THE CHARTER SCHOOL COMMUNITY’S PRIORITIES
FOR THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION
IN 2021

THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR
PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS
Education should be the great equalizer in American society. For decades, our nation has aspired to give all students a better start in life by providing them a high-quality public education. No one would say we have fully succeeded in reaching that goal. Too many students lack a quality education and a safe, supportive school in which to learn. Students of all races from low-income neighborhoods, and a disproportionate share of Black and Hispanic students, suffer the consequences of these policy failures. The pandemic has only served to exacerbate these inequities.

While states are primarily responsible for setting education policy, the federal government plays a critical role, directing resources to students who most need extra support and insisting on state accountability for these students’ outcomes. Title I, which provides federal funding to schools serving high percentages of low-income students, and IDEA, which funds services for students with disabilities, are cornerstones of the federal government’s commitment to educational equity. Both programs deserve more funding, which the Biden administration has pledged to provide.

Students also benefit from more options of where to attend school. This is especially true in neighborhoods where schools have been underperforming for many years. Through the Charter Schools Program (CSP), the federal government provides essential funding to foster educational innovation and support new approaches to creating and replicating public schools that meet the needs of students who are not well-served by existing public schools.

While some special interest groups try to pit charter schools and district schools against each other in a fight for federal resources, the reality is that both are public schools. And the Charter Schools Program accounts for less than 1% of federal spending on K-12 education. The results of that small investment have been profound, with numerous studies showing that high-quality charter schools deliver months of additional learning for students and improve college entrance and completion. In addition, low-income Black and Hispanic students are most likely to benefit from a charter school education:

- The most recent study, from Harvard, found that, overall, eighth graders attending charter schools showed learning gains that were three months ahead of their district school peers from 2005 to 2017. Black students in particular were approximately six months ahead. Given that one in three charter school students is Black, this is especially noteworthy. Test scores of those in the bottom 25%
of the socioeconomic distribution increased nearly twice as much as their counterparts in district schools.

- A 2019 study of Boston charter schools found attending a public charter school nearly doubled the likelihood that English language learners would enroll in four-year colleges and quadrupled the likelihood that special education students would graduate from a two-year college.

Given the significant learning loss caused by the pandemic, which many will continue to face, students need access to educational settings that will accelerate their learning gains. Cutting off access to, or halting the growth of, high-quality public schools is not in their best interests. Denying children access to charter schools will not make other public schools better, nor will it help educators overcome the impact of the pandemic and years of accumulated inequities. Our focus should be on giving all public schools, whether operated by school districts or other organizations, the accountability, autonomy, and adequate resources necessary to deliver high-quality education tailored to the needs of every student.

Charter schools are allies and leaders in the fight for educational equity. While 6.5% of public school students attend charter schools, 59% of charter school students come from low-income families, compared to 54% in district-managed schools. Nearly 70% are students of color. Issues of equity are critical for our students, and increasing funding for the CSP is one important way to advance educational equity and justice.

On behalf of the 3.3 million students attending 7,500 charter schools in 45 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and Guam, the National Alliance applauds President Biden’s commitment to equity and providing resources to our nation’s most underserved schools and students. We also applaud the new and returning members of Congress in both parties who recognize the urgent need to give all students access to higher-quality public schools, whether they operate as district schools or as charter schools.

This paper offers a summary of our budget priorities and policy recommendations for the new administration. The charter school community looks forward to working with everyone who shares our goal of strengthening all public schools in the United States and equipping them with resources to meet the needs of every student.
1. Propose additional COVID-19 relief for education and treat charter schools fairly.


3. Propose a significant increase in resources and strengthen equity.

4. Require full transparency of Title I allocations to all schools and districts.

5. Propose significant funding for school infrastructure, including charter schools.

6. Promote a more diverse teacher and leader workforce through program priorities, highlighting charter school innovation.

