

DEC 2018



NEW KNOWLEDGE BRIEF

Bridging K-12 Schooling and Higher Education

THE BIG PICTURE

Public charter schools were conceptualized in the 1970s with the intention of creating autonomous schools that could pursue innovative educational practices and improve student achievement. America's first charter school law was signed in Minnesota in 1991 and the first charter opened there in 1992. Since then, the number of charter schools has grown to approximately 7,000 across 43 states and Washington DC, serving 3.2 million students.¹

Charter schools are named as such because they operate under a legally binding contract called a charter issued by a governing body authorized to hold schools accountable for meeting certain criteria and performance metrics. Oftentimes, local school districts serve as authorizers. In fact, 90 percent of authorizers are local educational agencies.²

Universities and colleges can legally authorize charter schools in 17 states and roughly 47 higher education institutions have taken on that role.³ Central Michigan University became the first university authorizer of public charter schools in 1994 and has authorized 64 schools serving more than 30,000 students in the state since.⁴

An even smaller number of universities go beyond authorization and actually operate and house a public charter school. The University of Chicago became one of those charter school operators in 1998. It was among the first universities to operate a public charter school with the opening of its first [University of Chicago Charter School](#) (UChicago Charter School) campus in the North/Kenwood Oakland neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. The school has since expanded to serve approximately 1,700 students across four campuses spanning pre-kindergarten through high school. Today, there are less than a dozen other such partnerships between a university and a public charter school, including at the University of Texas Austin, the University of Dayton, the University of New Mexico, the University of West Alabama, Purdue University, and Delaware State University.

A 2008 Issue Brief from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) describes the rationale of many universities that choose to become charter school operators:

“Driven by a commitment to advance education reform, connect research to practice, and better serve the communities in which they are located, institutions of higher education are increasingly tapping into the potential of the charter school sector to broaden the impact of their missions.”⁵

Still, very few higher education institutions operate public charter schools. The reasons for that surely vary, but NACSA suggests some of the major obstacles include earning commitment from key stakeholder groups, “the unprecedented levels of accountability set for the charter school sector,” and “the ongoing political debates that surround charters nationally.”⁶

Timothy F.C. Knowles, a chief architect and former director of the University of Chicago [Urban Education Institute](#) (UEI), acknowledged the risks to operating a public charter school, but ultimately said, “What are universities for if they aren't helping America solve its biggest problems?”⁷ That sentiment was an important impetus for the founding of the UChicago Charter School.

The book, *The Ambitious Elementary School: Its Conception, Design, and Implications for Educational Equality*, written by Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick, Stephen W. Raudenbush, and Lisa Rosen examines the UChicago Charter School elementary model and its success in narrowing achievement gaps. In regard to the potential promise of partnerships between higher education institutions and public, K-12 schools, the authors write “that new collaborations between researchers and practitioners are essential to clarify, improve, and disseminate powerful approaches to schooling for the nation's most disadvantaged children.”⁸

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO CHARTER SCHOOL

The UChicago Charter School plays a critical role in the production of new knowledge in preK-12 schooling, and is also a major beneficiary of it, bringing to life how university and preK-12 partnerships can connect researchers and practitioners in service of improving outcomes for students. The school is situated within and operated by UEI, which bridges the worlds of education research and practice to foster greater equity and excellence in public schooling. Across four units, UEI conducts rigorous applied research, trains teachers and school leaders, provides

research-based tools and resources to schools in 62 major cities across 34 states, and operates the preK-12 UChicago Charter School. Together, UEI's units produce research- and practice-based knowledge on what matters most for school improvement and student success, with the UChicago Charter School serving as a conduit for new knowledge from UEI as well as a pilot site for research-based tools and practices UEI's units have helped produce, including the [Strategic Teaching and Evaluation of Progress \(STEP\) System](#) and the [Early Education Essentials Measurement System](#).

The UChicago Charter School also provides the [University of Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program](#) (UChicago UTEP) with a site in which to complete a portion of its teacher preparation work. All of UChicago UTEP's teacher candidates tutor UChicago Charter School students and participate in a UChicago Charter School-based child study during their first year of foundational coursework.

