

Research and Theory in Educational Administration

# **Navigating Charter School Landscapes**

**Growth and Governance Across  
California, Arizona, and Florida**

**Edited by**

**Zorka Karanxha  
William R. Black  
Arnold B. Danzig**

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# **Navigating Charter School Landscapes**

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# **Research and Theory in Educational Administration**

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Arnold B. Danzig and William R. Black

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*Edited by*

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# CONTENTS

About the Editors.....	vii
About the Contributors.....	ix
1 Introduction.....	1
<i>Zorka Karanxha, William R. Black and Arnold B. Danzig</i>	

## SECTION 1

### CALIFORNIA

---

2 Space, Place and Legislation: An Analysis of California Charter School Growth, Issues, and Challenges.....	39
<i>Robin Chait and Kelly Wynveen</i>	
3 Examining the Relationship Between Special Education and the Charter School Sector in California: A Descriptive Analysis ....	57
<i>Charisse Gulosino and Paul O'Neill</i>	
4 Charter School Expansion and the Fiscal Collapse of Public School Districts .....	93
<i>Gordon Lafer</i>	
5 California Charter School Law, Unintended Consequences, and Rocketship Education .....	117
<i>Vladimir G. Ivanović</i>	

- 6 Reforming Public Education in California: Are Charter Schools the Answer ..... 135  
*Edward C. González*

## SECTION 2

### ARIZONA

---

- 7 Policy Convergence Under Arizona's Competitive Education Policies..... 173  
*David R. Garcia and Caitlin Albrechtsen*
- 8 Racial homogenization in Arizona's rural charter schools..... 201  
*Casey D. Cobb, Gene V Glass and Charles Wentzell*

## SECTION 3

### FLORIDA

---

- 9 Charters are all about Accountability: Florida's accountability system and charter school innovation ..... 221  
*Carolyn Herrington and Stacey Rutledge*
- 10 Three Decades of Legislative Tremors: Centering School Choice Perils and Possibilities in Florida..... 239  
*William R. Black, Zorka Karanxha, Andrea O'Sullivan and Sarah Semon*
- 11 A Comparative Study of Private Education Management Companies and Stand-Alone Charter Schools in Florida..... 271  
*Joseph C. Simmons, Zorka Karanxha and William R. Black*

## SECTION 4

### NAVIGATING CHARTER SCHOOL LANDSCAPES: EXTENSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

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- 12 Trying to Thrive and Survive: An Ecological Approach to the Study of the Charter School Movement in the US..... 295  
*Brent Duckor*
- 13 Sisyphus System Leadership in England..... 345  
*Ian Potter*
- 14 Conclusion: A Roadmap for Navigating Charter School Landscapes..... 371  
*Arnold B. Danzig, William R. Black and Zorka Karanxha*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# INTRODUCTION

**Zorka Karanxha**

**William R. Black**

**Arnold B. Danzig**

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, the charter school enrollment has grown dramatically and the governance landscape for charter schools has become increasingly complex. As the cover image of the book suggests, this volume seeks to provide readers with a way of navigating the turbulent currents that contribute to charter school growth and a wide variety of governance structures across three states that were early adopters of charter school legislation: California, Arizona, and Florida. The growth of charter schools in these states continues to reshape their educational landscapes. Each state has exhibited high rates of public school student enrollment in charter schools. Currently, Arizona has the highest percentage of students enrolled in public charter schools at 20%, Florida at 13%, and California at 11.5% (Irwin et al. 2023). These states are also important to analyze not only for their charter school growth, but because of their widely varying political cultures that inform distinct charter school governance structures and regulations.

We invite you to delve into each of the state sections, as well as our final section, which provides wider ecological and international perspectives. The chapters in the volume represent a broad range of analyses that

ultimately help the reader navigate the landscape of this important and now central institutional form. The chapters provide analysis of what the new form does, how it works; what it does differently or better than the status quo and what new problems arise-anticipated and unanticipated.

## CHARTER SCHOOLS

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that are granted significant autonomy in curriculum and governance in return for greater accountability. Minnesota enacted the nation's first charter school law in 1991. According to [Bulkley and Fisler \(2003\)](#), the theory of charter schools consists of five components: (a) The creation of charter schools would lead to an expansion of the variety of schools available to students. (b) Charter schools would have flexibility and autonomy from school districts and state laws and regulations. (c) Autonomy of charter schools would make charter schools more innovative and of higher quality. (d) Charter schools would be more accountable than traditional public schools. (e) The above combinations would lead to improved student achievement, high parental satisfaction, teacher empowerment and positive effects on school districts and “positive or neutral effects on educational equity” ([Bulkley & Fisler, 2003](#), p. 319). Furthermore, in large part the appeal of charter schooling was the notion that fewer rules and regulations and higher accountability to multiple constituencies (state accountability, authorizers, and parents) and competition for students would lead to improved student achievement, high parental satisfaction, teacher empowerment and positive effects on educational equity ([Bulkley & Fisler, 2003](#)).

