



QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU ENROLL YOUR CHILD IN A CHARTER SCHOOL

IMPORTANT: ELC's publications are intended to give you a general idea of the law. However, each situation is different. If, after reading our publications, you have questions about how the law applies to your particular situation, contact us for a referral, or contact an attorney of your choice.

In Pennsylvania, charter schools are *public schools* created by agreement (a "charter") with a local school board. Charter schools are considered alternatives to traditional public schools. Charter schools do not have to follow some laws that other public schools must follow. However, charter schools *must* comply with laws protecting *civil rights* and *student health and safety*. In addition, charter schools *must* obey state law when they suspend or expel students (for example, the charter school must hold a formal hearing prior to expelling a student). Charter schools also *must* obey *federal special education laws*.

Charter schools increase the number of tuition-free educational options for students. Some people believe that charter schools can be more creative than other public schools in meeting the needs of children, families, and the community. Please see ELC's "**Charter Schools-Frequently Asked Questions**" fact sheet for more general information about charter schools.

Sending a child to a charter school, especially one that is new, is a big step. Before you send your child to a charter school, you should make sure that you find out all that you can about the school. Tour the school. Ask questions of administrators and teachers. Talk to parents whose children currently attend the school. Talk to parents who took their children out of the school and find out why.

The following list of questions gives you some idea about what to consider before enrolling your child in a charter school. We hope that it will help you make an informed choice about whether a particular school is right for your child!

→ General Questions About the School

- How long has the charter school been open?
- What is the charter school's "mission?"
- Does the charter school require parents and/or their children to fill out an application form and/or come for an interview before the school will decide to admit the child? If so, what is the application process?
- Does the charter school have a waiting list?
 - If so, how long is it?
 - How does the charter school pull students off the waiting list? (Keep in mind that siblings of current charter school students get preference on a waiting list).
- How many students currently attend the charter school? Has enrollment been steady, or has enrollment decreased? How many students left the charter school last year?
- Does the charter school have an established curriculum of study? If so, what is it?
 - If the charter school is an elementary school, how does the school teach children to read? Is there an established reading program?
- How is the charter school "different" from my neighborhood public school?
- Does the charter school have a Student Handbook? Can I get a copy of the Student Handbook?
- What does the charter school do if a child misbehaves? What if the child has constant behavior problems? Does the school have a written Code of Student Conduct? How many students were expelled last year? Does the school have any programs to teach conflict resolution skills? Does the school offer a peer mediation program?
- Is the charter school's attendance policy different from the local school district's attendance policy?

- Does the charter school require parents to volunteer? What if I work during the school day? Can I volunteer at some other time?
- Is there an active Parent-Teacher Association? Am I required to attend conferences or other meetings at the charter school?
- If a parent has a complaint about something that is happening at the charter school, how is that complaint handled?
- Who is on the Board of Trustees? Are there parents on the Board? Are there educators on the Board?
- When is the next Board of Trustees meeting? Where is the meeting held?
 - A Board of Trustees oversees each charter school. Boards must hold regular meetings that are open to the public.
- Does the charter school have a dress code? If so, what is it?
- Does the charter school have information on student achievement? For example, how did the students at the school score on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA)? Has the school been making the "adequate yearly progress (AYP)" required by the No Child Left Behind law?

→ **Questions About Staff**

- What is the background of the current principal, and how long has he or she been with the charter school? Has the principal ever been an educator?
- How many certified teachers work at the charter school? How many "highly qualified teachers" work at the school? Has there been a lot of staff turnover since the school has been open?
- Does the charter school have a nurse on staff? If so, is the nurse full-time or part-time?
- Does the charter school have a guidance counselor? If so, is the guidance counselor full-time or part-time?

- Does the charter school have one or more certified special education teachers on staff? If so, is the teacher full-time or part-time?
- Does the charter school have a school psychologist on staff? If not, does the school have a contract with an outside agency to provide psychological services?

→ **Questions About Programs and Supports for Students**

- What academic courses does the charter school offer? Does the school have any special reading programs? Does the school offer science labs? Does it offer art, music, or any other "special" classes?
- Does the charter school offer any kind of extracurricular activities, such as a chorus, school newspaper, drama club, etc.?
- Does the charter school provide any before-school or after-school tutoring programs?
- Does the charter school provide any kind of counseling services, or do they contract with an outside agency to provide free counseling services to students?
- If my child has a disability, who provides special education? How? If my child has transportation included in his/her IEP, who provides the transportation?
- Is transportation to the charter school available? Does the school provide transportation, or does the local school district? If transportation is not available, will the school provide free tokens for public transportation?
- Does the charter school offer a free or reduced lunch program? If so, is the program up and running?
- Does the charter school have a library? Does the charter school have a gym or access to a gym?
- Do students get their own books, and if so, can they take the books home?

→ **More Information about Charter Schools in Pennsylvania can be found at:**

- **http://www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/site/default.asp**: This is the Pennsylvania Department of Education's website on charter schools. It contains a link to the Charter School Law, known as Act 22 of 1997, answers to frequently asked questions about Pennsylvania charter schools, and a list of names, addresses, and phone numbers for all the charter schools, including cyber charter schools, operating in Pennsylvania. Each charter school must also submit an **annual report** to the Department (and to the school district that approved its charter) about whether the charter school is meeting the goals of the charter. Each school's annual report is posted on this site. Click on "Reports" to access it. You can find out a lot of information about each school in its annual report.
- **<http://www.paayp.com>**: This site lists the annual reports on each public school required by the No Child Left Behind law. The reports tell whether the school is making adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reaching goals for student proficiency in reading, math, attendance, and other areas. You can search by the name of the charter school to pull up the report on the school.
- **http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/offices/c/charter_schools**: This is the website for the School District of Philadelphia's Office of Charter Schools. It has a list of frequently asked questions and answers, and a directory of Philadelphia charter school addresses and phone numbers. It also contains links to information about each school.