



## Charting the Course

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

For years, the quality of public schools in Illinois's inner cities and beleaguered rural communities has stood in stark contrast to that of schools in wealthier, safer, newer towns—and this is most evident when looking at high school graduation rates.

Statewide, on average, only 74 percent of public school students graduate from high school. The combined graduation rate of the bottom fifteen performers, among districts with 900 freshmen, is less than 51 percent. A young man who fails to earn a high school degree will, throughout his life, have a similar chance of doing prison time as he will of ever holding down a regular job that pays \$30,000 a year. The Center for Labor Market Studies estimates that each Illinois dropout costs taxpayers \$221,000 over the course of his lifetime. The disparity in graduation rates in Illinois, in other words, is not just a matter of statistics—it has a sizeable human impact.

There is a proven solution for Illinois's struggling schools, however. Charter schools can lead the effort to close the gap between rich and poor in Illinois's schools. Charter schools are public schools without entrance exams, open to any student. These schools are given the freedom to innovate with curriculum, length of school day, teacher compensation and student discipline. No two are alike. Urban Prep

Academy in Chicago, for example, is an all-boys college prep high school, while Chicago Virtual Charter School is a K-12 school where learning mainly takes place either online or through home-based study. These are just two of thirty-nine charter schools spread across Illinois.

As a whole, Chicago's charter schools significantly boost their students' chances of graduating high school and attending college, as demonstrated most recently in a report by the RAND Corporation. The state's largest charter school, Chicago International Charter School, has a dozen campuses across Chicago and a high school graduation rate of 90.4 percent, far higher than Chicago Public Schools' district-wide rate, which is often reported to be below fifty percent.

Neighborhoods in Chicago and communities throughout the rest of the state desperately need the innovation and improvement that charter schools provide. Communities such as Peoria, Springfield and Waukegan could use new charter schools of their own. This paper outlines steps that state and local policymakers should take to grow the number of charter schools throughout Illinois.

Specifically, local school districts should adopt a charter school request-for-proposal process. This an important first step toward vetting ideas from innovative educators who are eager to open new schools that can tackle challenges faced by area students.

For varied reasons, not all districts desire to act as a charter school authorizer. Therefore, it is also recommended that state