



**Wisconsin Charter Schools Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)
(updated in 2020)**

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Accountability

Are charter school students required to take Wisconsin's Standardized Testing?

Charter school students are required to take Wisconsin standardized tests (forward and ACT). Many charter schools also use curriculum-based, mission-specific, and other nationally recognized standardized assessments to monitor and assess student learning.

Are charter schools held accountable for student growth like other public schools are?

Although charters have greater flexibility in their curriculum and education philosophy compared to traditional public schools, they also are held to greater responsibility to prove that their education methods are effective. Charter schools are held to specific performance measures that are found in the charter contract between the governance board and the charter school authorizer.

Charter schools are solely responsible for ensuring that their students are making progress and learning to the level stated in the contract. If a charter fails to help students meet educational goals or does not meet the performance measures in the contract, the authorizer can intervene and ask the charter school to implement a school improvement plan. If the charter school continues to not meet performance measures, the contract may not be renewed and/or the charter school could be shut down.

Contracts

Is there a government body that oversees or approves charter contracts?

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) collects and files all charter contracts in the state. DPI uses a [WI Charter Contract Benchmark Document](#) to ensure all contracts are meeting state statute.

Can a school district board member be on the charter governance board?

A district board member can be on the charter school governance board for a charter school which they are not authorizing. A district board member cannot serve as both a charter school authorizer and a governance board member for the same charter school.



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Are charter school contracts renewable after 5 years?

Yes, they may be renewed after five years, but that renewal is at the authorizer's discretion. A charter school contract may be for any term not exceeding five school years and can be renewed for one or more terms not exceeding five school years. The contract must specify the amount to be paid to the charter school during each year of the contract. Charter school contracts are written between the charter school governing board and the charter school authorizer. For answers to more questions about contracts see [WRCCS Charter Contract FAQ Sheet](#).

Enrollment

Is there a minimum number of students required to start a charter school?

There is not a state law specifically stating a minimum number of students required for a charter school. A charter capacity number is often dictated in the charter contract between the charter school authorizer and the charter school governance board.

Can charter schools turn away students?

Charter schools cannot turn away students. There cannot be entrance exams or any other selective process put into place that would make the enrollment into the charter school inequitable. Many charter schools are in high demand, and when that demand exceeds the space available in the school, a charter school must hold a randomized, blind lottery to determine which students are admitted.

Are charter schools public? Are charter schools the same as voucher schools?

Voucher schools, by definition, are private schools and do not have to follow all of the same rules as public schools. Most voucher schools charge tuition to private-paying students. Vouchers are then given to families to help offset the cost of the private school. Voucher schools are not held to the same state and federal accountability standards as charter schools and/or traditional schools.

All charter schools are public schools. Charter schools are non-religious and may not charge tuition. They are governed by boards of directors. Charter schools are beholden to a "contract" (or charter), granted significant autonomy, and operate as independent entities. The schools are expected to provide greater academic results and innovation. Charter schools are required to administer the same state tests required of all public schools.



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Are charter schools only for at-risk students?

Charter schools are public schools and are open to ALL students. Charter schools cannot ever charge tuition, and they accept any student who wants to attend. Charter laws require that students are admitted by a random lottery in cases where more students want to enroll than spots are available in the charter school.

Charter schools are specifically designed to reach students that are educationally disadvantaged. Educationally disadvantaged students are defined as economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, migrant students, limited English proficient students (also referred to as English learners or English language learners), neglected or delinquent students, or homeless students.

Charter schools meet the needs of the community differently than traditional schools. There are several charter schools that are specifically designed to meet the needs of at-risk students, but not all charter schools have this specific design.

Funding

What grants are available to charter schools?

Currently, the [Federal Charter Schools Program Grant](#) (specific to only charter schools) is available in Wisconsin through the Department of Public Instruction for new charter schools and existing high-performing charter schools that wish to expand or replicate. However, since charter schools have a specific mission and vision, telling their story and explaining community need help charter schools specifically align to many grants and potential funders.

What is the best resource for writing a successful grant? Are there certain grant writers that always get the grants?

There are several grant writers across the state of Wisconsin that can support the writing for a Charter School Program (CSP) grant with the Department of Public Instruction. Most CESAs in Wisconsin, Innovative Schools Network (ISN), and several independent consultants could support the writing of a charter school grant.

How does a charter school sustain after planning grants are used up?

Many charter schools in Wisconsin have successfully sustained academically, operationally, and financially well after the life of a planning grant. Many charter schools build fund balances and/or endowments to ensure financial sustainability. A clear and



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well-communicated vision and mission of the school helps guide practices for alignment and sustainability. Effective governance boards provide the school with essential oversight and governance. A strong authorizer and charter contract provides the charter school with autonomy in exchange for accountability around performance.