The UChicago Charter School benefits from its proximity to the [University of Chicago Consortium on School Research](#) (UChicago Consortium) within UEI as well. Founded in 1990, the UChicago Consortium has established itself as a leader in rigorous, applied research that identifies what matters most for school improvement and student success. Based on the UChicago Consortium's research, the UChicago Charter School has established a number of policies, goals, and school-wide improvements. For example, the school established a 98 percent attendance rate goal for all of its campuses based on UChicago Consortium research illuminating the link between a 98 percent attendance threshold and college readiness.⁹ The school also regularly monitors its [Freshman OnTrack rate](#) — the proportion of its ninth grade students earning no more than one semester F in a core course and enough credits to be promoted to the tenth grade at the end of freshman year — as well as students' [attendance rates](#) and [GPAs](#) in light of the UChicago Consortium's research illuminating the importance of these measures for students' high school and college attainment.

The UChicago Charter School also benefits from its proximity to myriad resources and enrichment opportunities at the University of Chicago. The University's [Office of Civic Engagement](#) offers free tutoring and college counseling, connecting UChicago undergraduates with UChicago Charter School students through its [Neighborhood Schools Program](#). UChicago's Office of Civic Engagement and Facilities Services also sponsor a monthly seminar for UChicago Charter high school students interested in architecture and construction careers. Each session involves visiting an active construction project and interactive activities that expose students to the intricacies of planning and designing buildings.

Additionally, UChicago supports initiatives to improve the safety, health, and well being of UChicago Charter School students and families. The University of Chicago Police Department's [PAL program](#) provides after-school experiences that build academic and life skills for UChicago Charter's middle school students, and [UChicago Medicine](#) has supported work to improve asthma identification and education at the UChicago Charter School, screening over 1,200 students and identifying more than 280 with asthma or signs of asthma. The students who were identified, as well as their parents or guardians, received education and follow-up from a community health worker and the program helped reduce the number of emergency department visits for participants by 83 percent. UChicago Medicine also partnered with the UChicago Charter School to create the Fresh, Fit, Fun program designed to teach children, parents, and staff about nutrition, improve access to fitness activities, and train teachers on approaches to reducing childhood obesity.

With the aid of these partnerships and supports, the UChicago Charter School has generated strong results. An in-depth study of the UChicago Charter School's elementary model found that students who attended the UChicago Charter School by virtue of winning a random lottery achieved substantially more in reading and mathematics than those who lost the lottery and were unable to attend the school. Specifically, children who lost the lottery and therefore were unable to attend the school scored, on average, at the 26th percentile of the white distribution in Chicago. That means that 74 percent of the white students in Chicago would outscore those children. In contrast, children who won the lottery and therefore were able to attend the school scored at the 44th percentile of the white distribution. This means that just over half of the white students in Chicago would outscore those children. Thus, attending the UChicago Charter School closed most of the gap between these students and white students in Chicago. This result holds up for reading as well as math and is one of the largest effects of innovative schooling in the published literature.¹⁰ Additionally, two of the nation's leading economists and education scholars—Harvard University's Richard Murnane and University of California Irvine's Greg Duncan — showcased the UChicago Charter

School's North Kenwood/Oakland elementary campus as one of three of the nation's most promising educational solutions in their book, *Restoring Opportunity: The Crisis of Inequality and the Challenge for American Education*.

Evidence also suggests the UChicago Charter School's model is working to move students to and through college. Since 2012, 100 percent of the UChicago Charter School's graduating students have been accepted to college, and the UChicago Charter School holds one of the highest college persistence rates of all non-selective high schools in Chicago,¹¹ with alumni attending Stanford University, the University of Chicago, Oberlin College, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Missouri, Howard University, and other selective colleges across the country.

In addition to educating its own students, the UChicago Charter School also provides education and enrichment opportunities to students and families across Chicago's South Side. The UChicago Charter School's Woodlawn Campus offers free college counseling services, including financial aid counseling, college application assistance, and exam preparation, to all students in the neighborhoods surrounding the University of Chicago.



