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A Roadmap for
Student Success

BY DR. WILL FLANDERS, KYLE KOENEN & MAELLIE LEWNA

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

**Improving the Charter School
Sector in Wisconsin**



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Executive Summary

Charter schools are laboratories of innovation that accept rigorous achievement expectations in exchange for freedom from district mandates. Once at the forefront of education reform, charter schools face stagnation in Wisconsin despite national growth. While enrollment in charters has risen modestly, momentum has slowed due to a mix of financial, regulatory, political, and structural barriers. This report examines the challenges confronting Wisconsin's charter sector, drawing on interviews with fifteen stakeholders, analyses of state funding and policy frameworks, and comparisons to more supportive charter environments nationwide. The findings highlight why Wisconsin is viewed as a somewhat inhospitable environment for charter growth and offer targeted reforms to reinvigorate the sector.

Some of the key takeaways from these conversations are listed below.

Key Takeaways

1. **Wisconsin's charter law not among the best in the nation:** the state's law was rated as a 'B-' by the National Center for Education Reform.
2. **Slow Growth Amid National Expansion:** Independent charter enrollment in Wisconsin has grown only modestly, with major authorizers refusing to expand their portfolios.
3. **Funding Gaps Undermine Schools:** Lack of facilities funding leaves schools financially strained and reliant on philanthropy with significantly less funding per student (\$12,369 per student in independent charters) than traditional public schools (\$18,592 on average).
4. **Authorizer Instability Blocks Progress:** Inconsistent and politicized authorizing deters national operators and stifles local growth.
5. **Political Volatility Fuels Uncertainty:** Wisconsin's shifting political climate makes charter policy unpredictable and discourages long-term investment.
6. **Targeted Reforms Could Reignite Growth:** State-backed facilities support, a formal appeals process for charter denials, and a politically-insulated statewide authorizer would create stability and attract high-quality operators.

Wisconsin's charter sector faces stagnation not primarily because of weak demand, but because of systemic barriers in funding, authorizing, regulation, and governance. Without targeted reforms, the state risks falling further behind in the parental choice movement. By implementing structural supports and insulating charters from political swings, Wisconsin can revitalize its charter sector and ensure families continue to have access to innovative public-school options.

INTRODUCTION

Charter schools occupy a unique position in American education, existing as publicly-funded but independently-operated institutions that trade regulatory flexibility for heightened accountability. Over the past three decades, they have emerged as one of the most significant reforms to public education, but, in many ways, it feels as if charters have been left behind as other education reforms like private school choice have moved to the forefront of the education reform discussion. This feeling of stagnation is perhaps especially pervasive in Wisconsin.

While chartering has continued to thrive in recent years around the country, the charter market in Wisconsin has stagnated in recent years—with fewer new schools and little enrollment growth. In the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' 2022 ranking of state charter school laws—the most recent edition where rankings were included—Wisconsin placed 41st out of 45 states, reflecting weak authorizing structures, limited funding, and restrictive regulations.* We wanted to know why this was the case.

* National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2022, January 25). *Measuring up to the model: A ranking of state public charter school laws, 2022*. <https://publiccharters.org/news/measuring-up-to-the-model-a-ranking-of-state-public-charter-school-laws-2022/>

This report examines the structure, strengths, and struggles of charter schools in Wisconsin, drawing on stakeholder interviews, funding analyses, and national comparisons. By identifying barriers to growth and opportunities for reform, we will offer a policy agenda to ensure that charter schools maintain their key position in the school choice movement in Wisconsin.

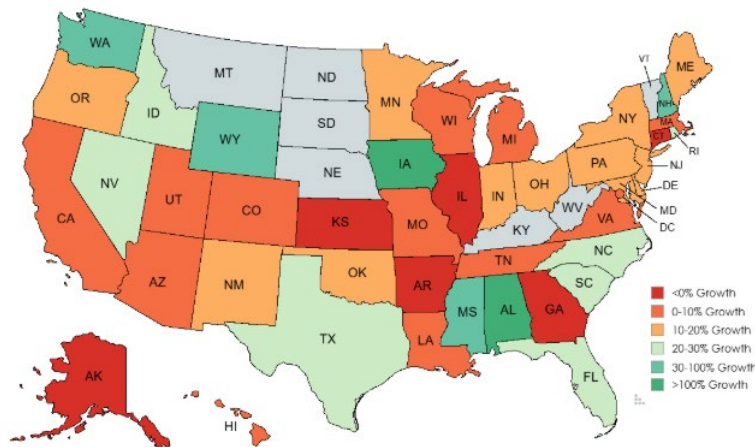
WHAT IS A CHARTER SCHOOL?

Charter schools are public schools that operate under a performance contract, or “charter,” with an authorizing public entity. In exchange for greater autonomy over curriculum, staffing, and budgeting, the school board commits to clear performance goals and can be closed if they fail to meet them. The first charter schools were created in Minnesota in 1992, with Wisconsin following suit in 1993. Charter schools in Wisconsin are not allowed to “cream the crop” when it comes to enrollment. If interest exceeds capacity, they must hold a lottery to determine who gets the seat.*

THE STAGNATION PROBLEM: WHERE WISCONSIN STANDS

The map below shows all charter enrollment growth over the past five years using data from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools.† Note that this is percentage growth—some of the highest growth states started from extremely low numbers. Wisconsin falls into the second lowest category with a growth rate of about 9.83% over the time frame of analysis.

Figure 1.
Charter School
Enrollment Over Time,
2019-20 to 2023-24

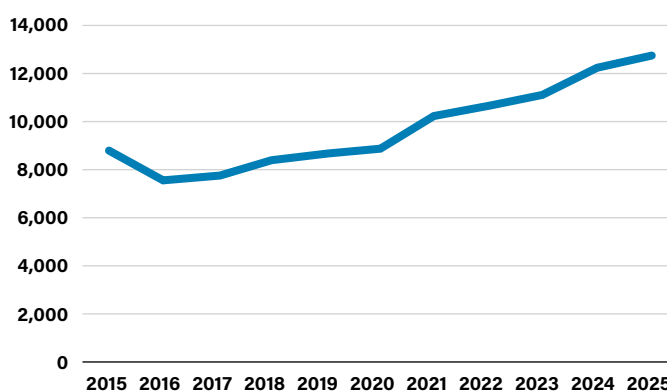


* Legislative Fiscal Bureau Informational Paper 33. 2025. “Charter Schools.” https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2025/0033_charter_schools_informational_paper_33.pdf

† National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2024, October 8). *New report shows charter school enrollment grows across the nation.* <https://publiccharters.org/news/new-report-shows-charter-school-enrollment-grows-across-the-nation/>

While enrollment in independent charter schools has increased in recent years in the face of declining public-school enrollment overall, the rate of growth has been relatively slow. Figure 2 depicts growth in independent charter enrollment over the past decade.* Since 2015, enrollment is up nearly 35%, but over the past three years enrollment growth has slowed to 11.6%.

