

## **What Every Parent Needs to Know About Charter Schools: A Step-by-Step Guide to Finding the Right Fit for Your Family**

Charter schools are public schools that represent flexibility and accountability for parents. What do current charter parents think of their schools? And, how should you choose the right school for your child?

### **Parent Support**

In 2002, almost 67% of parents responding to a parent survey gave their child's charter school an A or an A+. In 2006, that figure rose to over 80% of parents who gave their child's charter school an A or A+.

- Findings from the 2002 Survey of Parents with Children in Arizona Charter Schools: How Parents Grade Their Charter Schools, March 10, 2003 and Arizona State Board for Charter Schools Parent Survey Final Evaluation Report, May 1, 2007.

### **Public Support**

Support for public charter schools reached 60% in 2007.

- 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of The Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, 2007.

### **Why Choose Charters?**

The main reasons parents choose charters are:

1. Small class size (57%)
  2. Quality of teachers (45%)
  3. Specialized curriculum (40%)
  4. Unhappy with student progress at prior school (33%)
- Arizona State Board for Charter Schools Parent Survey Final Evaluation Report, May 1, 2007.

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## **How Do I Choose a Charter School For My Child?**

The best way to ensure your own satisfaction with a charter school is to research your options. We have outlined several key questions you should ask yourself.

### **Q: How do I know if a charter school is a right choice for my child?**

**A:** Consider your child's needs and your family's needs and values. Focus on four fit factors:

- 1) what your child learns,
- 2) how your child learns,
- 3) social issues, and
- 4) practical matters.

Read about these fit factors in more detail at <http://www.greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/AZ/308/improve/print>.

You can also complete a worksheet on the four fit factors through the Picky Parent Guide at <http://www.greatschools.net/pdf/articles/picky/GreatFitChecklist.pdf>.

### **Q: How do I find a charter school in Arizona?**

**A:** There are a number of different websites that can help you locate a charter school that meets the needs of your child.

- Search for a charter school by school name, zip code, and/or area of specialty (such as Montessori, Back to Basics, or an alternative school) at the Arizona Charter Schools Association website, <http://www.azcharters.org>.
- Search for a charter school by city, county, zip code, among other categories at the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) website, <http://www.ade.state.az.us/CharterSchools/Search/>.
- If your high school student needs an alternative schedule or works better in a non-traditional environment, ADE has a list of alternative schools at <http://www.ade.state.az.us/> (on the left hand menu choose "find a school", and then on the pull down menu that appears, choose "alternative schools list".)

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- Investigate individual schools and learn the school's rating and test scores, and compare to the ratings of the other schools nearby. Plus, read student and parent comments regarding the schools. <http://www.greatschools.net>.
- Search for charter schools both in and outside of Arizona at [http://www.edreform.com/charter\\_schools/maps/](http://www.edreform.com/charter_schools/maps/), [www.publicschoolreview.com/find\\_schools.php](http://www.publicschoolreview.com/find_schools.php), or <http://www.schooldigger.com/>.

**Q: I have found several charter schools that may meet my child's needs, how do I find out more about them?**

**A:** Some of the same websites listed above also give you more details about the school's performance and/or other data.

- ADE lists top Arizona schools by excelling and highly performing based on AZ Learns and the Arizonan Department of Education school rating system at <http://www.ade.state.az.us/profile/publicview/Excelling.asp> and <http://www.ade.state.az.us/profile/publicview/HighlyPerforming.asp>
- ADE posts the school report card of every public charter and district school in Arizona at [http://www.ade.az.gov/srcs/find\\_school.asp?rdoYear=2007](http://www.ade.az.gov/srcs/find_school.asp?rdoYear=2007). The ADE school report card includes enrollment data, academic goals and mission, safety data, teacher experience, types of programs, and a breakdown of test scores.
- Go to the individual school's website. Many schools have their own websites that can provide you with information on their programs. You can also call the principal or school leader to arrange a school visit. Charter school leaders are more than happy to hear from you and would welcome the opportunity to show you their schools.

**Q: What questions should I ask when I go on a school visit?**

**A:** When you go to visit the school, first request to meet with the school administrator and a teacher. Tour the school to check out their facilities and classrooms. Ask questions such as:

- What is the teaching and learning philosophy?
- What is the AZLearns rating?(\*defined at end)
- What percent of the students pass AIMS?
- Does the school conduct any other assessments of student learning besides the AIMS?
- Does the school offer any extracurricular activities or field trips?

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- Are there health services on site?
- How are parents involved with the school?

**Q: Is there anything that would prohibit my child from being able to attend a charter school?**

**A:** Charter schools are public schools which all children are permitted to attend. Some schools, however, may have more applicants than seats available and must hold a lottery. Some schools may have an enrollment process as long as it is not discriminatory and it is clearly defined in the school's charter.

**Q: How do I know that the charter school I chose is a responsible, viable, organization?**

**A:** Charter schools receive funding from the state, generally based on the number of students enrolled in the school. Because charter schools receive public funds, they are accountable fiscally and in other areas. Generally, charter schools are accountable in at least four areas:

- Academic
  - Students in charter schools must meet certain learning standards.
  - Students in charter schools must be tested according to state assessment measures, No Child Left Behind assessment measures, and any school mandated assessment measures.
  - Students in charter schools may not pass to the next grade level if these academic standards are not met.
- Fiscal
  - Charter schools are financially accountable for the lawful use of public funds, and provide yearly audits to the state.
- Rule Compliance
  - Charter schools must comply with various federal and state laws, and are subject to site visits by their authorizer.
- Public/Parental
  - Each charter school is accountable to parents, students, the school's governing board, and their charter granting agency (such as the state board for charter schools or a local school district). Charter schools can be closed down by their authorizers if they do not recruit enough students, do not find a facility, do not

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adequately meet the needs of their students, or do not adequately meet their fiscal responsibilities.

## **What are the Best Charter Schools in Arizona?**

There are a number of charter schools in Arizona which have won various awards for their dedication to student achievement.

**Basis Charter School** ranked 16<sup>th</sup> and **Northland Preparatory Academy** ranked 56<sup>th</sup> in *U.S. News & World Reports* list of America's top public schools.

**Challenge Charter School** and **Presidio School** were awarded No Child Left Behind ó Blue Ribbon Schools in 2007 by the U.S. Department of Education.

**Challenge Charter School** and **Triumphant Learning Center** were among the winners of the National Charter Schools of the Year presented by The Center for Education Reform.

**Arizona LEARNS** is a rating system for our schools. Almost every school has been evaluated, based on three years performance, as being one of the following four categories:

- **Underperforming:** needs to meet state performance and state progress goals.
- **Maintaining Performance:** meets state performance goals, and needs to meet state progress goals.
- **Improving:** exceeds state performance and state progress goals.
- **Excelling**
  - **K-8:** 90% of pupils achieved one year of academic progress in all subject areas of the Arizona measure of academic progress, and ninety percent passed all subject areas of the AIMS test.
  - **9-12:** 90% of pupils passed all subject areas of the AIMS test, the dropout rate is no more than six per cent and the school's graduation rate is at least ninety per cent.

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