



Charter Schools and Higher Education Authorizers
A Research for Action Policy Note

January 2014

Pennsylvania Clearinghouse for Education Research (PACER)

Introduction

Charter school authorization, accountability, and funding will be key features of education policy debates in Pennsylvania over the next several months. One proposed policy, Senate Bill 1085, would amend significant aspects of the state's charter school law, including the system for charter school approval, specific criteria for evaluating proposed charter schools, policies concerning enrollment caps, and requirements for financial and other reporting. The legislation would also establish a Charter School Funding Advisory Commission comprised of representatives appointed by the Governor and General Assembly.

This brief focuses on one element of the legislation receiving particular attention: a proposal to allow higher education institutions—public and private, non-profit and for-profit—to authorize charter schools. It also provides important background from non-partisan sources and state agency websites to inform policymakers and the public on this aspect of the legislation.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How common is it for institutions of higher education to authorize charter schools?

Fewer than five percent of the nation's approximately 1,000 charter school authorizers are institutions of higher education (IHE); by comparison, roughly 90 percent of authorizers are local school districts or agencies. Nine percent of charter schools nationwide are authorized by IHEs.ⁱ

2. What is the landscape of higher education authorizers nationwide and in neighboring states?

Nationwide, 12 states permit higher education institutions to authorize charter schools: Hawaii, Indiana, Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin. Most IHE-authorized charter schools are concentrated in Midwestern states. Currently, there are no active IHE authorizers in Hawaii, Nevada, and Louisiana.ⁱⁱ

Across the remaining nine states, roughly 45 institutions or centers of higher education have approved at least one charter school; like charter schools themselves, a significant majority—90 percent—of IHE authorizers are in Michigan, Missouri, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin.

States with IHEs that have authorized at least one charter school are listed in Table 1, next page.

Table 1. States with Active Higher Education Authorizer Systemsⁱⁱⁱ

Note: Counts are drawn from state agency websites.

	Number of IHE Authorizers	Number of charters approved by IHEs
1. Michigan ^{iv}	11	243
2. Missouri ^{v vi}	9	37
3. Minnesota ^{vii}	7	25
4. Ohio ^{viii}	3	54
5. Indiana ^{ix x}	3	34
6. Wisconsin ^{xi}	2	13
7. Florida ^{xii}	2	6
8. Oklahoma ^{xiii}	2	6
9. New York ^{xiv}	1	124

3. How many higher education authorizers would exist in Pennsylvania under Senate Bill 1085? What types of higher education institutions would be permitted to authorize charter schools?

In its current form,^{xv} Senate Bill 1085 provides approximately 100 Pennsylvania higher education institutions with the power to authorize charter schools. The exact number of entities eligible to approve a charter school in a particular district varies depending on the local and county postsecondary landscape.

The proposed authorizer structure is as follows:

- District-Level Authorization.** Any postsecondary institution that enrolls at least 2,000 students would be permitted to authorize charter schools without local school district approval in the school district where the institution has its primary campus. Between 90 and 100 institutions of higher education statewide—including institutions that do not offer education programs, for-profit colleges, and two-year schools—meet this criteria based on Fall 2012 student enrollment figures.^{xvi}
- County-Wide Authorization.** Colleges or universities that enroll more than 2,000 students and offer four-year Bachelor’s degrees in education would have greater latitude, with the authority to approve charter schools without school district approval anywhere in the county where the institution has its primary campus.

- **Statewide Authorization.** Universities that enroll more than 2,000 students and award doctoral degrees in education may authorize a charter school without school district approval in any of the state’s 500 school districts. ^{xvii}

As currently written, Senate Bill 1085 would establish the potential for more charter school authorizers in a single Pennsylvania school district than exist in most states. For instance, as many as 15 IHE authorizers could become active as authorizers for the Radnor Township School District in suburban Philadelphia; this includes three institutions within the school district boundaries, two more elsewhere in the county that offer four-year degrees in education, and 10 institutions statewide that offer doctoral programs. Several additional institutions could be eligible authorizers if enrollment increased to 2,000 students.

4. What does rigorous research say about the relationship between greater diversity in authorizer types and academic outcomes?

A 2009 study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University examined the relationship between student achievement and multiple charter school authorizers, including but not limited to higher education institutions. The authors found that in states with multiple authorizers, “there is a significant negative impact on student academic growth, reducing learning gains by .08 standard deviations.” The authors suggest that, given a choice, charter school applicants “are strategic in their choice of authorizer and look for the option that is ‘easiest’ on charters.”^{xviii} While a 2013 CREDO study has been cited as evidence that higher education authorizers contribute to improved charter school outcomes, the study did not investigate this question.^{xix}

5. What does rigorous research say about the relationship between higher education authorization of charter schools and student academic outcomes?

A review of research found no evidence that a relationship exists between higher education authorizers and improved student achievement outcomes at charter schools.

A study by Carlson, Lavery, and Witte (2011) examined school-level student achievement data across a 10-year period in Minnesota and found that “the type of institution that authorizes a charter school has no statistically significant relationship with mean levels of student achievement” (p. 265). The authors go on to note that the “analysis did not uncover any evidence that permitting additional entities to authorize charter schools—particularly postsecondary institutions and nonprofit organizations—leads to differential student achievement outcomes.”^{xx}

Conclusion

Senate Bill 1085 represents a substantial rewrite of the state’s charter school law; a key facet is a higher education authorizer system that would allow proposed charter schools to seek approval from approximately 100 institutions without the input or approval of local school districts. The legislation does not require that the higher education institutions possess educational or management expertise or

capacity related to charter schools or public K-12 education more generally. In this way, the proposed structure differs from the framework in other states; for instance, New York’s higher education authorizer is a dedicated center— the State University of New York Charter Schools Institute—within a single public university system.

A review of relevant, rigorous research finds no evidence that higher education authorizers, in particular, correlate with student achievement gains. A comprehensive study of charter school performance in 16 states found lower student achievement in states with multiple authorizers, including non-profit organizations and higher education authorizers.

Sources

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- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) provided RFA the list of states with active higher education authorizers. NACSA data on number of higher education authorizers in each state and the number of charter schools sponsored by these entities was last updated in August, 2013. To provide readers with the most current representation of the national landscape, RFA staff examined each state’s education department website and collected the number of approved higher education authorizers and their associated charter schools. When RFA could not locate information regarding charter authorizers in a state, staff relied on NACSA data in the case of Florida, or recent newspaper reports in the case of Trine University in Indiana.
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- ^{xv} Senate Bill 1085, Printer’s Number 1597. Pennsylvania General Assembly, Regular Session 2013-2014.
- ^{xvi} National Center for Education Statistics. IPEDS data center. Fall enrollment 2012.
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