Figure 2.
Independent Charter
Enrollment, 2015-2024



National organizations that track charter school policy offer a window into why this may be happening. A 2022 ranking of charter laws by the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools rated† Wisconsin 1 out of 4 possible points on having “transparent Charter Application, Review, and Decision-making Processes.” The state also received only 1 point on having “a Clear Processes for Renewal, Nonrenewal, and Revocation Decisions.” Other problem areas identified in this report included “Equitable Operational Funding and Equal Access to All State and Federal Categorical Funding,” where the state received 0 out of 4 possible points.

More recently in 2026, the Center for Education Reform released its own charter school law rankings.‡ They place Wisconsin in the ‘B-’ category overall on an A to F scale. The state received 11 out of 15 points when it comes to authorizers, receiving middle-of-the-pack scores on both number of authorizers and their level of independence. Other glaring issues identified in this ranking include a 0 out of 5 possible points for “Facility Funding/Financing,” as such funds simply aren’t available to charter schools in the state.

* Kava, R. (2025, January). *Charter schools* (Informational Paper No. 33). Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau. https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lfb/informational_papers/january_2025/0033_charter_schools_informational_paper_33.pdf

† Ziebarth, Todd. “Measuring up to the Model: A Ranking of State Public Charter School Laws.” National Alliance of Public Charter Schools. 2022. https://publiccharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2022-model-law_rd3.pdf

‡ Center for Education Reform. (2026). National Charter School Rankings & Scorecard—2026 https://edreform.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/CER_2026_CharterLawScorecard_8.5.26.pdf

WHY THIS MATTERS: CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE DELIVERING RESULTS

Wisconsin's charter sector is not stagnating because the model has failed to prove itself. WILL's 2026 Apples to Apples analysis finds that Wisconsin charter schools generally perform as well as or better than traditional public schools when comparing students with similar backgrounds and prior achievement. This advantage is especially pronounced among charter schools that operate with greater independence from their authorizing school districts. In Milwaukee, non-instrumentality charter schools posted more than 10 percentage points higher proficiency than their traditional public school peers in both math and English/Language Arts, while independent charters showed an advantage of nearly 8 percentage points in math.*

These results are particularly notable because charter schools often serve higher concentrations of low-income and minority students than traditional public schools, making simple comparisons of raw average test scores potentially misleading. The evidence suggests that where Wisconsin has allowed charter schools the independence to operate as intended, the model works. That makes the barriers described in the remainder of this report more than a policy inconvenience—they stand between more Wisconsin students and an education model that is already proving itself.

WHAT IS AN AUTHORIZER?

Charter school authorizers are the entities responsible for approving, monitoring, and renewing charter schools to ensure they meet the terms of their performance contracts. The types of entities that can be designated as authorizers vary from state to state. In some states, local school boards serve as authorizers; in others that role may be held by state-level independent chartering boards, non-profits, university systems, or other non-educational government agencies.†

Each state determines who may authorize charter schools, with most allowing several different authorizing entities to grant charters. The structure and capacity of these authorizers can play a major role in shaping the state's charter sector. When state laws over-regulate charter schools or limit how many authorizers operate, they can unintentionally restrict growth and innovation within the charter marketplace, leading to fewer options for families.

* Flanders, W. (2026, February). *Apples to Apples: A look at school sector performance in Wisconsin for 2025*. Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty. <https://will-law.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/ApplestoApples2026-web.pdf>

† National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (n.d.). *List of charter school authorizers by state*. <https://qualitycharters.org/state-policy/multiple-authorizers/list-of-charter-school-authorizers-by-state/>

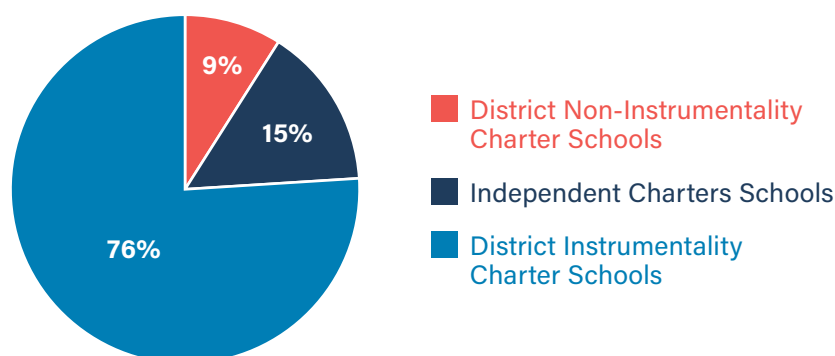
Responsibility and Oversight of Authorizers

In addition to being the entity responsible for being in a contract with a charter school, authorizers have the broader responsibility of general oversight over charter schools. This includes overseeing the application and approval process for new charter schools and enforcing any laws and expectations charter schools must follow regarding performance. Renewing contracts with charter schools as well as closing charters through the revocation of charter contracts fall within an authorizer's responsibilities. Depending on state law, authorizers may be responsible for more substantial amounts of oversight and reporting on the charter school partners.

Charter School Types and Authorizers in Wisconsin

Wisconsin has two types of authorizers – public school districts and state entities designated by the legislature ("independent" charters). There are also two types of charter schools within the district charter umbrella—instrumentality and non-instrumentality.

Figure 3.
Charter Schools by
Type in Wisconsin



DISTRICT CHARTER SCHOOLS

In Wisconsin, school districts are the most common charter authorizers. District authorized charter schools operate under contracts approved by the local school board and must comply with most district policies. State law also limits fully virtual charters to only be authorized by school districts. School districts can authorize two types of district charters:

Instrumentality Charters: Instrumentality charter schools operate as extensions of their authorizing school districts. Their enrollment, funding, staffing, and academic results are all reported as part of the district's totals. The district employs the teachers, controls the budget, and retains responsibility for compliance and accountability. As a result, these schools function much like traditional public schools, with limited operational independence despite carrying the charter label. For those reasons, WILL has often referred to these schools as "*charters in name only*."

These schools are frequently specialty or themed programs—such as Montessori, STEM, or arts academies—and are sometimes co-located within existing district facilities. Virtual charter schools also typically fall under the instrumentality umbrella.

From a funding perspective, instrumentality charter schools receive the same per-pupil funding as their authorizing school district and are eligible for all categorical aids, including special education funding. Because they are part of the district for membership and aid purposes, their budgets and reimbursements flow through the district rather than directly to the school.

As of the 2025–26 school year, there were 168 instrumentality charter schools statewide.*

Non-Instrumentality Charters: Non-instrumentality charter schools operate under contract with a school district but maintain a greater degree of independence than their instrumentality counterparts. While the district authorizes the school and is ultimately responsible for ensuring compliance with the charter contract, the school's governing board manages its own budget, hires and supervises staff, and determines curriculum and instructional methods. Teachers and other employees are typically not members of district collective-bargaining units, giving the school flexibility to align personnel decisions with its mission and model.

These schools still rely on district-passed state and local funding, which can limit autonomy in practice. The district generally retains fiscal control of funds and may impose additional reporting or operational requirements. As a result, the level of independence among non-instrumentality charters varies widely depending on the district's posture toward chartering.

From a funding perspective, non-instrumentality charter schools are financed through their authorizing school district, rather than receiving direct state payments. Students enrolled in these schools are counted in the district's membership for purposes of general state aid and revenue limits. The district receives all state and local funding, then transfers an agreed-upon per-pupil amount to the charter school under the terms of its contract.

