



Charting the Course

Illinois charter schools offer a proven solution to the state's dropout problem

The Problem

What would you do if your children could be on a championship-level team...but they weren't allowed to try out? Every day, kids from many of Illinois's roughest communities prove they can compete in the classroom. All they need is the opportunity—an opportunity often provided by charter schools.

Tragically, thousands of children are not given a chance to "try out" for better schools. They are locked into continually failing schools with low graduation rates, largely because of state laws that keep innovative educators from opening charter schools in many of Illinois's most troubled communities.

A new report from the Illinois Policy Institute looks at high school graduation rates in Illinois, according to statistics from the 2005-06 school year. Some highlights of the report include:

- Chicago's high school graduation rate is just 49.7 percent.
- Illinois's public high school graduation rate is 74.1 percent (20th nationally) according to *Education Week*, nearly 14 points lower than the official graduation rate as reported by the Illinois State Board of Education.
- The graduation rate of Illinois's fifteen lowest performing districts (with a minimum of 900 freshmen) is 51 percent.
- Outside of those fifteen districts, the high school graduation rate is 85 percent, higher than any other state in *Education Week's* widely read graduation rate rankings.
- Illinois would have led the nation in *Education Week's* 2009 rankings of state graduation rates if Chicago students had performed at the same level as students from the rest of the state – something they are already doing in many of Chicago's charter schools.

There is a clear problem with education in Illinois. However, there is also a working, proven solution, and it should be expanded.

Until recently, state law capped the number of charter schools in Chicago at 30, preventing more than 13,000 wait-listed children from receiving the quality education they deserve. That number has now been increased to 75.

Outside of Chicago, school districts have been granted near-total control over whether charter schools are able to open. As a result, only a handful of charter schools have opened throughout the rest of the state – despite the fact that communities such as Waukegan and Springfield are badly in need of better schools, and despite the fact that there is strong public support for charters in these communities.

Our Solution

Charter public schools significantly increase their students' chances of graduating high school. Indeed, the state's largest charter school, Chicago International Charter School, graduates 90.4 percent of its students—better than students in the suburbs and downstate Illinois, who graduate at a rate of 83 percent. Charter schools, in short, are doing their job – while much of the public school system is not.

We encourage the legislature to do the following:

- Lift the cap on charter schools in Chicago and statewide, before it again hinders the growth of charter schools in the city.
- Reform the charter school authorization process to allow more innovative schools in districts throughout Illinois.

Why This Works

By lifting the cap on charter schools, lawmakers can open a pathway to success that is currently blocked. A high school dropout has an equal chance of serving time in prison as earning \$30,000 per year. This is unacceptable. Charter schools throughout Chicago—and around the state—are proving that quality education and success is possible in Chicago's urban neighborhoods and struggling rural communities.

It is time to open the door to charter schools so that all Illinois children have the opportunity for an excellent education. Every child should be able to try out for a winning team. We can make that happen in our state.

Learn more at www.illinoispolicy.org