



Getting Down to **FACTS**

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Charter Schools in California: Autonomy, Accountability, and Variation

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Introduction

Charter schools are a significant part of California’s public education system. Since California authorized charter schools in 1992, the sector has grown substantially. By 2024-25, nearly 1,300 charter schools served approximately 727,000 students, about 12 percent of public school enrollment in the state (Smith et al.).

Charter schools operate through a policy bargain that grants greater autonomy in exchange for accountability for academic, financial, and operational performance. Schools have flexibility over key decisions such as instructional design, staffing, scheduling, and resource allocation. Authorizers are responsible for screening new charter petitions, monitoring school performance, and deciding whether schools are renewed or closed.

California’s charter system is highly decentralized. Local school districts serve as the primary authorizers, with county offices of education and the State Board of Education playing more limited roles. Most California charter schools are authorized by local districts, and many authorizers oversee only one or a small number of schools. This structure creates variation in authorizer capacity, oversight practices, and the conditions under which charter schools operate (Smith et al.).

The charter sector itself is also highly varied. California includes independent single-site charters, schools operated by charter management organizations, conversion charters, and nonclassroom-based programs. Recent analyses of Local Control and Accountability Plans show similar variation in how charter schools set goals, use data, and describe improvement strategies. Some network-affiliated schools show highly standardized planning approaches, while independent charter schools show greater variability in the specificity and substance of their goals (Hibel and Beberman).

This brief synthesizes evidence from Getting Down to Facts III and related research on governance and authorizing, organizational variation, planning and accountability, and differences in outcomes across charter school models and contexts. The central issue is whether California’s decentralized charter system has the authorizing capacity and accountability infrastructure needed to ensure quality across a sector that varies widely in school model, authorizer capacity, and organizational support.

Key Findings

1 Charter schools are a large and varied part of California's public education system.

California has the largest charter school sector in the nation, with nearly 1,300 schools serving about 727,000 students in 2024-25. Charter schools include independent schools, charter management organizations, conversion schools, and nonclassroom-based programs. This variation is central to understanding the sector.

2 California's charter school governance system relies heavily on local authorizers.

Local school districts authorize most charter schools, while county offices of education and the State Board of Education play more limited roles. Many authorizers oversee only one or a few schools, while a small number oversee large charter portfolios. This structure creates uneven capacity for oversight, monitoring, and renewal decisions (Smith et al.).

3 Charter autonomy depends on consistent, capable oversight.

Charter schools receive flexibility over school design, instruction, staffing, scheduling, and resource use in exchange for accountability for results. Authorizers are responsible for reviewing petitions, monitoring performance, and deciding whether schools continue operating. The evidence points to substantial variation in how those responsibilities are carried out across California.

4 Planning and improvement capacity vary across charter schools and networks.

Analyses of Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) show that charter schools differ in how they define goals, use measurable targets, and connect goals to actions. Some charter networks use highly standardized planning frameworks across schools, but networks also differ in the length, specificity, and measurability of their goals. Independent charters show greater variation, including higher rates of short or weakly specified goals.

5 Charter school outcomes vary by context, model, and organizational capacity.

Research on California charter schools finds stronger results in some urban areas and among some network-affiliated schools, with more mixed results in non-urban and virtual school settings. These patterns show that charter schools do not operate as a single model, and that charter status alone does not determine quality. Outcomes depend on local context, school design, oversight, and organizational capacity.

The Evidence Behind These Findings

Charter schools are a large and varied part of California’s public education system

California has the largest charter school sector in the nation. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho report that by 2024-25, approximately 727,000 students attended nearly 1,300 charter schools in California, representing about 12 percent of public school enrollment. Charter enrollment in California is also higher than the national average, where charter students represent about 7 percent of public school enrollment.

The sector includes several different kinds of schools. California permits newly created brick-and-mortar charter schools, conversion charter schools, and nonclassroom-based charter schools, which provide at least 20 percent of instructional time outside of an in-person classroom setting. Nonclassroom-based schools have received particular attention in recent policy debates because of recent high-profile financial fraud cases.

Older Getting Down to Facts II evidence shows that this variation has long been a defining feature of California’s charter sector. Mumma and West (2018) described California’s charter sector as large, growing, and varied in school types, operators, and governance models, including single-site charters, charter management organizations, conversion schools, nonclassroom-based schools, virtual schools, and alternative charter schools serving high-risk student populations.