Like other district schools, non-instrumentality charters are eligible for categorical aids, including special-education reimbursement under Wis. Stat. §115.88, since the district—rather than the charter—is the local educational agency (LEA). However, because the district controls the flow of funds, the level of financial autonomy can vary. While some districts provide the full per-pupil amount with minimal conditions, this is the exception rather than the rule. In most cases, districts deduct administrative fees, retain all categorical aids, and provide the charter only with a per-pupil payment roughly equivalent to the state independent-charter amount. As a result, non-instrumentality charters often operate with less financial flexibility and autonomy than their statutory independence might suggest.

* Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (2025, August). *Quick facts, Wisconsin charter schools, 2024–25/2025–26*. Wisconsin Digital Archives. <https://www.wistatedocuments.org/digital/>

As of the 2025–26 school year, there were 25 non-instrumentality charter schools operating in Wisconsin, a decrease of 2 from the 2018–19 school year.

INDEPENDENT CHARTER SCHOOLS

A variety of other state entities also have the authority to authorize charter schools that operate independently of school districts—collectively known as independent charter schools. These schools are funded directly by the state, rather than through a local district. Their per-pupil payment is set in statute and adjusted during each state budget cycle.

For the 2025–26 school year, the per-pupil amount for independent charter schools was \$12,369. By comparison, the average state and locally funded amount for traditional public school districts in Wisconsin was approximately \$18,592 per pupil for the most recent school year available, 2023–24. There are 33 independent charter schools currently operating in Wisconsin.

Under Wisconsin law, there are several entities that have the authority to authorize independent charter schools, although not all of them utilize that authority. The state extended chartering authority for independent charter schools beginning in 1997 to University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM), Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC) and the Common Council of Milwaukee.* UWM was permitted to charter within Milwaukee County or an adjacent county, while the Common Council and MATC were limited to the district boundaries for Milwaukee Public Schools.

In 2001, chartering authority was extended to University of Wisconsin-Parkside and limited to either Racine County or an adjacent county.† The legislature then extended charter authority in 2015 to several more state entities including Office of Educational Opportunity with the University of Wisconsin, Gateway Technical College Board, Waukesha County Executive, Menomonee Nation and the Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa Community College.‡ These authorizers initially had some boundaries, such as Waukesha Executive could only authorize in Waukesha County; Gateway College Board could authorize within the district. The tribal colleges could authorize up to six charters total anywhere in the state.

Then in 2017, the legislature permitted a pilot program for a recovery charter school, extended authorization authority to all UW technical college boards and remaining Chancellors and removed geographical limitations for most authorizers (only Waukesha County executive is limited to Waukesha County).§

* 1997 Wisconsin Act 27

† 2001 Wisconsin Act 16

‡ 2015 Wisconsin Act 55

§ 2017 Wisconsin Act 30

As of the 2025-26 school year only five active authorizing entities in the state operated as independent authorizers: City of Milwaukee, Office of Educational Opportunity (OEO), UW-Milwaukee, UW-Parkside, Waukesha County Executive.* The table below lists the number of schools authorized by each independent authorizer.

Table 1. Count of Independent Charter Schools by Authorizer, 2025-26

Authorizer	Current School Count	Statute
City of Milwaukee (Common Council)	6	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)a
Office of Educational Opportunity (UW- System)	10	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2x)
UW-Milwaukee Chancellor	15	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)b
UW-Parkside Chancellor	1	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)c
Waukesha County Executive	1	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)f
Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwe Community College	0	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)h
Milwaukee Area Technical College District Board	0	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)d
College of Menominee Nation	0	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)g
Chancellor of Any Other UW University	0	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)eg
Any Other Technical College District Board	0	Wis. Stat. §118.40(2r)(b)(1)e

With the exception of the tribal colleges and the Waukesha County Executive, Wisconsin law places no statutory limits on the number or location of independent charter schools that may be authorized by these entities.† In practice, however, most authorizers have only approved schools within their immediate geographic area—for example, the UW-Milwaukee typically authorizes within Milwaukee County. The one significant exception is the Office of Educational Opportunity (OEO), which is an independent office housed within the Universities of Wisconsin System and serves as the state’s primary statewide authorizer of independent charter schools.

For the rest of this paper, we will primarily focus on the barriers to the growth of independent charter schools, as they operate with the greatest degree of freedom from traditional public schools and are of most interest in growing.

* Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Charter Schools Team. (2025, March). *Legislative report on charter schools 2023-2024*. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED672987.pdf>

† LFB 33

FEDERAL CHARTER SCHOOL GRANTS

Wisconsin has been the recipient of the federal Charter School Grants, which is a federal five-year grant program to various states to create new charters and support replication of successful charters.* Wisconsin has been awarded this grant several times—including 2017 and 2023.† In the most recent round, Wisconsin was awarded a total of \$58 million for a five-year grant.

DPI makes subgrants from this federal grant in three main categories: (1) planning and implementation opening the following year; (2) implementation grants for newly opened or will open in the following year; and (3) aid the expansion of existing high-quality charter schools.

Applications go through a review process: (1) technical review by DPI staff to ensure the school meets the eligibility requirements, then (2) an external peer review panel and follow a specific benchmark and final approval is approved by the state superintendent.‡ Peer review benchmarks are based on a numerical scale.§

Wisconsin charter schools that received the planning and implementation of subgrants saw fairly high success. Out of the 31 subgrants given between 2017-2024, 22 of the charter schools are still operating in 2025-2026. A significant challenge for start-up charter schools is often the planning and implementation stage given the funding needed to get started. The success of these grants helping charter schools succeed is a good sign. Out of the 124 total subgrants given to Wisconsin charter schools since 2017, independent charter schools received about 37% of the subgrants. See the online appendix for a complete list of charter schools who received subgrants from DPI over this time frame.

These federal charter school program grants have been an important financial support system for charter school growth in Wisconsin. Yet the success of these grants underscores the paper's central puzzle: federal dollars have proven effective at helping individual schools open and survive, but they cannot manufacture authorizers willing to approve new schools or buildings for those schools to occupy. Wisconsin's bottleneck is not seed funding; it is the policy environment the rest of this report describes.

