



## Charter Schools: Changing Lives

*New Illinois Policy Institute documentary  
shows revolution in public education*

### The Problem

In Chicago, one out of two public high school students fails to graduate each year. High school dropouts face a difficult road, to put it mildly. Statistics show that dropouts are more likely to serve time in prison than earn \$30,000 a year.

Chicago's public schools, in short, are failing, and the consequences are dire.

### The Solution

Charter schools—a new kind of public school—have begun to reverse this trend. A new documentary from the Illinois Policy Institute, “Charter Schools: Changing Lives,” shows how charter schools are revolutionizing public education. The film features interviews and testimonials from students and educators at three of Chicago's inner-city charter schools. Their message is unanimous: charter schools have done a world of good, often changing the lives of their students.

“I remember entering here my freshman year barely knowing how to write a sentence,” said Chicago International Charter School senior Shantell Hopkins, who now expects to attend college after graduating from high school this year. Charter schools, says Hopkins, “hold you accountable for everything that you do.”

Charter schools have been indisputably successful in Chicago, with graduation rates averaging at 75%, and with some schools – like Chicago International Charter School – averaging an impressive 90%. Even more impressive is the fact that charters often achieve this success using less public funding than traditional public schools.

Charter schools are open to any student who applies, regardless of ability or location. They are run by independent non-profit and community groups, have the freedom to innovate, and provide parents with new choices within the public school system. Students are admitted by lottery if applications exceed the number of available seats—a frequent occurrence in Chicago, where there are nearly 13,000 families on waiting lists to get into one of the city's charter schools.

“At the bus stop, people see my uniform,” Daisy Bermudez of Pritzker College Prep says, “and they say that I'm so lucky.”

Until recently, Illinois state law capped the number of charter schools in Chicago, allowing only 30. A new state law has increased that number to 75, which will allow the number of charters in Chicago to grow in the short term. However, the cap—along with other restrictions on charter schools that hinder their growth in many of the state's neediest neighborhoods—should be removed altogether.

### Why This Works

Charter schools have been shown to boost graduation rates in Chicago. They have proven to increase the chance that their students will attend college. If state law lifts current restrictions on their growth, they can do the same in communities throughout Illinois.

The cap on charter schools “is a cap on opportunity. It's a cap on success. It's a cap on options,” says Kenneth Hutchinson, Director of College & Community Partnerships at Urban Prep Academy for Young Men in Chicago's Englewood neighborhood. If allowed to grow to their full potential, charter schools can change lives for hundreds of thousands of Illinois families by providing them with better educational choices—and a brighter future.

### About The Film

“Charter Schools: Changing Lives” was filmed and edited in the spring and summer of 2009 by Heather Wilhelm and Richard Lorenc of the Illinois Policy Institute, who visited three Chicago charter schools—Urban Prep Academy for Young Men, Chicago International Charter School's Ralph Ellison campus, and Pritzker College Prep—to interview students and administrators about the challenges and successes of charter schools.

The Illinois Policy Institute thanks the students, teachers, and staff who told their stories for “Charter Schools: Changing Lives”: Kenneth Hutchinson, Aakeem Chauncey, and Tyler Beck of Urban Prep Academy for Young Men; Veronica Aguilar, Daisy Bermudez, and Stephanie Martinez of Pritzker College Prep; and Conrad Timbers-Ausar, Shantell Hopkins, Erika Callahan, and Miche'le Johnson of Chicago International Charter School's Ralph Ellison Campus.

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