Connecticut Charter School Law Overview

The Connecticut charter school law (enacted in 1996) is a result of a state Supreme Court decision (Sheff v. O'Neill) requiring the legislature to correct the inequity of education provided to minority students. The legislature and governor judged that charter schools could be catalysts in the restructuring of public schools to increase racial and ethnic diversity.

Current law allows the State Board of Education to authorize a total of 24 charter schools, with such schools becoming either a “local charter school” or a “state charter school.” To be a local charter, the applicant obtains approval from the local governing board before requesting a charter from the state. To be a state charter school, the applicant goes straight to the state.

As of Fall 2002, there were 14 approved charters, with 13 currently operating. All are state charter schools. At one time, there were two local charters but both have been converted into magnet schools. Currently, the legislature has not appropriated any additional funds for new charter schools. Hence, no new applications are being accepted.

State Policy Environment

Support for Charter Schools: Connecticut earned a D+ for its level of support. It received very low scores for adequate technical assistance or resource center support, although the State Department of Education provides technical assistance to applicants and holds numerous workshops. The Charter Schools Network also provides some technical assistance and purchases memberships from the Connecticut School Board Association in order for charter schools to receive technical assistance from that organization.

The state also received low marks for sufficient contracting services; political support; acceptance by local districts; understanding by parents and the public; and the existence of ample opportunities for quality proposals to receive a charter. Respondents indicate that funding for charters has been minimal, and has affected the ability of the Department of Education to support its schools.

The state received high marks for providing for financially and legally autonomous schools, but state officials do maintain some control over funding, as specified in the charter.

Support and External Accountability for Authorizers: Connecticut received a D+ in this catego-
ry as well. As the only active authorizer, the State Board of Education receives funding for a charter school office (within the State Department of Education) to support several staff members. However, survey respondents gave a very low score for “adequate funding for authorizer staff and activities.” Indeed, charter funding is so low that no new applications are being taken. The state also received low marks for periodic oversight by a state body (although the Commissioner of Education must prepare an annual report for the legislature on the operation of charter schools—a criterion that was rated well) and watchful media.

The state received high marks for having an appeals process as well as a school-based accountability system. (There does not appear to be an “official” appeals process but, in practice, would-be charter operators were able to come directly to the State Board—and that proved to be the route to charters for all schools currently functioning in Connecticut.)

**Authorizer Practices**

**Application Processes:** Connecticut received an average of C– here. The lowest score was related to seeking new applications to meet market gaps, likely because of the singular state purpose for charter schools and the lack of funding for new applications.

**Approval Processes:** The state scored quite well in this category, with a B+. High marks were given for having multiple reviewers, as formal application review and approval processes are in place for charter schools. Also highly rated were criteria related to providing additional information should questions arise, providing denied applicants written explanations, and having a non-political, quality-based application-review process.

**Performance Contracts:** Connecticut received an A for its performance contracts, with extremely high marks on all criteria.

**Oversight:** The state’s B– is derived from averaging some very high and low scores. The latter were for unannounced site visits and shielding schools from red tape. The high marks were associated with site visits, requiring audits and progress reports from schools (which are published and available to the public), using those reports to flag problems and notify schools, and having a clearly defined set of actions to take when problems are found.

**Renewal and Revocation Processes:** Connecticut earned an A– for this category. The law doesn’t require a formal review, but charter schools have a clear understanding of renewal process expectations. As of Fall 2002, only one charter had been revoked or non-renewed.

**Transparency and Internal Accountability:** Connecticut received a B– here, with mediocre marks for most criteria. It did receive high marks for easily available application packets and for making approved applications available to the public.

**Overall Grade**

Based on scores for 56 criteria, Connecticut earned a B+ for its policy environment and a B for authorizer practices, resulting in an overall grade of B–. When observer and school operator survey respondents were asked to provide a single “holistic” grade, the average grade given was a C.

Charter schools in Connecticut are few and the program is static. It has developed good authorizing procedures—among the highest rated in this study—but its overall support for the charter movement is very low. Authorizers and policymakers are urged to review specific criteria for their state in Appendix A of this report, and on the web at [http://www.edexcellence.net/tbfinstitute/authorizers.html](http://www.edexcellence.net/tbfinstitute/authorizers.html).

Note: The grades for Connecticut are based upon survey data received from one authorizer respondent (representing the state’s only authorizer in the state); four observer respondents; and three charter operator respondents (of 13 total operating charter schools, or 23%).
### Connecticut

**Charter School & Authorizer Numbers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Initial Charter Law Enacted</th>
<th>1996</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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**Total Charter Schools & Students (as of Fall 2002)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># Approved Charter Schools</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># Operating Charter Schools</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># Charter Students (% of Total Public School Students)</td>
<td>About 2,224 (&gt;1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Closures (to date)**

| # Revocations or Non-renewals | 1 |
| # Voluntary Closures | 2 converted to magnet schools, 2 voluntary closures |

**Major Authorizers (those with three or more schools)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th># of Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut State Board of Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Source: Connecticut Charter Schools Network