Why Growth Has Stalled: An Analysis of Wisconsin's Independent Authorizers

One key reason growth has slowed is likely an increasing reticence of existing authorizers to allow for new schools to be started. Key authorizers like the City of Milwaukee largely stopped adding schools as the

* U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *Charter School Programs*. <https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/grants/charter-school-programs>

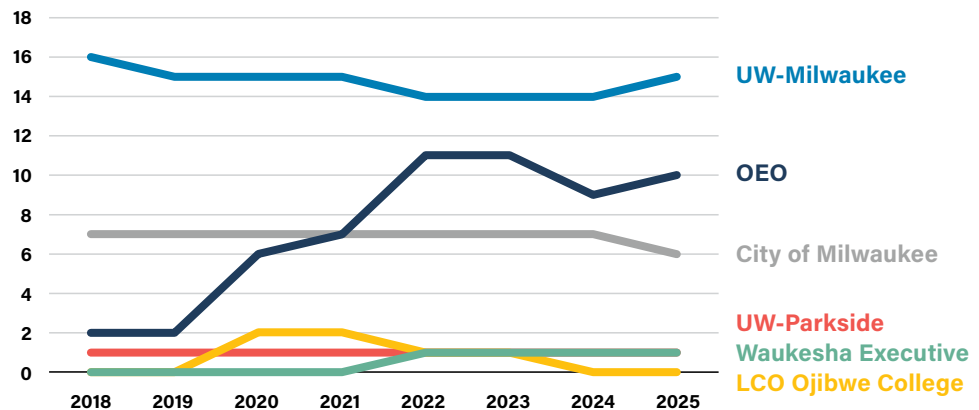
† According to a legislative charter school report: "Since 1996, DPI has been awarded federal grants through the U.S. Department of Education to provide funds to local school districts for charter school planning and implementation grants. The Department received three-year grants in 1996, 1999, 2002, and 2005. In 2009, DPI was awarded a five-year grant that ran through 2014 and totaled \$86.0 million. Five percent of the funding is reserved for DPI grant administration and 95% is awarded to school districts. For 2014-15, DPI has awarded approximately \$8.1 million to 51 charter schools,..." https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/policy-budget/pdf/2015-27_Charter_Schools.pdf

‡ https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Charter-Schools/pdf/WCSP_RFA_2026.pdf

§ <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1SukVf7QpOxslROXU4ZLutxMdGHDCB8y3JjBq7XAbOHO/edit?gid=293291158#gid=293291158>

national debate on school choice has shifted. Figure 4 below shows that most authorizers have expanded the number of schools that it authorizes since 2015, and the number authorized by UW-Milwaukee has declined over this time frame.*

Figure 4.
Count of Independent
Charters by Authorizer,
2015-2025



As part of this research, WILL requested records related to charter schools from every state entity with chartering authority. The records showed that most authorizers do not promote their legislative granted power to authorize charter schools, nor do they appear to have an authorized individual within the entity knowledgeable about this authority. For instance, most technical colleges and UW-System universities did not have a publicly available website with information regarding charter authority, a process to submit applications, or a contact person listed.

Since the Legislature granted technical college boards charter-authorizing authority, no Wisconsin technical college produced records showing that any individual or organization applied to open a charter school through one of those boards. While the technical college's decision to not promote this authority is disappointing, it is surprising that no individual or charter group has even attempted to be authorized by a Wisconsin technical college. Similarly, outside of the OEO, UWM and UW-Parkside, no chancellor at UW campuses across the state had records of applications. A discussion on how to encourage authorizers to be more active will be addressed later in this report.

Among the state entities that have utilized their legislative-granted authority to authorize charter schools, several patterns emerge. For instance, the City of Milwaukee was one of the earliest active independent authorizers. After receiving chartering authority, the Common Council partnered with Marquette University's Institute for the Transformation of Learning to support Milwaukee's Charter School Review Committee work of authorizing and overseeing existing charter schools. The City began receiving applications soon after gaining this authority and approved several schools in 1998, including United

* LFB 33

Community Center's Bruce Guadalupe Community School, YWCA Global Career Academy, Central City Cyberschool, Khamit Institute, Inc., and Downtown Montessori Academy. The City also denied several applications during this early period.* Many City of Milwaukee charter schools have been in existence for decades, and the city has not authorized a new charter in more than ten years.

Table 2.
City of Milwaukee
2025-2026 Authorized
Independent Charter
Schools

Central City Cyberschool	Est. 1997
Darrell Lynn Hines College Preparatory Academy of Excellence	Est. 2002
Downtown Montessori	Est. 1999
Escuela Verde	Est. 2012
Milwaukee Academy of Science	Est. 2000
Milwaukee Math and Science Academy	Est. 2011

Another active early authorizer was the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). Between 2000 and 2002, UWM authorized Business and Economics Academy of Milwaukee (BEAM), School for Early Development and Achievement, Milwaukee College Preparatory School (36th Street), and YMCA Youth Leadership Academy. Of these, Milwaukee College Preparatory School is the only charter school still operating, although it is now authorized by the Milwaukee Public Schools. Similarly, the University of Wisconsin-Parkside authorized 21st Century Preparatory Academy School in 2002, and it is still operating today.

UWM continues to be a sought-after authorizer by charter schools' founders and leaders. UWM has a two-step authorization process: first, a prospectus is submitted, and if accepted, then an application is submitted prior to being approved for a charter contract.† A prospectus is a short description of the proposed school and includes information about its organizers, curricular focus, instructional methodology, governance, and financial capacity. Of the 40 applications submitted since receiving authorization authority in 1999, UWM has only rejected 3. However, many more prospectus applications expressing initial interest were not advanced in the process, with 68 out of 114 being rejected. In 2025-2026, UWM authorized 15 charter schools within the Milwaukee area.

The OEO has a similar approval process. Prospective schools submit a prospectus that is approved or rejected by the OEO. Then, schools submit a formal application that is reviewed by the Application Review Committee. Recommendations of this Committee are then submitted to the Universities of Wisconsin

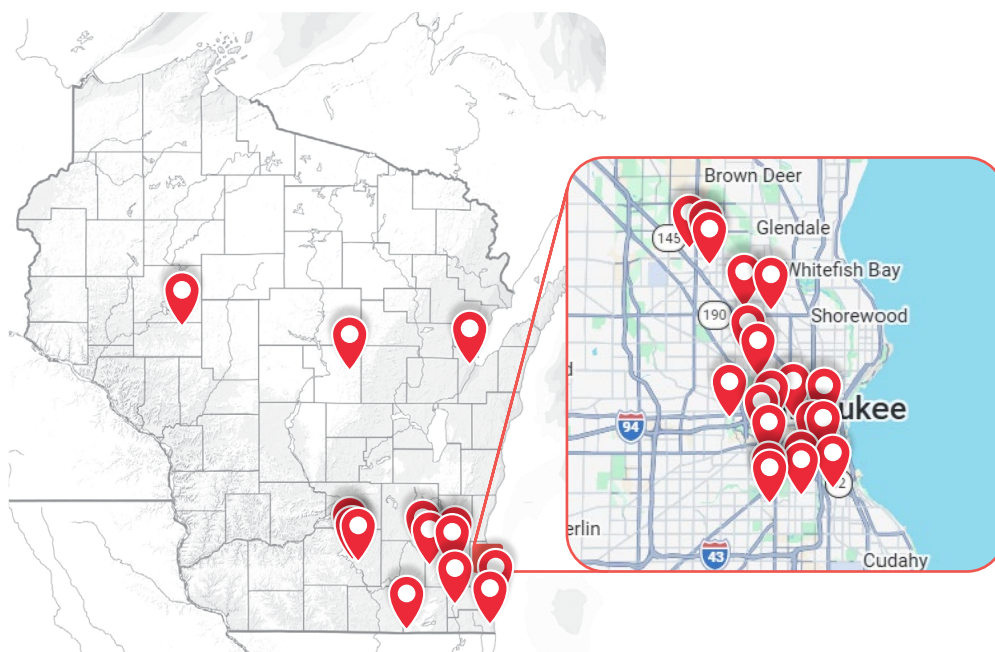
* According to City of Milwaukee Steering & Rules Committee minutes from 1998-1999, the following charter applications were withdrawn or put on hold without eventual approval: United Community Center Bruce Guadalupe charter school, Milwaukee Excel Academy, Inc., Milwaukee Community Charter Schools, Inc., Hickman's Academy Preparatory School, Lakeshore Montessori School, Inc., and Choice Education Services, Inc.