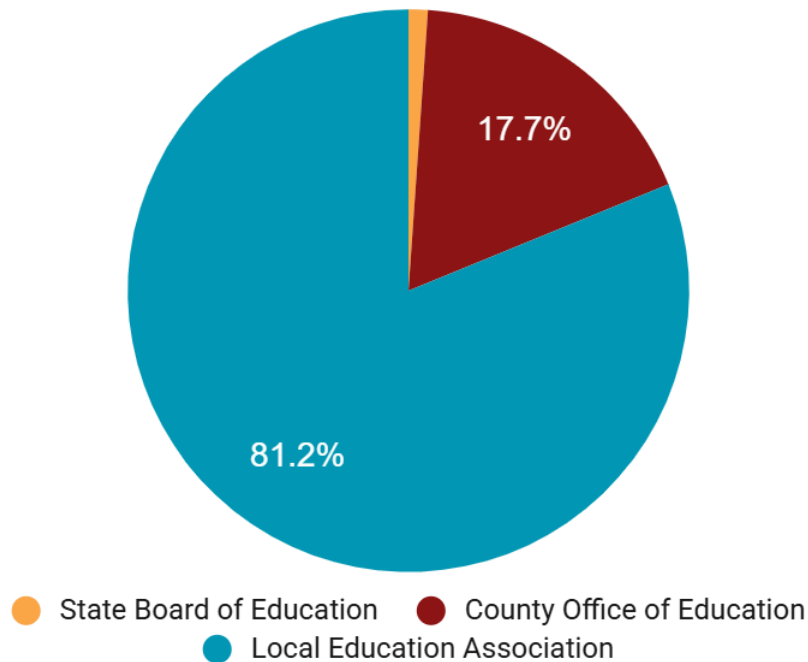
This variation matters because the term “charter school” does not describe one school model. It refers to a governance arrangement that can support many organizational forms, instructional designs, and student populations.

California’s charter school governance system relies heavily on local authorizers

California’s charter school governance system is highly decentralized. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho report that local school districts serve as the primary authorizers of new charter schools, while county offices of education and the State Board of Education have more limited authorizing roles. As of 2024-25, school districts authorized 81 percent of active charter schools in California, compared with 17 percent authorized by county offices of education and 1 percent by the State Board of Education. The data in **Figure 1** show that most charter schools operate under district authorizers.

Figure 1. Charter Schools by Authorizer Type in California (2024–25)

(Source: Smith, Zimmer, and Kho, *GDTF III Charter Governance paper*)

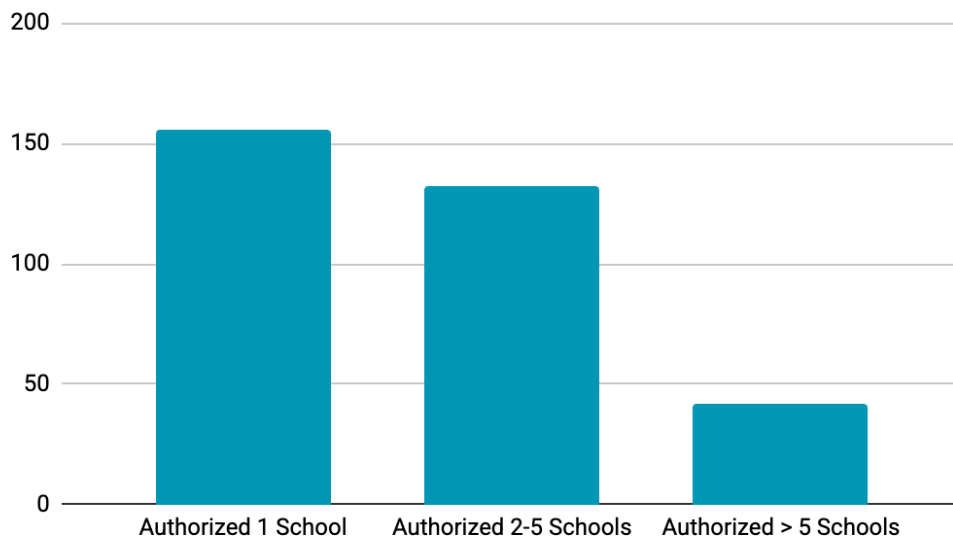


Note: The figure displays the percentage of active charter schools authorized by type of authorizer as of the 2024-25 school year. Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>

This local authorizing structure gives California a large number of authorizers with very different portfolios. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho find that 287 of 936 school districts and 42 of 58 county offices of education authorized at least one active charter school in 2024-25. Many authorizers oversee only one school, while a small number oversee large charter sectors. Los Angeles Unified School District is the largest authorizer in the state, overseeing more than 260 charter schools, about 20 percent of all active charter schools in California. The pattern in **Figure 2** highlights the concentration of charter oversight among a small number of large authorizers alongside many with limited portfolios.

