

WHAT IS A CHARTER SCHOOL?

A charter school in Colorado is a tuition-free, public school of choice that operates under a performance-based contract—called a charter—with a local school district or the Colorado Charter School Institute. Charter schools are open to all students but do not automatically enroll students based on geographic boundaries; instead, families must choose to enroll. These schools are often founded by parents, educators, or community members and are governed by an independent board rather than directly by the district or state.

Charter schools are granted greater autonomy in areas such as staffing, curriculum, budgeting, and operations, and they may request waivers from certain state or district regulations to implement more innovative educational approaches. However, with this flexibility comes heightened accountability: charter schools **must meet clearly defined academic and operational performance targets** laid out in their contracts. If they fail to do so, their authorizer can choose to revoke or not renew the charter, effectively closing the school. Like all public schools, charters receive state funding through the per-pupil funding formula and **must serve students equitably**.



Other facts about charter public schools:

- Charter schools are accountable to the same standards and assessments as other public schools in the state (CRS 22-30.5-104(6)©(II)). Charter schools are bound by the same state and federal laws barring discrimination in enrollment practices; charters are open to all and may not request entrance exams (CRS 22-30.5-104(3)).
- Charter schools serve a statewide student population that is just as diverse as non-charters
 - In 2024-25, 52% of charter school students identified as students of color compared to 51% of the state's traditional PK-12 public school students.
 - In addition, 16% of Colorado charter school students were identified as English Language Learners compared to 15% of the state's traditional PK-12 public school students last year.

**FREE,
PUBLIC,
&
OPEN TO ALL**

.....

**AUTONOMY
in exchange for
ACCOUNTABILITY**



**SAME
STANDARDS &
ASSESSMENTS**

.....

JUST AS DIVERSE



COLORADO LEAGUE of
CHARTER SCHOOLS

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- All charter public schools must be set up and run as nonprofit entities (CRS 22-30.5-104(4)(a)).
- Charter public schools must complete an independent financial audit each year (CRS 22-30.5-104(4)(a)); all charter public schools are subject to the same “Public School Financial Transparency Act” as every district in the state, which requires them to regularly post detailed financial information online for free public access.
- Charters are subject to the same sunshine laws regarding open meetings and open records as other schools in the state.
- Charters must undergo annual performance reviews by their districts examining the school’s academic progress as well as its most recent financial audit (CRS 22-30.5-110).
- If charters continually underperform, the timeline for districts to begin closely examining and considering action against them is just two years (CRS 22-30.5-110(3.5)). This same timeline can be as long as five years in the case of other poor-performing public schools.

Authorizing 101:

A **charter school authorizer** is the entity responsible for overseeing and holding charter public schools accountable for academic performance, legal compliance, financial health, and overall school quality. In Colorado, authorizers ensure that charter schools deliver on their promises to students and families: approving strong applications, monitoring progress, and intervening when schools fall short.

There are two types of charter authorizers in the state: local school districts and the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI). Most school districts in Colorado hold what’s called *Exclusive Chartering Authority* (ECA), which gives them full control over whether charter schools can open, continue operating, or expand within their boundaries. Today, 172 of Colorado’s 178 districts hold ECA, including small rural districts that can receive this status automatically upon request.

The **Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI)** was created by the legislature in 2004 as a statewide charter school authorizer to provide an alternative pathway for charter school approval. CSI can authorize schools in districts that do not hold ECA, or in cases where a district voluntarily allows a school to apply to CSI.



All Charters are
NONPROFITS

**INDEPENDENT
FINANCIAL AUDIT**

SUBJECT TO CORA

**ANNUAL
PERFORMANCE
REVIEWS**

**ACCOUNTABILITY
at the
DISTRICT & STATE**

**EXCLUSIVE
CHARTERING
AUTHORITY**

CSI