7. Include charter schools in pre-K and childcare proposals.

8. Examine the impact of access to affordable housing and quality schools.

**PROPOSE ADDITIONAL COVID-19 RELIEF FOR EDUCATION AND TREAT CHARTER SCHOOLS FAIRLY.**

The National Alliance has joined with the broader education community in support of significant additional funding to help manage the near- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The relief packages passed in 2020 provided critical funding, but additional funding will be necessary in 2021 to help schools reopen safely. This relief is particularly critical for charter schools, since they typically receive less funding per-pupil, especially those in urban areas: a recent study found that charter schools receive 33% less in urban areas with a significant number of charter schools, a difference of about 7,800 a student. In addition to general relief needs, charter schools have significant needs to bridge the digital divide. Based on our analysis, more than one in five charter school students live in low-connectivity areas, and charter schools need $243 million to meet the needs of their students who lack devices and connectivity. We support at least $2 billion in total funding for distance learning to ensure all students and teachers are better prepared in the likely event of future stay-at-home orders. We also support additional resources for E-Rate and targeting resources to the schools with greatest need.

All charter schools are public schools and their students, nearly two-thirds of whom come from low-income families and are students of color, must be supported on an equal basis when it comes to benefitting from federal COVID-19 funding. Despite their status as public schools, there have been instances of charter schools being left uninformed about their funding, or in other cases only receiving services in lieu of funding. Political pressures have pitted district schools against charter schools, impeding access to funds. Public charter school students should not be singled out and required to bear a disproportionate burden
of state and local budget cuts. Therefore, for the nearly 50% of charter schools that aren’t their own local educational agencies (LEAs), school districts should be required to provide relief funds on the same basis as all of its other public schools. In addition, states and districts should be required to report their allocations of relief funding to ensure funding is transparent, including amounts held at the district level that are not allocated to schools.

2. **SUPPORT STATE ASSESSMENTS IN 2021.**

COVID-19 has disproportionately affected our nation’s most vulnerable students, including many students of color. Now they are facing an entire year of disrupted education on top of starting the year behind. We need to ensure schools continue to measure student achievement so inequities and learning losses cannot be hidden. Therefore, we do not support blanket assessment waivers for the 20‑21 school year. To be sure, there shouldn’t be high stakes attached to any testing this year, but we need to know where there is significant learning loss and where to direct appropriate resources. Charter schools are particularly at risk in the absence of state assessment data because of how it can impact their charter school renewals. The administration should work to ensure charter schools are not penalized in state accountability systems or in charter school renewal determinations due to the lack of assessment data if district-run public schools are held harmless based on assessment results.

3. **PROPOSE A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN RESOURCES AND STRENGTHEN EQUITY.**

We support President Biden’s proposal to triple funding for Title I, as well as his proposal to increase funding for federal Title III and IDEA, while at the same time strengthening targeted aid to the highest-need states and school districts. *Title I should also incentivize states to distribute their own education dollars equitably and in a manner that addresses racial and socio-economic disparities and that treats charter schools fairly, regardless of their status as LEAs.* School districts should be encouraged to adopt weighted per-pupil funding formulas that equitably target resources at the school level, including for charter schools.

4. **REQUIRE FULL TRANSPARENCY OF TITLE I ALLOCATIONS TO ALL SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS.**

The process of allocating Title I funds in accordance with federal formulas is incredibly complex, and even more complex for charter school LEAs. Charter schools that are their own LEAs receive allocation amounts per child based on the amount of funds received per child by their sending district (see this post for more information about charter schools and the Title I formula). Under the ESEA Title I program, the U.S. Department of Education calculates preliminary LEA allocations, based on the estimated number of low-income children residing in a geographic area, and states adjust those allocations to account for the presence of charter school LEAs and other entities that don’t serve all students in a specific area. However, the U.S. Education Department does not require states to report their *adjusted* allocations, which are the final allocations actually flowing to all LEAs in the state. This lack of transparency has resulted in incorrect allocations to charter schools going unnoticed for years. It also makes it extremely difficult to understand
whether funds are being appropriately targeted to high-poverty schools and districts. Collecting adjusted allocations from states will increase transparency and ensure public access to data needed to determine the impact of Title I on school finances. Therefore, we ask that the U.S. Department of Education collect this data. This proposal can be implemented without Congressional authorization.