Figure 2. Distribution of Charter School Authorizers by Number of Schools Overseen

(Source: Smith, Zimmer, and Kho, *GDTF III Charter Governance paper*)



Note: The figure displays the number of active charter schools authorized by authorizers as of the 2024-25 school year.

Source: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp>

Getting Down to Facts II identified the same basic pattern. Mumma and West (2018) found that California’s authorizing system was highly decentralized, with school districts serving as the dominant authorizer type and many authorizers overseeing five or fewer schools. That earlier report also noted that small authorizers may have limited staffing and resources for oversight, especially when authorizing fees support only a small portion of a full-time position.

The governance structure matters because authorizers are responsible for screening new charter petitions, monitoring school performance and finances, and making renewal or closure decisions. A system with many small authorizers can support local control, but it also creates uneven oversight capacity. The evidence points to a central feature of California’s charter governance system: most charter schools are overseen locally, and the quality and consistency of oversight depend heavily on the capacity, incentives, and practices of local authorizers.

Charter autonomy depends on consistent, capable oversight

Charter schools operate through an exchange of flexibility for accountability. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho describe California charter schools as publicly funded schools that operate with increased autonomy, often with greater flexibility than traditional public schools over instructional and operational decisions. In return, charter schools are expected to meet academic, financial, and operational expectations through the authorizing process.

Authorizers carry out this accountability role through three main responsibilities: screening proposals for new charter schools, monitoring school performance, and deciding whether charter contracts are renewed or schools are closed. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho emphasize that authorizers' structure and effectiveness play a central role in determining the quality and integrity of the charter sector because charter schools are granted autonomy in exchange for accountability.

California's accountability system gives authorizers substantial responsibility, but state law only partially defines how those responsibilities should be carried out. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho note that according to California Charter Authorizing Professionals (CCAP), authorizers' legal responsibilities translate into more than 100 distinct tasks across the life cycle of a charter school, many of which are not codified in state Education Code. Oversight requirements include annual site visits, fiscal monitoring, verification of required reporting, and notification of charter status changes, but authorizers retain considerable discretion in how they carry out oversight.

This discretion creates variation in accountability practice across the state. Some authorizers have staff, systems, and expertise to monitor schools closely, while smaller authorizers may have limited capacity to support rigorous oversight. Recent concerns about financial mismanagement, especially involving nonclassroom-based charter programming, have renewed attention to whether California's accountability structures are strong enough to match the autonomy charter schools receive.

Planning and improvement capacity vary across charter schools and networks

California law treats charter schools as Local Education Agencies (LEAs) for funding and accountability purposes. LCAPs are required of all LEAs, including districts and charter schools. LCAP analyses provide one way to see how charter schools define goals, use data, and describe improvement strategies. Hibel and Beberman's analysis of 2024-25 LCAPs finds substantial variation in goal quality, measurability, and duplication across school districts, county offices, and charter schools. Across the full corpus, most goals contained no measurement-oriented language, and only 7.9 percent included an explicit numeric target.

Charter schools show especially high levels of goal duplication. Hibel and Beberman found that non-charter districts had a goal duplication rate of 17.8 percent, while independent charter schools had a duplication rate of 48.7 percent. Among named charter management organizations, duplication rates were much higher, including 100 percent for Alliance, 99 percent for Aspire, 93 percent for KIPP, and 91.8 percent for Green Dot.

These patterns require careful interpretation. In some charter networks, repeated LCAP goals may reflect intentional network-wide planning, common school models, and coherent supports across

campuses. In other cases, repeated, very short, or weakly specified goals may signal limited local tailoring, weak planning, or insufficient oversight. Hibel and Beberman note, for example, that the two-word goal “Academic Excellence” appeared across 47 separate LEAs affiliated with independent charter and other LAUSD-authorized networks, a pattern they interpret as more likely reflecting insufficient oversight than meaningful shared planning.

Goal quality also varies across networks. Some networks produced longer and more measurable goals, while others used shorter or more relational language with few numeric targets. The evidence points to uneven planning and improvement capacity across the charter sector, with important differences between network-affiliated schools, independent charters, and schools operating under different authorizing contexts.

