

My name is Michael Chartier and I am a policy director for Excel in Ed. Excel in Ed is a national non-profit that supports state leaders in transforming education to unlock opportunity and lifelong success for each and every child. We are focused on educational quality, innovation, and opportunity—both within and outside of the traditional education system.

While charter schools are often thought of in urban settings, rural charter schools also play an important role for those communities. Across the country, there are over 900 rural charter schools operating in the 2023-24 school year educating about 360,400 students. These schools account for around 12% of the overall charter schools in the country. In neighboring Minnesota, the state with the first charter school law, there are 75 charter schools that educate students in the state's rural communities. Each school educates anywhere between 20 and 600 students.

Rural charter schools can utilize their flexibility to tailor their mission and operations to their unique context. This could include things such as addressing teacher and staffing shortages, or providing a curriculum tailored specifically to things like an agricultural setting.

Rural charter schools can also fill educational and workforce needs in the community, like the Academy of Seminole in Oklahoma. The rural charter school founder established the school because of the workforce shortages he experienced trying to hire in manufacturing. Now, the school supports high school students with an emphasis on career planning and dual enrollment.

We know from experience that the states with the most robust charter sectors provide transparent guidance around academic and fiscal transparency, yet leave the finer details to be worked out between the charter school and their authorizer. Twenty states leave at least some of their authorizing power to their state education agency or their superintendent of public instruction. This strong relationship between an authorizer and the charter school is the basis for delivering an education that works for their individual students.

Additionally, one might ask how charter school students perform academically. Luckily, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University has compiled the most comprehensive series of studies on the academic progress of charter students. The most recent study, released in 2023, found that overall, charter school students received an additional 16 days of learning in reading and 6 days of learning in mathematics, compared to their traditional public-school counterparts.

Students in poverty had stronger growth than their traditional public school (TPS) peers with 17 additional days of learning in math and 23 days stronger growth in reading.

While the above results were positive, SPED students had weaker growth with 13 fewer days in reading and 14 fewer in math. An area of concern.

However, we also know from this research that the longer a student is in a charter school, the more additional learning will take place. By their fourth year, students in charter schools showed an additional 45 days of reading and 39 days of math.

In closing, thank you for allowing me to share a little about our thoughts on charter schools. This is an intense process, with lots of different policy considerations, from authorization to funding, but we believe that any program should center students and families. From having a transparent straightforward application for all potential charter operators, to allowing a wide variety of innovative models and increased flexibility for operators, students are the ultimate “customer” for these schools. Policymakers will never go wrong by putting them first.