† University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Office of Charter Schools, application process.
<https://uwm.edu/education/community-engagement/charter-schools/application-process/>

President for the final approval. Since it began authorizing in 2015, the OEO has had applications from 31 potential charter schools. Of those, 19 have reached phase 2 of the process and 10 operate as of today.

Another challenge with the current active authorizers is the lack of geographic diversity of independent charters. Only the University of Wisconsin Office of Educational Opportunity is currently authorizing charter schools outside of southeastern Wisconsin. Figure 5 below shows the locations of authorized independent charters in Wisconsin. The vast majority are in Milwaukee, and all but two are in the southeastern part of the state.

Figure 5.
Location of
Independent Charters
in Wisconsin, 2024-25



Interestingly, many public-school districts outside of southeastern Wisconsin have district authorized charter schools. For example, the Appleton Area School District authorized 15 charter schools that are currently operating throughout the district. Of these 15 schools, 2 are exclusively virtual charter schools, six are high schools, and the newest charter school is the Hmong American Immersion School.* This expansion of public options for families indicates that there is an interest in more educational options outside of southeastern Wisconsin.

INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

To gain more leverage on the problems with chartering in Wisconsin, we conducted interviews with fifteen stakeholders in the charter school movement around the state and nation. We interviewed a diverse

* Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. (n.d.). *Currently operating charter schools*.
<https://dpi.wi.gov/parental-education-options/charter-schools/currently-operating-charter-schools>

group of education leaders representing state charter school authorizers in other states, national charter management organizations—some that have schools in Wisconsin and some that do not—and representatives of individual charter schools. The interviews also included prominent advocates and policy experts with deep experience in school choice and charter school governance.

These interviews were conducted anonymously to allow the interviewees to feel free to speak their mind. Some of the most insightful quotes are included here without attribution. The themes below were consistently mentioned in our interviews. Interviews followed a semi-structured format organized around the same core topics reflected in this report: funding, authorizing, political climate, facilities, staffing, and regulation. Roughly half were with Wisconsin-based charter operators and long-time policy advocates, and the remainder were with national charter management organizations and national policy experts who provided points of comparison to other states' charter environments.

Overall Charter Environment

Across the board, Wisconsin was not regarded as a charter growth-friendly state. Stakeholders described it as a “hard” or “unwelcoming” environment, with one summarizing that “Wisconsin is on no one’s shortlist for expansion.” Several reasons were cited for this reputation, including weak funding and facilities support, political unpredictability, burdensome regulations, and the state’s shrinking K–12 population. Milwaukee, while home to most existing charters, was described as an oversaturated market with limited room for growth. Meanwhile, rural areas faced demographic and logistical constraints that further limited opportunities for expansion.

National networks noted the absence of the kind of charter support ecosystem found in other states—incubators, technical-assistance providers, and philanthropic intermediaries. Wisconsin charters operate in isolation, with no coordinated entity guiding replication or startup support.

Funding

Most interviewees expressed cautious satisfaction with the recent per-pupil increase for independent charter schools, noting that the new amount of roughly \$12,369 per student represents long-overdue progress after years of stagnant funding. Several leaders described it as “a big help” that provides breathing room for basic operations.

However, that optimism was tempered by the recognition that Wisconsin charters still operate well below full funding parity with traditional public schools once local revenue and categorical aids are considered. As one school leader noted, *“It helps, but we’re still thousands of dollars behind every district student.”* Others emphasized that the additional aid is quickly consumed by special-education, early-childhood, and facilities costs, leaving little discretionary margin to improve staff pay or expand programs.

Authorizer Issues

Stakeholders expressed deep frustration with Wisconsin's authorizing landscape, describing it as unstable, inconsistent, and overly politicized. Turnover at UW-OEO and the influence of shifting political winds were repeatedly cited as reasons for unpredictability. One operator noted that *"just changing directors, for example, has had a profound difference in approaches."* Since 2015, neither UW-Milwaukee nor the City of Milwaukee has expanded their portfolios, and OEO's posture toward new charters has shifted dramatically with each administration. Interviewees referred to this as "authorizer fatigue"—a combination of political caution and limited staffing that leaves high-quality proposals with nowhere to go. Unlike in other states, Wisconsin has no functional appeals process: if one authorizer denies an application, the process effectively ends.

Operators also described renewal and oversight processes as opaque and inconsistent. Some authorizers exercise minimal accountability even for chronically underperforming schools, while others impose shifting requirements or compliance burdens without clear criteria. The absence of a statewide performance framework undermines confidence among both existing and prospective operators.

By contrast, authorizers in South Carolina and Colorado operate as professionalized, bipartisan agencies with clear statutory authority and full-time staff. This structure arguably leads to a less politically charged environment where charter schools are viewed as the vanguard of broader school choice. Their approval decisions rely on published rubrics, defined timelines, and transparent performance metrics—structures that insulate quality decisions from political change.

Political Climate

Wisconsin's political climate was viewed as highly unstable, particularly when it comes to education reform. Interviewees emphasized that gubernatorial elections, DPI leadership turnover, and Board of Regents changes frequently reset policy priorities. As one national strategist put it, "You're one election away from the whole thing falling apart." Democratic leadership, especially under Governor Evers, was described as generally unsupportive of charter school growth, with some local leaders voicing especially sharp critiques of the state's Democratic establishment. Furthermore, several candidates in Wisconsin's 2026 gubernatorial election have also pledged to phase out independent charter schools. In contrast, states like Colorado and Arizona were praised for insulating their charter governance structures from politics, allowing for a more predictable and bipartisan environment.

Facilities

Nearly all interviewees identified the lack of state-backed facilities funding as one of the most significant barriers to charter growth. Wisconsin law provides no mechanism for charters to finance or construct buildings—no capital grants, loan funds, or bonding authority. While districts can raise local revenue through referenda or debt issuance, independent charters must lease or build entirely with their per-pupil funding and private donations.

As a result, many independent charters occupy retrofitted spaces—churches, warehouses, or former district facilities—rather than purpose-built schools. Several leaders described the challenge as the “price of entry” for operating in Wisconsin. *“With construction costs between \$300 and \$500 per square foot,”* one national operator explained, *“unless you have a major philanthropic opportunity, it just doesn’t work.”* Several Wisconsin schools reported relying on private capital campaigns simply to open their doors.

By comparison, Colorado and Arizona provide per-pupil facilities aid and state-backed credit enhancements, while South Carolina’s statewide authorizer can manage facilities compliance as a local education agency. The absence of similar programs in Wisconsin was repeatedly cited as a primary deterrent for even high-performing national operators considering entry into the state.

