

An Illinois Charter School Primer

What is a Charter School?

A charter school is a public school that receives state funding. They are nonsectarian and nonreligious. Charter schools are not supposed to be home based. However, there are 3 “blended” virtual schools which require students to take a portion of their classes from home. A charter school is also a non-profit school. With that, many charter schools are managed by an Education Management Organization (EMO) or Charter Management Organization (CMO), both of which are for profit.

Parents must apply for their children in order to attend a charter school. If the number of applicants exceeds the number of available spots a random lottery is supposed to be held which determines who will be granted admittance for the following school year. Once a student has “won” their spot in the school they do not need to keep re-applying each subsequent year.

Charter School Landscape

There are 64 charter schools in Illinois. The General Assembly has imposed “caps” on the number of charter schools that can be opened at any one time in the state. The reason for these caps is to avoid what has happened in other states where unlimited numbers of charters were opened resulting in very little to no accountability and oversight.

The “caps” in Illinois are applied to Chicago and then the rest of the state. Chicago is capped at 75 charter schools (5 of those charters being strictly for dropouts and at-risk students). There are currently 51 active charter schools in Chicago. The rest of Illinois is “capped” at 45. There are currently 14 active charter schools outside of Chicago.

Location	Active	Cap
Chicago	51	75
Downstate	14	45

There seems to be very little chance of exceeding those caps in the near future as Illinois has seen only 16 new charter application over the past three years.

How is a Charter School Authorized?

Currently there are three ways a Charter School can be opened in the State of Illinois:

1. A charter school applicant is approved by a local school board.
2. The Illinois Charter School Commission can overturn a local school board decision to deny a charter. Charters approved by this method become Commission-authorized charters.
3. The local electorate can approve a charter school by referendum at a regular scheduled election. To proceed by this route, the charter school applicant must submit the proposal to the State Charter School Commission to determine if the charter school complies with the Charter School Law. If it does, a minimum of 5% of the electorate would need to sign a petition to allow the question to be submitted for referendum.

How is a Charter School Funded?

If a local school board elects to approve a charter application it will be decided between the parent district and the chartering entity how much of the per capita tuition cost (PCTC) will be paid by the district. The agreed amount of PCTC paid must fall within the range of 75-125%.

If the state approves a charter applicant, either through appeal or requested intervention, the range of PCTC to be paid by the parent district to the charter school becomes 95-100%.