Charter school outcomes vary by context, model, and organizational capacity

Evidence on charter school outcomes in California points to substantial variation across school types and contexts. Smith, Zimmer, and Kho note that CREDO’s national study found that California charter students perform comparably to similar peers in traditional public schools in math and outperform them in reading, equivalent to approximately 11 additional days of learning. At the same time, the broader research base shows that charter school performance is not uniform across the sector.

Getting Down to Facts II reached a similar conclusion. Mumma and West (2018) reported that charter school learning gains in California were stronger, on average, in urban areas, especially Los Angeles, and in schools operated by charter management organizations. Results were more mixed or weaker for students in non-urban charter schools and virtual schools.

The pandemic response evidence also illustrates variation in charter school capacity and responsiveness. CREDO’s survey of charter schools in California, New York, and Washington found that responding schools shifted rapidly to remote instruction, expanded access to devices and internet, provided professional development in remote learning, and prioritized family communication and student engagement. The report also cautions that California survey results should be interpreted carefully because the response rate was 21 percent.

These findings point to a charter sector whose outcomes depend on more than charter status alone. Local context, school model, network affiliation, authorizer oversight, instructional design, and organizational capacity all shape how charter schools operate and what students experience.

Implications for California

The evidence on charter schools in California points to a set of implications about how governance, capacity, and variation shape the sector's role within the broader education system.

Governance and oversight as central features of the charter system

California's charter sector depends heavily on local authorizers to carry out core accountability functions, including approving, monitoring, and renewing schools. However, many of these accountability functions are not well codified in the state Education Code. This governance structure places substantial responsibility and discretion on school districts and other authorizers.

California's reliance on many small authorizers makes oversight capacity an important implementation issue. Many authorizers oversee only one or a small number of charter schools, which can make it difficult to maintain specialized staff, conduct rigorous fiscal and academic monitoring, and make consistent renewal decisions. Shared tools, clearer expectations, and regional support could help make authorizing more consistent while preserving local responsibility.

Variation across charter school models and contexts

Charter schools operate under a shared policy framework but encompass a wide range of school models, organizational structures, and instructional approaches. Differences between independent schools, network-affiliated schools, nonclassroom-based programs, and conversion schools contribute to variation in planning, practice, and outcomes. This variation means that patterns observed in one part of the sector may not generalize to others.

Organizational capacity and coherence shape school practice

Differences in planning and goal-setting may point to uneven organizational capacity across charter schools. Network-affiliated schools often show more standardized approaches to planning and coherence across campuses, while independent schools show greater variability in how they define goals and structure improvement efforts. These differences suggest that autonomy interacts with organizational supports, systems, and internal capacity in shaping how schools operate.

Accountability systems depend on implementation, not design alone

California's charter framework establishes broad expectations for accountability, but the evidence shows that implementation varies across authorizers and schools. Oversight practices, monitoring systems, and renewal decisions differ across local contexts where authorizers have varying levels of

capacity, which affects how consistently accountability functions are carried out. This pattern indicates that the effectiveness of the charter system depends not only on accountability design, but also the capacity of authorizers to enact accountability in practice across differing environments.

Charter school outcomes reflect differences in context and design

Research on charter school performance shows that outcomes vary across locations, school types, and organizational models. Stronger results in some urban areas and network-affiliated schools, alongside more mixed results in other contexts, point to the importance of local conditions, instructional design, and organizational capacity. These patterns reinforce that charter status alone does not determine outcomes, and that variation within the sector is central to understanding its impact.

Conclusion

Charter schools are a substantial and established part of California's public education system. The sector is built on a policy bargain that grants schools flexibility in exchange for accountability through authorizing, monitoring, and renewal. The evidence reviewed in this brief shows that the success of that bargain depends on appropriate state guidance and on the practices of the institutions that make accountability and improvement real.

California's charter sector includes many models. Schools differ by authorizer, school design, network affiliation, planning capacity, and local context. Some schools and networks show coherent planning and strong organizational supports, while others operate with more limited capacity and less defined improvement systems.

The central issue is whether California's decentralized charter system has the authorizing capacity and accountability infrastructure needed to ensure quality across a varied sector. Authorizers, planning tools, and accountability systems shape whether flexibility supports stronger opportunities for students or produces uneven oversight and fragmented practice. Understanding and improving the charter sector depends on close attention to governance, capacity, and implementation. State policy updates may continue to be important for providing guidance for these essential functions while maintaining the foundational autonomy of the charter sector.

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