Choice advocates believed that “deficient” traditional public schools will either improve or suffer from the competitive environment ([Nathan, 1996](#)). However, the last three decades have shown that in practice charter schools have yet to resolve the tension between flexibility/autonomy and accountability. These tensions are evident across the diverse state policy landscapes explored in this volume. California, a high regulation state, subjects charter schools to more regulations while Arizona has the fewest regulations on charter schools, and both states have some of the most robust growth in the charter school sector. Arizona has continuously made headlines for its lack of government-imposed accountability and some of the consequences as a result. Florida on the other hand has fewer regulations than California and requires more accountability than Arizona.

One of the most interesting developments around charter schools is the relative agreement and convergence of support for charter schools by both major political parties in the United States. Since the Reagan era, each federal administration has championed school choice, vouchers, and charter schools in their own way ([Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2015](#); [Harris & Witte, 2011](#);

Scott et al., 2015). President Biden voiced concerns about charter schools while campaigning but the federal funding of charter schools has remained constant. In the United States, since the first charter school launched in 1992, all but five states (Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont) and the District of Columbia have legislation that allows public charter schools. Similarly, the Academy model was established and then flourished in the United Kingdom over the last three decades. Charter schools (and Academies) have become a central part of the American and UK educational landscape despite enduring and robust debates among many proponents of the charter movement as well as many opponents. Gradually but surely, charter schools and charter school enrollment have grown and moved from the periphery to the center of educational policy initiatives.

The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (Irwin et al. 2023) show more than 7,847 charter schools in operation serving 3.7 million students in 2021–22. The percentage of all students who attend public charter schools was at 7.5% in 2021–22 compared to 3.6% in 2010–11 (Irwin et al. 2023). The District of Columbia had the highest percentage of students enrolled in public charter schools at 45%, followed by Arizona at 20%, Colorado (15%), Florida (13%), Louisiana (13%), Nevada (13%), Delaware (12%), California (11.5%), Michigan (11%), and Utah (11%), while Wyoming, Mississippi, Kansas, Alabama, Washington, Virginia, and Iowa had less than 1% of students enrolled in charter schools in 2021 (Irwin et al. 2023). Kentucky and West Virginia had no charter schools despite having passed charter legislation.

The ethnic or racial breakdown of students attending charter schools is also instructive with Black and Hispanic students attending charter schools at higher rates than traditional public schools. In fall 2021, the percentage of public charter school students who were Black was 24%, Hispanic 36%, Asian at 4%, White 29%, American Indian/Alaska Native 0.7%, Pacific Islander 0.4%, and two or more races 5% (Irwin et al. 2023). In the same year, the percentage of traditional public-school students who were Black was at 15%, Hispanic was 28%, and White at 45% (Irwin et al. 2023).

The literature on charter school accountability, conceptual and empirical, has previously been characterized as highly politicized (Henig, 2009; Poole, 2011). Data are often reported by charter school advocates, advocacy organizations or opponents and state agencies that drive headlines and charter school discourse. Work and studies by independent researchers are less publicized and utilized in policy making. This separation makes it “rather myopic and often difficult to interpret” (Poole, 2011, p. 266). Furthermore, data on charter schools are incomplete, with either gaps on important demographic indicators such socio-economic status, English second language or missing from databases entirely (Frankenberg et al., 2010). This volume aims to address some of these issues by presenting a wide range of perspectives.

## EQUITY AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

From the beginning, considerable emphasis in the literature on charter schools has been on the charter school racial equity issues (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Orfield, 2009; Vasquez Helig et al., 2016; Wells, 2002) and equitable enrollment of students with disabilities (Estes, 2004; Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019). Research shows that Black and Latinx families of Students with Disabilities (SWD) experience school choice differently than White families of SWD and Black and Latinx families of students without disabilities (Waitoller & Super, 2017). Furthermore, “school choice is shaped by structural and individual factors related to the interaction of race, disability and geography” (Waitoller & Lubienski, 2019, p. 2).