Staffing Issues

Recruitment and retention of staff emerged as another pressing challenge. Wisconsin’s licensure requirements were frequently cited as barriers to hiring mission-aligned educators, particularly for classical or alternative education models. As one operator argued, *“We’re not convinced that having a Bachelor of Education necessarily produces the best classical educators.”* Unlike more flexible states, Wisconsin lacks streamlined alternative pipelines for career changers or nontraditional teaching candidates, further limiting the talent pool. Special education staffing costs, already inflated by the state’s low reimbursement rate, were described as particularly burdensome for local schools.

Regulatory Climate

Stakeholders described Wisconsin as an over-regulated state when it comes to charter operations. Requirements surrounding curriculum, teacher certification, and compliance documentation were seen as heavy-handed and misaligned with student outcomes. As one interviewee summarized, *“The focus should be on whether kids are learning—not how thick your compliance binder is.”* In contrast, states like Arizona and Colorado were praised for oversight structures that emphasize performance-based accountability while imposing lighter regulatory burdens. Interviewees argued that Wisconsin’s regulatory climate stifles innovation and reduces the operational autonomy that makes charter models viable.

Other Key Insights

Several additional themes surfaced across interviews. Stakeholders observed that while families in Wisconsin show strong interest in quality charter options, the state lacks the intermediary infrastructure—such as incubators and technical assistance organizations—needed to support growth. Innovation is further suppressed by the combination of regulatory burdens and funding limitations. These include short initial contracts in Wisconsin of five years that may make it challenging for schools to establish a foothold and make it more difficult to receive bank financing for facilities.

A broader demographic concern is the state's declining K-12 student population, with multiple interviewees stressing that *"there too few kids."* Concerns about the challenges of finding and retaining effective teachers were also brought up. This is a broader concern than just for charter schools, as the shrinking teacher pipeline affects all sectors. The legislature should consider innovative licensing reforms to address this. Finally, many participants emphasized the need for a coordinated statewide growth strategy rather than piecemeal or reactive policy responses, arguing that without such an approach, Wisconsin's charter sector will remain stagnant.

The Demand Question

Two caveats are worth addressing directly. Interviewees described Milwaukee's charter and choice marketplace as saturated, making it a less-than-ideal place to launch a new school, and multiple stakeholders flagged Wisconsin's declining statewide K-12 enrollment as a headwind for growth.

Both are fair points, but neither settles the question, because independent charters have barely been tested outside the Milwaukee metro area. Where they have not been tried, the evidence points the other way: public school districts elsewhere in the state have created their own specialized charter schools, suggesting real demand for the model, even though independent charters have struggled to gain a foothold in those same areas. 125 districts across the state are still seeing positive enrollment growth over the past five school years (though some growth has been quite modest), and these areas represent exactly the kind of untested opportunity where independent charter schools deserve a chance to demonstrate demand, rather than being written off based on Milwaukee's experience.

POLICY SOLUTIONS

Provide State-Backed Facilities Support

While charter schools are public schools, they do not benefit from the revenue-generating pathways that other public schools have through referenda when attempting to build new facilities. Addressing this critical need would reduce dependence on philanthropy and make Wisconsin more attractive to high-quality operators. This is particularly apt to the recent dispute between Milwaukee Public Schools and Carmen charter schools. Despite MPS authorizing Carmen charter school network since 2007 and leasing buildings for years, this year MPS only re-authorized Carmen for one additional year (the 2026-2027 school year). This decision, which charter advocates widely viewed as political rather than performance-based, could leave hundreds of students in limbo as Carmen navigates fighting against a hostile authorizer for a building and trying to find another building to purchase or lease.

There are a variety of options that could address the facility issue for Carmen and other charter schools:

1. **Establish state facilities per pupil categorical aid** as part of the state’s funding model for charter schools specifically. The Arizona model is a per pupil amount that can be used for a variety of educational expenditures. It is \$2,174 for grades K-8 and \$2,534 for high school.* Another benefit to creating a specific facility per pupil fund is the ability for Wisconsin to access the federal State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grants. This grant only applies to states with “per-pupil facilities aid” for charter schools because it is to help establish or enhance these funds.
2. **Create a low-interest loan state program** to help cover the capital costs of charter school buildings. Wisconsin has existing state entities that could be expanded to provide this support.

The Wisconsin Health and Education Facilities Authority (WHEFA) is a public authority that offers capital financing assistance to Wisconsin nonprofit health care institutions, independent colleges and universities, private elementary and secondary schools, and other 501(c)(3) nonprofits—including most private and charter schools. WHEFA provides this assistance by issuing revenue bonds to institutional lenders and investors. The proceeds from these bond sales are then loaned to eligible organizations at a reduced cost, made possible by federal tax-exempt status and lower interest rates. Borrowers repay their loans to WHEFA, ensuring that no state or other public funds are used. Financing availability and terms are based on the applicant’s creditworthiness.

The legislature could require that high-performing public charter and private schools—as defined in statute—receive priority access to WHEFA financing. Alternatively, the state could establish a targeted grant program through an existing state agency to help high-performing public and private schools expand or open new campuses.

A grant program focused on expanding high-performing schools in Milwaukee could support traditional public schools, public charters, and private schools in parental choice programs that meet clear criteria, such as strong performance or location within an educational “desert.” States such as Arkansas and Idaho operate similar loan programs that help charter schools secure lower interest rates and dedicated facility funding.

Wisconsin’s Board of Commissioners of Public Lands (BCPL) also administers a State Trust Fund Loan Program, offering below-market loans to municipalities and school districts for public purpose projects. Independent charter schools cannot access these loans, because Wisconsin law defines eligible borrowers as “municipalities” and “school districts”—categories that exclude independent charters, which are nonprofit corporations rather than units of government. The legislature should amend this definition to include independent charter schools authorized under § 118.40, allowing them to borrow on the same terms as school districts. This is a narrow fix: it would not touch the trust’s principal or its constitutional purpose, and Colorado offers a precedent for extending state trust-land benefits to charter schools by statute.

* Arizona Department of Education. (2026 Jun) *FY 2027 School Finance Fiscal Operations Updates*. <https://cms.azed.gov/finance/fy2027-school-finance-fiscal-operations-updates>

3. State-backed credit enhancements

Alternatively, the state could model a new program after Arizona's state-backed credit enhancements.* The public-school credit enhancement fund is to provide financial support to both charter and public schools to reduce borrowing costs by ensuring the bonds will be repaid, even if the school defaults. However, only high performing schools qualify for this program and must meet specific requirements including proven instructional strategies and curricula that demonstrate high academic outcomes; high enrollment demand; and a financial plan.

This program has delivered results. By 2019, it had approved nearly \$213 million in financing for charter operators including BASIS, which used it to fund new buildings and additions at four campuses while saving an estimated \$127,000 per year in interest on a single \$31 million bond.†

4. State competitive grant fund for facilities

Another option to support charter schools' access to facilities is a state-competitive grant fund. Georgia's fund supports costs of construction, renovation, long-term lease and purchases of facilities. To qualify for the grant, a charter school must either (1) own the facility or the property to build the facility; (2) be in the process of purchasing the facility through a lease-purchase agreement or (3) have a long-term lease that is five years or longer.