5. **PROPOSE SIGNIFICANT FUNDING FOR SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE, INCLUDING CHARTER SCHOOLS.**

Both district and charter schools face significant challenges with respect to the quality and upkeep of their buildings. Charter schools face additional hurdles when it comes to facilities, since most lack funding mechanisms available to school districts, such as taxpayer-funded bonds and land ownership. House Education and Labor Committee Chairman Bobby Scott’s school modernization legislation includes charter schools. We request that any major infrastructure bill include community facilities, including all public schools, in the definition of infrastructure. Additionally, any proposals should include charter schools in local consultation requirements.

6. **PROMOTE A MORE DIVERSE TEACHER AND LEADER WORKFORCE THROUGH PROGRAM PRIORITIES, HIGHLIGHTING CHARTER INNOVATION.**

Federal funds for teacher training and leadership can be used to improve the recruitment, support, and retention of educators from diverse backgrounds. Charter schools have a track record of recruiting diverse teachers: Nearly 32% of teachers at charter schools are teachers of color, compared to about 20% of teachers at of district schools. Charter school autonomy has enabled many schools to implement innovative recruitment programs. Promoting teacher-led charter schools and innovative practices is one potential tool to address this goal. Setting aside funds for teachers to design and open their own schools could be another means of addressing this need (described below in “Charter Schools Program Priorities”). Additionally, during the Obama administration, the secretary of education’s supplemental priorities and individual programs prioritized educator diversity. We recommend reinstating this priority for Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED), Teacher and School Leader Incentive Program (TSLIP), and Teacher Quality Partnerships (TQP).

7. **INCLUDE CHARTER SCHOOLS IN PRE-K AND CHILDCARE PROPOSALS.**

Charter schools in 31 states provide pre-K to 45,000 students, with enrollment growing by about a third over the last five years. Pre-K programs are also an important means of identifying and providing students with special education services. Therefore, we support increasing resources for childcare and pre-K, and would welcome the opportunity to help implement this initiative. While not every state permits charter schools to offer pre-K programs, where such programs are permitted, they should have the same access as LEAs to federal funds.
8. EXAMINE THE IMPACT OF ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND QUALITY SCHOOLS.

The National Alliance supports increasing funding for Section 8 housing vouchers so that families with school-aged children can also better access high-quality schools, including public charter schools. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development should devote a portion of its research budget to collecting data on public schools, including public charter schools, co-located with public housing. This information will help inform how housing programs might take additional steps to improve families’ access to high-quality schools.
Charter Schools Program

BUDGET & POLICY PRIORITIES

1. Propose $500 million for the CSP in the FY 2022 budget.

   The CSP is funded at $440 million for fiscal year 2021—the same allocation it received in FY 2020 and FY 2019. An additional $60 million should be used to provide additional resources for facilities funding programs and for grants to encourage new charter school models and other innovations. In FY 2020, there were more applicants than funds available for state grants. With level funding in FY 2021, there will not be sufficient funds to make new grants in any of the major programs.

   For the most recent data and research on the activities of the CSP program, see our 2020 CSP Annual Report as well as Bellwether Education Partners’ Clearing the Air report on the CSP.

2. Request flexibility to prioritize CSP funds based on the needs of the community.

   There is currently no flexibility to allocate funds among the various CSP authorities from one year to the next based on the needs and growth patterns of schools and communities. For example, finding and paying for facilities is one of the top challenges for new and existing charter schools. The Biden administration should request that appropriators use caps or floors for subprograms, not exact amounts, so as to give U.S. Department of Education program administrators greater flexibility to meet the needs of the charter school sector.