A central argument in favor of charter schools is that they are better situated to address the unmet needs of poor children of color (Ravitch, 2016). However, Garcia and Stigler (2012) question the extent to which Black students nationally are exposed to the ultra-competitive, high achieving charter schools. In their study, Garcia and Stigler (2012) found that

states with the highest concentrations of Black students are home to more pedestrian charter school policies that are not intended to foster competition between schools. Rather, the most aggressive charter school policies are found in the Western United States where only a small percentage of the student population is Black. (p. 214)

The initial promise of charter schools was that they would sever the link between segregated neighborhoods and schools. However, earlier studies showed that charter schools had intensified racial and economic segregation (Cobb & Glass, 1999; Frankenberg et al., 2010; Orfield, 2009). Studies on racial segregation in charter schools (Frankenberg et al., 2010; Garcia, 2007; Orfield, 2009) show that charter schools are segregating students of color in Black and Brown populated schools that are even more segregated than the already highly segregated traditional public schools. Garcia (2007) found similar results in Arizona. In their study of Arizona charter schools, Cobb and Glass (1999) found that charter schools were more ethnically segregated than traditional public schools. Specifically, they found a higher proportion of White non-Hispanic students in charter schools. Frankenberg et al. (2010) found the level of segregation in charter schools for Black students was higher than in traditional public schools. Numerous researchers and critics of charter schools have noted that the high enrollment numbers are due to high concentrations of students of color in urban areas and are further resegregating traditional public schools (Chapman & Donnor, 2015; Sulentic Dowell & Bickmore, 2015).

Segregation of students with disabilities in charter schools continues to be highly problematic due to large disparities in the enrollment of

high-need students relative to traditional public schools nearby (Vasquez Helig et al., 2016). Studies suggest underrepresentation of students with significant disabilities in charter schools (Barnard-Brak et al., 2018; Miron & Nelson, 2002). Other researchers (Fuller & Elmore, 2006) have shown that choice programs tend to increase income, racial, and social class stratification among schools rather than reduce inequalities. They urged policy-makers to be more careful in designing choice programs and to “treat with skepticism the claim that educational choice enhances equality of opportunity” (Fuller & Elmore, 2006, p. 193). Lubienski’s research (2007) indicates that charter schools engage in locational decisions on establishing schools in locales and marketing that appeals to parents’ emotions on “safety” and racialized representations. In other words, charter schools (or management companies) decide on which demographic population they intend to serve before opening a school. Reasons for locating charter schools in particular areas as well as implications for the types of students that attend these locations are discussed in multiple chapters in this volume.

### **ACCOUNTING FOR DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES: THE BLIND MEN AND THE ELEPHANT**

Despite equity concerns, the ongoing measured performance struggles of a sector of traditional public schools has meant that the push for charters as a promise for higher academic achievement of students who are “stuck in low performing traditional public schools” continues unabated. After three decades of charter schooling, research on charter schools continues to be mixed, contentious, and oftentimes driven by ideology. What started as a limited experiment has turned into one of the most discussed issues in education reform. Different stakeholders focus attention on different aspects of the charter school and traditional public school systems. Like the fable of the six blind men and the elephant, one person touches the elephant’s trunk and says it is like a thick snake; another touches its tusks and says, no, it is more like a spear, a third touches its leg and claims the elephant is like the trunk of a tree, and so on. The challenge is that each viewer sees only part of the whole, a smaller portion of a larger entity. As a result, there are basic differences among viewers regarding the most salient qualities, the implications of these qualities, and the sources of tensions among charter schools, traditional public schools, and other forms of schooling.

One strand of the charter school debate revolves around democratic control of public charter schools which, according to critics, has taken a back seat and has been replaced in many instances by charter school boards who make important decisions on publicly funded schools without any public control (Hanauer, 2008). The other revolves around choice, individual

needs, local equity, and market theory (Chubb & Moe, 1990). One particularly significant area discussed in the volume is the priority placed on the democratic aspects of schooling and its commitment to a public good that is built into the common school history of traditional public schooling (Kaestle, 1983; Tyack, 2004) but not as prominent in either the history of or practices within charter schools. Proponents of charter schools often focus on opportunities for innovation. Entrepreneurs and businesspeople see an opportunity for breaking what they consider a traditional public school monopoly. Charter school advocates may also view education and schooling as a market for books, software, technology platforms, materials, curricula, professional development, and countless other opportunities to build innovation and revenues. Charter schools can be seen as fertile ground for testing new ideas, new pedagogy, new curriculum, and new assessments.

Another powerful rationale for charter schools has been the desire to free schools of some of the financial and academic accountability requirements of traditional public schools. The benefit would come from providing greater flexibility to teachers and administrators to educate youth in ways based on professional expertise and subsequent professional development. These advocates point to innovative possibilities such as project-based learning, arts-based curricula, and real-world assessments. In these cases, traditional standardized testing and accountability measures take a back seat while greater autonomy for teachers and other local school leaders is prioritized.