The benefit of a grant fund is to provide schools with access to funding that is needed to take on a facility or capital project. Often the schools' revenue is supporting the day-to-day operations, and there is not enough additional funding to support a facility purchase.

For scale: independent charter enrollment in Wisconsin is roughly 11,500 students. A facilities categorical aid of \$1,000 per pupil, comparable in structure to Arizona's additional assistance, would cost approximately \$11.5 million annually, a small proportion of a K-12 budget that exceeds \$8 billion, and would unlock eligibility for federal facilities incentive grants that Wisconsin currently forgoes. The loan-guarantee and WHEFA-priority options would cost less still, since they leverage private capital rather than appropriating state funds.

Activate Dormant Charter Authorizers

The structure of a state's authorizing system often reflects its broader political commitment to charter school growth. States that have a more positive view of chartering as a permanent part of public education

* Local Initiatives Support Corporation. (n.d.). *Charter schools funding options: Arizona*. <https://www.lisc.org/charter-schools/funding-options/state/arizona/>

† Duda, J. (2019, November 25). *Arizona charter schools get \$213M in "Achievement District" financing*. Arizona Mirror. <https://azmirror.com/2019/11/25/arizona-charter-schools-get-213m-in-achievement-district-financing/>

tend to create authorizers and processes that are better insulated from partisan turnover and operate under clear, professionalized standards. In contrast, states with weaker political support for charter schools often place authorizing power in agencies with little incentive to foster growth, such as local school boards or state education departments. These entities are typically cautious and bureaucratic, resulting in approval processes that are inconsistent, opaque, and slow to adapt.

Wisconsin's authorizing system remains fragmented and politically volatile. Independent charter authorizers are housed in a variety of institutions—the UW system and affiliated universities, municipal and county governments, and technical college districts—that may shift priorities with each administration or board turnover. Several of the current authorizers rarely, if ever, use it, leaving only a handful of active authorizers statewide. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools continually identifies Wisconsin as a weak charter school state for lack of strong alternative, non-district authorizers in comparison to other states, in its annual ranking of charter school laws.*

It is unclear how much of this dormancy reflects genuine opposition to chartering versus simple inattention. The evidence points more toward the latter: as this report's own records requests found, most of these authorizers have no application process in place, no public information about their authorizing power, and no history of ever fielding an applicant. This is a real missed opportunity. A K-12 to higher education pipeline has been successful in states like Indiana† and Arizona‡ where universities authorize schools aligned with their own academic strengths, from technical and career programs to STEM-focused campuses. Wisconsin's UW institutions and technical colleges could do the same, but an authorizer that has never been asked and never made it possible to ask is a different problem than one that has actively said no, and it calls for a different fix. We recommend three steps to bring these authorizers off the sidelines:

- **Require baseline transparency.** Every entity with chartering authority under state law should be required to maintain a public application webpage, publish a timeline and rubric for approval, and designate a named contact person, with noncompliance reported annually by DPI. In addition, all charter authorizers should report annually the number of charter applications received and decisions made. An authorizer the public cannot even find is functionally not an authorizer in practice.
- **Fund technical assistance for first-time authorizers.** The state should direct one-time grant funding to the Wisconsin Resource Center for Charter Schools (housed at CESA 9) to proactively support authorizers who have never processed an application—building their first contract template, review rubric, and oversight plan—rather than expecting each dormant authorizer to build this capacity from nothing.
- **Incentivize activation with targeted grants.** The state should provide additional grant funding to institutions that authorize a school aligned with their own mission, such as a technical college board

* Ziebarth 2022

† Purdue Polytechnic High Schools. (n.d.). *Purdue Polytechnic High Schools | Public charter K-12 high schools Indianapolis*. <https://www.pphs.purdue.edu/>

‡ ASU Preparatory Academy. (n.d.). *ASU Prep Academy K-12 college prep charter schools*. Arizona State University. <https://asuprep.asu.edu/>

authorizing a career-and-technical-focused high school. This ties activation to institutional strengths rather than treating every authorizer as interchangeable.

Create New Statewide Charter Authorizer

When the legislature expanded independent authorizers in 2017, the creation of the Office of Educational Opportunity (OEO), under the University of Wisconsin system, seemed like the first authorizer whose sole purpose would be to authorize charter schools. Although the OEO was designed to function as an independent, statewide authorizer, it ultimately operates under the Board of Regents of the Universities of Wisconsin System, whose members are appointed by the governor. As a result, shifts in political leadership can significantly influence OEO's priorities and operations, undermining the stability and predictability that statewide authorizers are meant to provide. Despite the expectations of a politically "safe" authorizer, the OEO has become another subject of debate within the Board of Regents. Turnover in gubernatorial appointees over the last several years appears to be a significant factor, though other dynamics—including leadership changes at OEO itself and shifting priorities within the UW System—likely play a role as well. It seems likely that this authorizer will continue to be subject to the political changes of the governor's office over time.

Colorado and South Carolina show two different ways of avoiding this outcome.

Colorado stands as a unique example for how authorizers function in states that are more responsive to charter school growth. In addition to local district authorizers, the state established the Colorado Charter School Institute (CSI),*—a bipartisan, statewide body governed by a nine-member board with staggered terms and party-balance requirements.† The long-standing presence of the CSI aids charter school growth by providing insulation against everchanging political positions in the state government as well as providing a clear, structured pathway for new charters to come into existence outside of going through a public school district.

South Carolina offers a similar approach in a politically different context. The state created the South Carolina Public Charter School District in 2006 to authorize and oversee charter schools statewide. The district provides a structured alternative for high-quality operators who might otherwise be blocked by resistant local districts. It functions much like a traditional district for funding and accountability purposes but operates independently of local politics, giving charter schools a stable and predictable pathway to approval and renewal.

Another solution to the ongoing authorization challenges in Wisconsin is to create a new statewide charter authorization board that is more politically balanced than our current options. This statewide board would need a budget line to support staff doing the authorization duties. This would reduce political volatility, give operators predictable pathways for approval, and insulate charters from shifts in partisan control. This new authorizer could also serve as an appeals board, as noted on the next page.

* Colorado Charter School Institute (n.d.) *CSI Portfolio of Schools*. <https://www.csi.state.co.us/schools/>

† CO Rev Stat § 22-30.5-505 (2024)

One possible structure could be a nine-member board. Each house of the legislature would appoint four: two selected by the majority leader and two by the minority leader in the Assembly, and the same split in the Senate. Because majority and minority leaders in each chamber belong to different parties by definition, this structure produces an even four-four party split without needing a separate statutory cap. The ninth and final seat would be appointed by the Governor and reserved for someone with a background administering an independent charter school, so the board retains real operating expertise regardless of which party holds the other eight seats. All seats should be subject to confirmation by the State Senate.

To keep this design from being turned against the sector by a narrow majority, denying a new application, revoking an existing charter, or declining to renew one should each require a supermajority of six of nine votes. The legislature should also write the board's mission directly into statute, directing it to evaluate applications with a presumption toward expanding high-quality charter options statewide. That way the board's purpose can't be redefined by whichever coalition happens to hold a working majority in a given year.

The board would supplement rather than replace existing authorizers. Its budget should come from chartering fees rather than general appropriations.