3. Strengthen rules for contracts with for-profit charter school management companies.

   President Biden has proposed to ban federal funding for for-profit charter schools. However, for-profit management companies that directly operate charter schools and hold a charter are not currently eligible to receive funding from the CSP (and these operating arrangements are only permitted in Arizona). Instead, a non-profit charter school governing board may choose to contract with a for-profit management company (which is currently the situation with about 10% of charter schools), just as traditional public schools often do.
purchase goods and services from the private for-profit sector. This is why, technically speaking, there is no such thing as a for-profit charter school— they are education service providers that contract with non-profit schools. For-profit education service providers have a long history of serving school districts, as well as charter schools. From textbooks to technology, public schools are dependent on private companies to provide a range of resources and use federal programs to fund them. Instead of a blanket ban on non-profit charter schools contracting with for-profit educational service providers, the National Alliance proposes stronger enforcement of federal rules and guidance related to CSP grantees contracting with management companies, which could include current guidance in program regulations.

4. **EMPOWER EDUCATORS TO OPEN THEIR OWN SCHOOLS.**

Under the current rules for the CSP, there is no authority for pre-planning grants that can help incubate new high-quality schools. Grants are only for schools that already have their charter. Proposing a new authority, encouraging state-level funds to be used for this purpose, or creating a priority within national dissemination grant funds would allow a percentage of state CSP grant funds to be awarded to teacher-led planning or school incubation projects. Such grants will enable educators to dedicate resources to develop high-quality charter applications, which must be approved before they can access federal start-up funding for planning and implementation.
DIVING DEEPER
RESEARCH AND RESOURCES ON SUPPORTING HIGH-QUALITY CHARTER SCHOOLS

RESOURCES

- For the most recent data on public charter schools, please see [https://data.publiccharters.org/](https://data.publiccharters.org/)
- For an interactive map of COVID and charter schools in highly impacted school districts, see [https://covid.publiccharters.org/district-map](https://covid.publiccharters.org/district-map).

RESEARCH

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AND COLLEGE COMPLETION

- A 2020 study from the Program on Education Policy and Governance at Harvard University found that student cohorts attending charter schools made greater academic gains from 2005 to 2017 than cohorts attending district operated schools, amounting to nearly and additional half-year’s worth of learning. The gains were most significant for Black students and low-income students. This is the first nationwide study to compare student achievement trends over time between sectors rather than effectiveness at a single point in time.

- A 2019 study, published in the Journal of Human Resources, found that enrolling in a Boston charter school increased the likelihood that students lose their special education or English learner status (ELL) as they are exposed to a high-performing general education program. Positive effects extended through college: attending a public charter school nearly doubled the likelihood that ELLs enroll in a 4 year college and quadrupled the likelihood that special education students graduate from a 2 year college.

- The widely cited 2015 Urban Charter School Study, published by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University, found that students in urban charter schools gained an average 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days of learning in reading per year as compared to their district public school peers. In general, the longer a student attends an urban charter school, the greater the gains: on average, four or more years of enrollment in an urban charter school led to the equivalent of 108 additional days of learning in math and 72 additional days of learning in reading per year. In urban charter schools, low-income Hispanic students gained an average of 48 additional days in math and 25 additional days in reading. On average, black students from low-income families gained 59 additional days in math and 44 additional days in reading per year. Together, black and Hispanic students account for more than 60% of charter school enrollment.

- A 2014 study, published by the Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, found that being admitted to a high-quality public charter school in Los Angeles led to gains in math and reading scores, and decreased the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors.
OTHER STUDENT OUTCOMES

- A 2019 study from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University found that charter high school students in North Carolina were about 10% less likely to be chronically absent, about 50% less likely to be suspended, almost 40% less likely to be convicted of a felony or misdemeanor, 9% more likely to vote, and 2% more likely to register to vote.

- A 2018 study from the Center for State and Local Finance found that students in charter high schools in Georgia significant outperformed their district school peers in college enrollment, college persistence, and post-secondary degree attainment.

- A 2016 study, published by the Journal of Policy Analysis and Management, found that attending a public charter high school in Florida resulted in a 6% increase in the probability of earning a standard high school diploma within five years, a 9% increase in the probability of attending college, a 12% increase in college persistence, and more than $2,300 in increased annual earnings by age 25.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

- Multiple studies have shown charter schools exert a positive competitive influence on local district-operated schools, including a 2016 study in New York City and 2008 study in Texas.