Ultimately, the UChicago Charter School points to the potential of partnerships between higher education institutions and K-12 schools. Universities can bring a wealth of interdisciplinary knowledge to bear on K-12 schooling, as well as valuable enrichment opportunities to K-12 students, while K-12 schools can inspire and inform higher education institutions' work to prepare teachers and conduct research that informs education policy and practice in meaningful and impactful ways.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

While the number of higher education institutions operating charter schools remains small, more are joining the space. For example, the University of West Alabama welcomed nearly 300 students for the first time to its PreK-12 [University Charter School](#) in August 2018. The school, located on the university's campus, represents the first rural charter school in the state of Alabama and aims to create a diverse learning environment in a state that remains largely segregated.¹² The school currently serves grades pre-K through 8 and will add one grade per year until it reaches 12th grade.

In 2017, Purdue University, with the support of the City of Indianapolis, opened [The Purdue Polytechnic High School](#) for students who specifically want to pursue careers in STEM-related fields and may have been off-track toward graduation. The [Head of School](#) said, "The primary goal of the high school was to appeal to students who were not on track to further their education through college or technical school."¹³ The school recently completed its first year with a racially and economically diverse freshman class of 150 students and partnered with local businesses, including Subaru, Fair Oaks Farms, and IndyGo Transportation, to develop student programs.

The University of Texas is unique in that it operates two university public charter school districts that continue to expand and add campuses. One of the districts primarily serves special needs students in settings like psychiatric hospitals and residential treatment centers. This district educates more than 3,000 students in 23 locations in the central Texas and Houston areas. The second district is an open-enrollment charter serving 304 students in PreK-5. The CEO says, "Our partnership [with the University of Texas] is mutually beneficial as we not only place student teachers and interns from all of the college's departments, but we are a site for research for the college that is conducted by world-renowned faculty and staff dedicated to the success of our students."¹⁴

In the coming year, the UChicago Charter School will continue to deepen its partnerships with other units within UEI, and with the University of Chicago writ large. For example, UChicago Charter School directors will receive embedded leadership coaching from the UEI's [UChicago Impact](#) division. UChicago Impact provides tools designed to improve teaching, learning, and leadership to schools across the country, and will support the UChicago Charter School in translating the research and data they collect on their school's culture and climate, as well as their students' achievement, into actionable strategies for improvement. The UChicago Charter School will also continue to partner with UChicago's Office of Civic Engagement in new ways that serve to support both its students and students across Chicago's South Side communities.

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute's full New Knowledge Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/2018-new-knowledge-report>

SOURCES

- 1 <https://www.publiccharters.org>
- 2 <https://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/State-of-Charter-School-Authorizing-2016-Findings.pdf>
- 3 <https://www.idahoednews.org/voices/collaborators-how-universities-and-colleges-work-with-public-charter-schools/>
- 4 https://form.thecenterforcharters.org/modules.php?name=Issues&sp_id=104
- 5 https://www.qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/IssueBrief_SteppingUpUniversityLeadership_2008.12.pdf
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Hassrick, E.M., Raudenbush, S., & Rosen, L. (2017). *The ambitious elementary school: Its conception, design, and implications for educational equality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- 9 Rosenkranz, T., et al. (2014). *Free to fail or on-track to college. Why grades drop when students enter high school and what adults can do about it*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.
- 10 Hassrick, E.M., Raudenbush, S., & Rosen, L. *The ambitious elementary school: Its conception, design, and implications for educational equality*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- 11 <https://toandthrough.uchicago.edu/tool/cps/2018/#/milestones>
- 12 <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/08/21/640437944/charter-school-aims-to-diversify-sumter-county-alabama>
- 13 Moore, L. (2018, October 2). Purdue Polytechnic High School takes new approach to students with autism. *Journal and Courier*. Retrieved from <https://www.jconline.com/story/news/2018/10/02/autism-stem-purdue-polytechnic-high-school-education/1457361002/>
- 14 <http://utcharter.org/welcome-from-the-superintendent/>