Responses to the growth of charter schools also varies across perspectives. While some traditional public school advocates point to unfair competition and the need to limit the number and growth of charter schools, others have agreed with critiques that traditional public schools have become overly bureaucratic, filled with red tape and illustrate an essential conservatism which restricts innovation and creativity. Instead of proposing new or more charter schools, however, they suggest traditional public schools should be freed from bureaucratic overreach and other obstacles to flexibility and change, thereby allowing them to innovate with the same flexibility given to charter schools. This strategy would put traditional public schools and charter schools on a more even footing, and make future comparisons between charters and traditional public schools fairer. In this scenario, it is likely that charter schools and traditional public schools will become more alike over time, a prediction that some have pointed out is happening already (Huerta & Zuckerman, 2009).

Parental choice looms large in the charter school landscape. While not a homogeneous group, parents may have different priorities, with greater weight placed on the perceived benefit of the schooling experience for their particular child. Parents' views on education and schooling can also be associated with race and class, to social and economic circumstances.

The views of parents can play a role in the perceived value of education and education timeline for one's child (short or long horizon); it can shape the view of schooling as a place to protect children (a "garden of childhood") or as a way to prepare children for the future, work and life. Some parents focus on immediate safety for their children; others focus on the academic preparation over a long-term. These differences play out in the decisions that parents make concerning (a) type of schooling sought, (b) vision and mission for schools selected, (c) pedagogy embraced, (d) curricular focus, (e) administrative philosophy, and many other things associated with schooling. The differences in parents' views, resources, and priorities, as well as access to relevant information contribute to the decisions to enroll children in a traditional public school, a charter school, a private school, or even homeschooling.

Size and location may be another consideration for choosing one type of school or educational experience over another. Some children do better in smaller settings while others prefer the opportunities available at a larger school. This consideration may also include whose perceptions are prioritized, the parents or child. Are decisions to be based on what parents see as their child's abilities at school, dispositions for learning, need for competition, or what the child says and thinks? Decisions related to size and location of schools might therefore be better understood on the basis of whose positions are prioritized.

This brief consideration for navigating the charter school landscape illustrates only one of many routes, considered by one of many groups, the parents, who are as a group, complex and diverse. In the end, everyone—children, parents, educators, and decision-makers—must navigate the landscape. While we present less evidence to explain how individuals balance competing concerns, the chapter authors and co-editors hope that the data explored within the volume will lead readers to look past the headlines and decide for themselves which qualities of charter and traditional public schools are most important and why. We know that some people will choose traditional public schools, others will select charter schools, still others will choose private schools, and some people will select home schooling as the best solution. Regardless, our hope is that they will be able to make informed decisions and that this volume will help guide these decisions.

## **CHARTER GOVERNANCE**

It is difficult to generalize about charter schools since they are shaped by the separate laws in each state, the populations they serve, and the operators of each specific school.

Indeed, the only consistency across this diverse and diffuse reform ‘movement’ is that charter schools all operate under the guidelines of state policies that promise greater autonomy in exchange for greater academic accountability, but generally fail to support the efforts of committed educators, especially those serving the most disadvantaged students in grassroots and nonprofit charter schools. (Wells, 2002, p. 3)

In theory, charter schools are accountable to the authorizer and the state, and the families whose children they serve. So, in essence there is internal and external accountability. Each charter school has a performance contract with its authorizer that outlines the school’s mission, its program and goals, the population served, and ways to assess success or failure (Buckley & Schneider, 2009). Each charter also functions within the confines of the law of each state. “At the heart of the charter concept lies a bargain” (Miron & Nelson, 2002, p. 3) established between the charter school and its authorizer; the charter school receives autonomy in exchange for academic and fiscal accountability. This contract or charter details the school’s organizing, curricular focus, management, expectations of student outcomes, and how success will be measured. Charter laws vary across the states in relation to the major areas of concern within the charter school legislation, which include: (a) Charter authorizing (Who authorizes and existence of statewide authorizing body, Appeals process for charter applicants, Authorizer reporting on its portfolio of schools); (b) Autonomy and accountability (Waivers of certain rules, Grounds for termination, and provisions for closure); and (c) Certification requirements for teachers. The other subsections of charter laws are in the area of growth and the extent to which charter schools are allowed to expand including: (a) Caps on the number of charters in the state, (b) Conversion of public schools to charters, (c) Specifications on student enrollment preference, and (4) Provision of transportation (Rafa et al., 2020). State legislation also stipulates the management of charter schools including: (a) Who may apply for charters, (b) The status (for profit or nonprofit) of management companies that are allowed to operate charter schools, and (c) High-performing charter school replication (Education Commission of the States, 2023). Also, charter school funding and start-up money by the state is part of charter school laws. Finally, allowing virtual charter schools appears to be important for charter schooling and is also included in the classification of charter laws (Rafa et al., 2020).

### **The Case for California, Arizona and Florida: Sustained Growth and Variation in Governance Culture and Policies**

We have selected three states to focus on in this volume: California, Arizona, and Florida. All three states were early adopters of charter school