Charter School Program (CSP) grants are designed to help the school build capacity. It provides essential curriculum supplies, staff professional development, and governance and authorizer training. The charter school uses state of Wisconsin per-pupil funding along with federal aid to create a yearly operating budget. During the planning of the charter school, attention is given to ensure the charter school operational model (staffing, facility, and program) is financially sustainable based on the per-pupil allocation.

Do charter schools drain financial resources from traditional public schools?

Charter schools use state of Wisconsin per-pupil funding along with federal aid to create a yearly operating budget. Per-pupil allocation money follows the student. When parents decide to send their child to a charter school, the money follows the student to the charter school's LEA. With regard to district instrumentality charter schools, the per-pupil allocation money is governed by the district instrumentality charter schools.

Do charter schools receive ongoing funding of any sort, or do the costs have to be budgeted entirely by the district?

Charter schools use state of Wisconsin per-pupil funding along with federal aid to create a yearly operating budget. During the planning of the charter school, attention is given to ensure the charter school operational model (staffing, facility, and program) is financially sustainable based on the per-pupil allocation. Each charter contract establishes how the funding flows to the charter school. There is an authorizer fee (often no more than 3%) that charter schools pay to the authorizer for oversight services. Charter school governance boards can apply for grants or create additional revenue streams.

Need

Who or what organization in a community initiates the need or desire for a charter school? Where do they start?

A teacher, administrator, community person/organization, or a local school board of education wanting to open a charter school must apply to a charter school "authorizer." The authorizer reviews each application and decides whether to approve or decline it.



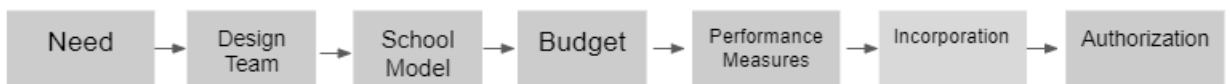
This resource was developed by WRCCS at CESA 9 between 2018-2023 with funding from Wisconsin's \$95 million dollar federal Charter Schools Program grant from the U.S. Department of Education. See wrccs.org for more information.

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The recommended place to start is with a specific community need. Reach out to [WRCCS](#) for further support.

What's the next step after the need is established?

The steps will differ for each chartering process. Here is an example of a typical process to authorization. Please keep in mind that there are many sub-steps to each step in the chartering process:



How do you communicate the benefits of a charter school to a reluctant community?

This can vary depending on the community and the familiarity with charter schools. The first step is always to ensure the community has an understanding of what a charter school is and what a charter school is not. We recommend holding forums or community meetings to ensure a shared understanding. Many communities also participate in visits to other communities that have charter schools.

Miscellaneous

Is there a limit on the number of charter schools in a district?

There is not a limit to the number of charter schools in a school district.

Can a charter school be an online (virtual) program?

Yes. A virtual charter school is defined in [Wis. Stats. § 115.001 \(16\)](#) as “a charter school under contract with a school board under [s. 118.40](#) in which all or a portion of the instruction is provided through means of the Internet, and the pupils enrolled in and instructional staff employed by the school are geographically remote from each other.” Virtual charter schools are publicly funded, nonsectarian schools that are exempt from many regulations that apply to traditional public schools that offer some of their classes online. In addition, state statutes contain specific requirements that must be met by virtual charter schools. See [Wis. Stats. § 118.40 \(8\)](#).

How can a charter school operate in a small, rural school without available space?

Many district-authorized charter schools in Wisconsin are co-located in the



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same building as other district legacy schools. This is beneficial for both co-located Schools. These schools can share many of the facility, transportation, operation, and contracted services costs. Some charter schools in Wisconsin reclaim district schools or district buildings that have become vacant.

One other strategy that is practiced in Wisconsin rural areas is chartering a school to serve multiple schools. This allows the charter school more flexibility in where it is located. It also provides a larger base for enrollment and opportunity.

Do charter schools have an easier time recruiting staff?

There is not any specific research that supports an answer to this question. However, charter schools tend to have a specific vision, mission, and program that addresses an identified community need. This specific identity can often help recruit the “right” teachers for the school. Wisconsin charter schools have also been seen to re-energize an existing teaching pool. Many Wisconsin teachers view their charter school as a second career opportunity by transitioning to teach at a charter school.

Do all charter schools file for non-profit status?

Charter school governance boards need to be incorporated as a legal entity in order to meet state statute and enter into a contract with a charter school authorizer. Some charter school governance boards in Wisconsin opt to incorporate as non-stock corporations (not-for-profit entities) where they also may choose to file Form 1023, Application for Recognition of Exemption Under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

