

# STATE POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

## FULL-TIME VIRTUAL CHARTER SCHOOLS



### THE BENEFIT

Full-time virtual charter schools are meaningful and beneficial options for some students. They help:

- Rural students avoid lengthy bus rides to brick-and-mortar buildings.
- Student-athletes who need a flexible schedule.
- Home- or hospital-bound youth who want to stay in school despite an illness or family challenge.
- Potential high school dropouts looking for an alternative.



### THE BARGAIN

Charter schools – including full-time virtual charter schools – are given more flexibility and autonomy to serve individual student needs in return for a commitment to meet higher standards of accountability. This is known as the “charter school bargain.”

**Full-time virtual charter public schools are meaningful and beneficial options for some students.**



### THE CURRENT PROBLEM

A study from Stanford University showed that compared to traditional public schools, full-time virtual charter schools have much weaker academic growth and perform worse than traditional public schools in most states:

**17** states studied by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes.

**13** states' full-time virtual charter schools performed **worse** in reading.

**14** states' full-time virtual charter schools performed **worse** in math.



### All subgroups perform worse in full-time virtual charter schools.

White, black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, multi-racial, those in poverty, English-language learners, and special education students – perform worse in full-time virtual charter schools than in traditional public schools.



### Less academic progress in both math and reading.

Full-time virtual charter school students experience 180 fewer days of learning in math and 72 fewer days of learning in reading in comparison to traditional public school students.

**When traditional public schools produce such results, we are rightly outraged. We should not feel any different just because these are charter schools.**



### THE SOLUTION

The continued underperformance by full-time virtual charter schools convinces us that states need to change the policy framework so that these schools better serve students. When traditional public schools produce such results, we are rightly outraged. We should not feel any different just because these are charter schools.





## PROPOSED ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

### ■ Authorizing Structure

We recommend that states only permit authorizers that have been granted statewide or regional chartering authority to oversee full-time virtual charter schools that enroll students from more than one district, while still allowing districts to authorize full-time virtual charter schools that enroll students only from within their districts. In order to curb the temptation to authorize for financial gain, we also recommend that states cap the amount of authorizing fees that an authorizer can withhold from a full-time virtual charter school.

### ■ Enrollment Criteria

We recommend that states study the establishment of criteria for enrollment in full-time virtual charter schools based on factors proven necessary for student success.

### ■ Enrollment Levels

We recommend that states require authorizers and schools to create desired enrollment levels for the full-time virtual charter schools in their states for each year of a charter contract, not to exceed a certain number of students per school in any given year, and allow schools to grow – or not – based on performance.

### ■ Accountability for Performance

We recommend that states require authorizers and schools to jointly determine additional, virtual-specific goals regarding student enrollment, attendance, engagement, achievement, truancy, attrition, finances, and operations and to include these goals in the schools' charter contracts. These goals are in addition to the rigorous goals that every charter school contract should contain. We recommend that authorizers make renewal and closure decisions based upon schools' achievement of the goals in their contracts.

### ■ Funding Levels Based on Costs

We recommend that states require full-time virtual charter school operators to propose and justify a price per student in their charter school applications. We also call on states to seek guidance from experts and researchers in determining responsible levels of funding based on the real costs of full-time virtual charter schools.

### ■ Performance-Based Funding

We recommend that as states establish valid cost levels for operating full-time virtual charter schools, they also fund full-time virtual charter school students via a performance-based funding system.

*To be clear, we do not support these policy options for brick-and-mortar charter schools or “hybrid” charter schools that make use of both brick-and-mortar and online settings. These provisions are tailored to the unique problems that have emerged among too many full-time virtual charter schools, problems that call for states to enact significant policy changes for these schools.*

*While we support the above changes in the context of a state's charter school law, we also realize that some of these changes may not fit within that context. States may need to consider governing full-time virtual schools outside of the state's charter school law, simply as full-time virtual public schools. We will support state leaders that decide to govern full-time virtual schools in this way.*

To learn more details about the proposed accountability mechanisms above, see “A Call To Action to Improve the Quality of Full-Time Virtual Charter Public Schools,” published June 2016 and available at [publiccharters.org](http://publiccharters.org).