AN APPEALS PROCESS FOR CHARTER SCHOOLS

Currently, Wisconsin has no clear appeals process for hearing claims of an undue termination of charter contract or for an unclear denial of a charter contract from an authorizer. This stifles potential growth for charter schools in the state and restricts the options for charter schools to find a strong, long-term partnership with an authorizer. California, Florida, and Tennessee all have more robust appeal processes that allow for better growth, clarity, and stability for charter schools in Wisconsin. State processes nationwide, however, still place greater emphasis on the new start of appeals processes in the state policies.

California established an appeals and review system in 2002, allowing counties to set appeals processes.* For example, Los Angeles County currently allows for charter schools to appeal a decision up to 30 days after the denial.† Similar to California, Florida has an appeal system that allows charter schools to appeal a denial decision up to 30 days after initial written notice.‡ Tennessee has a single State Board that handles

* Legislative Analyst's Office. (2006, August 1). *History and development of charter school policy in California*. California Legislature. https://lao.ca.gov/handouts/education/2006/Charter_School_Policy_080106.pdf

† Los Angeles County Office of Education. (2025, March). *District charter school renewals on appeal guide*. Los Angeles County Office of Education, Charter School Office. <https://www.lacoe.edu/content/dam/lacoeedu/documents/generalcounsel/charter-school-office/District%20Charter%20Renewal%20on%20Appeal%20Guide.pdf>

‡ Florida Department of Education, Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice. (n.d.). *Charter School Appeal Commission guidelines for charter school application denial appeals*. https://www.floridaschoolchoice.org/pdf/charter_school_appeal_guidelines.pdf

new start, revocation, and renewal appeals. Interestingly, the State Board may become the authorizer for a charter school going through the new start or renewal appeals process.*

Limit New Regulations on Charter Schools, Reduce Existing

Charter schools exist to be pathways for innovative teachers and others to experiment with new methods of educating students in exchange for rigorous outcome standards. When too many regulations are placed on charter schools, they essentially become traditional public schools under a different name. Legislators should think carefully about whether new regulations should be applied to charters, especially when it comes to regulating curricula.

Some areas of regulations that could be repealed include:

- **Licensure Requirement:** Under current law, all charter schoolteachers and administrators must be licensed. This is a requirement that private schools participating in the state's school choice programs are not subject to, yet students participating in choice earn better achievement scores on state testing once demographics are accounted for. As laboratories for innovation, charter schools could potentially benefit from having more flexibility in choosing what teachers and staff to hire rather than being limited to licensed teachers.

This also could address the challenges with Wisconsin's teacher shortage for charter schools because the process to be approved as an out-of-state teacher to teach in state is notoriously difficult.†

- **Length of Contract:** As mentioned earlier in the paper, charter school contracts in Wisconsin are limited to five-year contracts—whether for initial approval or renewal. This creates challenges for financing and long-term planning. There may be wisdom in limiting initial contract lengths—though this could in theory be left to the discretion of the authorizers themselves. But eliminating the contract length of regulations for renewals should be strongly considered.
- **Prohibition on Virtual Schools:** Under current law, only charter schools authorized by school districts can operate as virtual schools. Virtual education is growing in popularity in Wisconsin, and not allowing independent charters to operate virtual schools seems arbitrary. In order to offer as diverse an array of options as possible for Wisconsin families, this regulation should be considered for repeal.
- **Unable to Participate in Part-Time Open Enrollment:** Wisconsin's Part-Time Open Enrollment program allows students from one public high school in the state to attend classes at another public high school. This allows students to supplement their education with classes that are not offered in their home district; often due to a lack of sufficient enrollment. However, independent charter high

* Tennessee State Board of Education. (2020, January 30). *Tennessee Public Charter School Commission: State Board of Education webinar presentation*. https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/education/documents/TESS20200130_SBECCommissionWebinarPPT_FINAL.pdf

† Amid delays, GOP lawmakers order audit into Wisconsin's process for granting professional licenses - WPR. <https://www.wpr.org/economy/complaints-delays-gop-lawmakers-audit-process-professional-licenses>

schools are not allowed to participate in this program that could be a benefit to both students in the charter school and public-school students in the surrounding area. Fixing this simply requires adding independent charters to the existing statute.

Fast Track High-Quality Replication and Expansion

Charter leaders and school networks who have a proven track record of producing results ought to have an easier time opening an additional school. While charter authorizers currently make their own rules and could theoretically allow this, state law could be changed to mandate that charter school authorizers have limited discretion to deny additional charters to effective authorizers.

Florida offers a model worth emulating. Schools designated as “high-performing”—based on state accountability ratings and financial health – gain the ability to automatically increase enrollment, add grade levels and consolidate multiple campuses under a single contract, without a full modification of a charter agreement. They may also apply to open a new, substantially similar school in any district in the state through a simplified application process; the local district has 90 days to act, or the application is automatically approved. Florida extends the same rights to proven multi-campus networks, not just single schools, which is the more relevant model for Wisconsin given this report’s finding that national CMOs cite authorizing uncertainty as a barrier to entering the state.

Wisconsin should adopt a similar framework: define high-performing status using existing state accountability data, grant automatic enrollment and grade-level expansion rights to schools that qualify, and require authorizers to act on a qualifying operator’s replication application within a set window or have it deemed approved.

Clarify Autonomy Protections in Statute

Our interviews revealed extensive concerns about charters becoming “charters in name only” when authorizers strip away too much independent authority from schools. The state could help remedy this by making explicit the areas in which schools are meant to have almost total independence.

These include the following areas:

- **Staffing**
- **Curriculum beyond what has been mandated by the state**
- **Budgeting**
- **Discipline practices**

This could also be of benefit to charter authorizers by limiting the number of areas that they must evaluate the viability of a school on.

Conclusion

An aerial photograph of a city at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue. The city below is densely packed with buildings of various sizes and colors. In the foreground, there's a body of water with a small wooden pier extending into it. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

Wisconsin's charter school sector is not falling behind because families lack interest or because charter schools are ineffective. Rather, it is constrained by a policy environment that undermines stability, autonomy, and long-term planning. Chronic funding inequities—particularly the complete absence of facilities support—force schools to divert resources away from instruction and into basic survival. A fragmented and politically volatile authorizing system leaves operators with few viable pathways to open or expand schools and no recourse when applications are denied or contracts threatened. Layered on top of these challenges are regulatory requirements that erode the very flexibility that defines the charter model.

The contrast with states such as Colorado, South Carolina, Arizona, and Florida is stark. These states have demonstrated that professionalized authorizing, predictable governance, facilities support, and performance-based accountability can coexist with strong oversight and bipartisan durability. Wisconsin's experience shows that without these structural supports, charter schools remain vulnerable to political shifts, regardless of their quality or demand.

The reforms outlined in this report aren't radical nor untested. Establishing an appeals process, providing access to facilities financing, strengthening statewide authorizing, and restoring regulatory flexibility would not privilege charter schools over other public options. Instead, these changes would place charters on a more equal footing and allow them to function as intended: as innovative, accountable public schools responsive to family demand. Without these reforms, Wisconsin risks continued stagnation and the marginalization of a sector that once played a central role in the state's broader school choice movement.



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