met grade-level standards, compared to about 40% overall.

Teachers often point to growth as a better measure of education quality than scores. There, too, rates for charter schools were higher — particularly in math — compared with similar students in traditional schools.

These results won't matter to people who see charters as nothing but siphons diverting money toward private entities. It's a valid concern. But lost in this debate is the notion that charters were conceived as laboratories for teaching approaches that, if successful, could be spread.

With this in mind, it's worth looking at [Rainier Prep](#), a charter middle school in White Center, where 73% of students are low-income and 61% were at grade-level in English in 2023. Only 30% of middle schoolers in Rainier's home district, Highline, met that mark, though the poverty rates are similar. There was an even larger difference in pass rates for math.

Not every charter school has such exemplary results. But under Washington's rigorous authorization law, problems have been flagged and addressed — unlike in traditional public schools, where subpar performance lingers on and on.

The main reason seven charters have closed is financing, which is tougher for them because they get no access to local levies and typically use a big chunk of their state funding to lease classroom space. You could say they are teaching with one hand tied behind their backs. Remember, under the voter-approved initiative that created them, charters are public schools and their students are entitled to state support.

The state Board of Education recommends reopening the window to authorize more charters. The Seattle Times editorial board agrees. If they are running lean, and students who suffered in traditional schools are doing better in charters, Washington owes it to families to provide their kids a similar chance to thrive.

The Seattle Times editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Melissa Davis, Josh Farley, Alex Fryer, Claudia Rowe, Carlton Winfrey and William K. Blethen (emeritus).