



Mississippi First's Policy Position on Charter Schools

What Charter Schools Are

Charter schools are public schools. They are funded through the same per-pupil funding formulas used for traditional public schools, and they must take the same standardized tests. One key difference is that charter public schools most often operate independently from local school boards. With this autonomy, charter school principals enjoy greater flexibility in managing the school budget, making staff changes, setting the academic curriculum, and extending the amount of instructional time. High-performing charters have used this flexibility to produce innovative practices that have resulted in amazing success. These schools can serve as a model for statewide reforms in public education policy. They can also serve as quality educational options for children and families, particularly those in low-performing districts with no access to quality alternatives. Although efforts to turn around our lowest-performing schools must continue with urgency, parents should be able to access a more immediate option for providing their kids with a quality education.

What We Believe About Charter Schools

Mississippi First believes that high-quality public charter schools should be a part of our state's public education reform strategy. While we understand the controversy this issue has produced in Mississippi, we come to our position with a primary focus on national policy research. We understand that the questionable motives of Mississippi's early charter advocates are a root cause of mistrust regarding charter schools. The mixed results highlighted in some studies have produced skepticism about the potential benefit of charter schools. Nevertheless, national studies have clearly identified certain districts, states, and charter managers that have produced remarkable results in some of the nation's lowest-performing areas with the least advantaged children. We want the Magnolia State to pull from the best practices of other states in order to build a high-quality public charter schools sector.

While we feel that public charter schools should be a part of a broad school reform strategy, we strongly believe that certain factors are critically important in order to ensure that a charter sector will improve the quality of education for Mississippi children. As we move forward on this issue, there are three elements that must shape our charter school sector:

Adoption of High-Quality Charter School Policies

National research on charter school success has been clear that state policies are critically important in the success of the charter school sector. States with strong policies use a rigorous process for approving charter applications, making it far more likely that only applicants with the highest potential for success are able to open schools. States with strong charter policies carefully evaluate schools to track their progress, and they do not shy away from closing low-performing charter schools that fail to produce expected results. As the charter movement has evolved from a novel concept to a permanent facet of our public school sector, states are continuing to evaluate their policies in order to improve the overall quality of their charter schools. As a late

arrival to this movement, Mississippi has an opportunity to enact policies that will encourage successful schools from the beginning.

Replication of Successful Practices

While increased autonomy gives charter schools greater flexibility to use innovative practices, many practices often used by charter schools can and should be implemented in traditional public schools. The national charter school movement is at its best when it is able to produce “laboratories of innovation” that could lead to far-reaching reforms in public education. States must study their successful charter schools in order to identify effective practices and then develop ways to properly replicate that success in all public schools. In other words, if more instructional time is proven to be a factor in charter school success, all public school children should have access to more instructional time.

Commitment to Broader Education Reform Effort

The fact that Mississippi has been at the bottom in academic achievement is the result of several different factors. Therefore, the effort to make our public education system one of the nation’s finest will require the adoption of several different policy solutions. Even if Mississippi is able to produce high-quality charter schools, Mississippi would still need to transform traditional public education to ensure an excellent education for all students. Mississippians who strongly favor or oppose charter schools, along with everyone else in the middle, must lend their support for pre-Kindergarten, college/workforce-ready academic standards, and a host of other reforms that, in concert, can finally produce deep and lasting improvements in our state’s academic standing.