Examining the Landscape of Charter Systems in Georgia

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INTRODUCTION
• Charter schools have autonomy from district and state regulations to make their own decisions about:
  • Who they hire;
  • How they structure the school day; and
  • How they spend their resources.
• In exchange for this autonomy charter schools are expected to exceed state performance on educational outcomes.
• Most charter schools operate alone from their districts or with a consortium of schools that have adopted the same/ similar curriculum.
• Charter Systems
  • The state of Georgia permits school districts to apply for charter status.
  • Each school in the district is a charter school and each school makes decisions about its people, time and money.
  • These unique systems have yet to be evaluated to determine if districts are, indeed, relinquishing autonomy to their schools and what impact new governance practices may have on district performance.

METHODS
• Descriptive statistics
  • This study uses descriptive statistics to illustrate the characteristics and performance of Georgia’s 19 charter systems compared to traditional public school districts.
  • It also documents the governance policies of charter systems to evaluate how much autonomy schools have over their people, time and money.
• Analysis
  • Tables and figures: report the characteristics and performance of charter systems relative to traditional districts in Georgia for each year in operation as a charter system.
  • Governance practices are described and assessed to determine if each district’s schools have low, medium, or high levels of autonomy.
• Data
  • Demographic data, test scores and governance practices come from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement and the Georgia Department of Education.

RESULTS
Autonomy
• Each charter system makes the decision whether to give each school in its district autonomy regarding the way the school allocates its people, time, and money.
• People
  • Low (< 25% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Evaluation of staff;
    • Annual employment contracts;
    • Certification requirements;
    • Compensation model of salary schedules; and
    • Pay scale, experience, and training for substitute teachers.
  • Medium (26%–74% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Selecting professional development resources;
    • Control over position types, budgets, and qualifications; and
    • Control over hiring decisions, human resources, and work schedules.
  • High (75%–100% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Professional development requirements for staff.
• Time and Curriculum
  • Low (< 25% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Setting course/credit requirements;
    • Setting student technology and physical education requirements;
    • Establishing curriculum maps and lesson plan requirements; and
    • Setting a staff/student ration for non-class time.
  • Medium (26%–74% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Selecting curriculum and delivery methods;
    • Choice of textbooks, technology, instructional materials, and seat time establishment;
    • Career Pathway, dual enrollment, and credit recovery options;
    • Establishing additional mastery level requirements for performance; and
    • Selecting school calendars, daily/weekly class schedules, and co-curricular activities.
  • High (75%–100% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Selecting courses and programs offered.
• Finances and Operations
  • Low (< 25% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Managing fiscal and operational affairs independent of central office;
    • Managing transportation and food service decisions;
    • Selecting student and financial information systems; and
    • Establishing the school size and grade span.
  • Medium (26%–74% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Setting budget priorities with funds from state, local and federal funds;
    • Ensuring the school receives all per-pupil funds to which it’s entitled;
    • Maintaining a reserve fund;
    • Determining how the school uses its facility; and
    • Authorizing attendance policies.
  • High (75%–100% of districts) grant schools autonomy for:
    • Establishing school partnerships for school growth; and
    • Establishing student codes of conduct.