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Taxpayer-funded charter schools: What are they and why should you care?



ALEX GELI | Staff Writer

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Students exit La Academia Partnership Charter School at the end of a school day in 2017.

RICHARD HERTZLER | Staff Photographer

Pennsylvania's charter school law is 23 years old. Yet many questions remain about what charter schools are, who they serve and why they exist.

Here's what you need to know about the charter school situation in Lancaster County.

What is a charter school?

Charter schools are an alternative to traditional public schools. Despite being fueled by taxpayer dollars, they are privately run, typically by nonprofit corporations, and governed by their own school boards. They're meant to improve student performance and provide innovative teaching methods for those who choose to enroll.

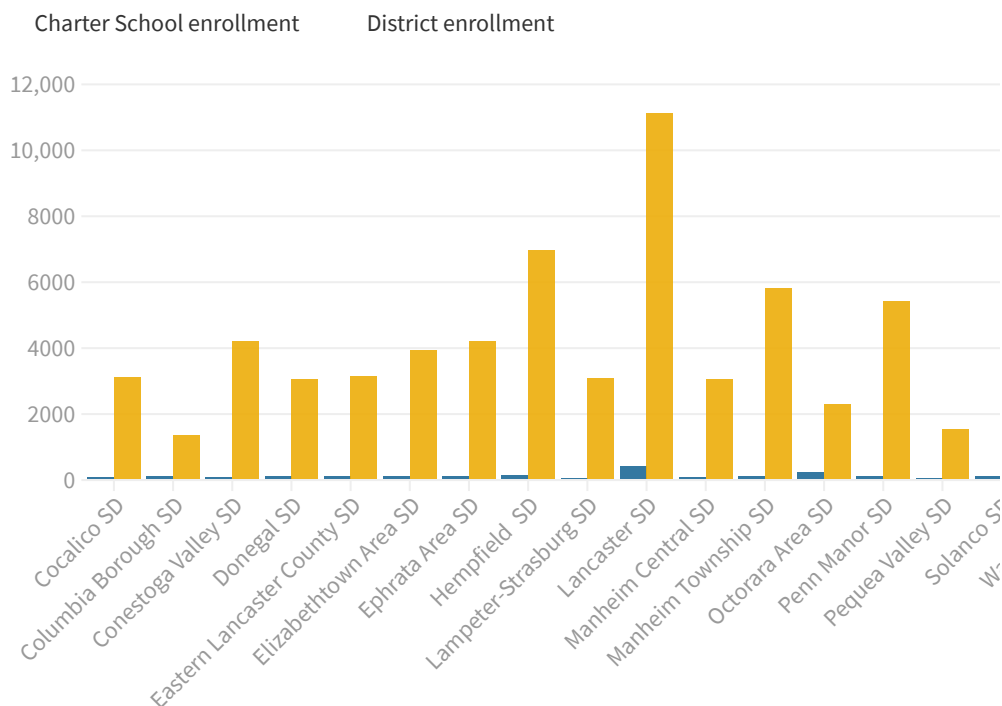
Among the types of charter schools are traditional charter schools, regional charter schools (run by more than one local school board) and cyber charter schools (providing online programs). The former two types are commonly referred to as brick and mortar schools because teachers and students interact face to face in physical facilities.

How many are in Lancaster County?

There is currently one brick and mortar charter school in the county: La Academia Partnership Charter School, which serves about 220 students in grades six through 12 in Lancaster city.

In addition, Lancaster County students attend statewide cyber charters such as Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School, Commonwealth Charter Academy and Agora Cyber Charter School.

More than 1,500 students in Lancaster County go to charter schools, according to 2018-19 data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Nearly 70,000 students attend traditional public schools.



Source: PA Department of Education, 2018-19

 A Flourish data visualisation

What does it cost to enroll my child in a charter school?

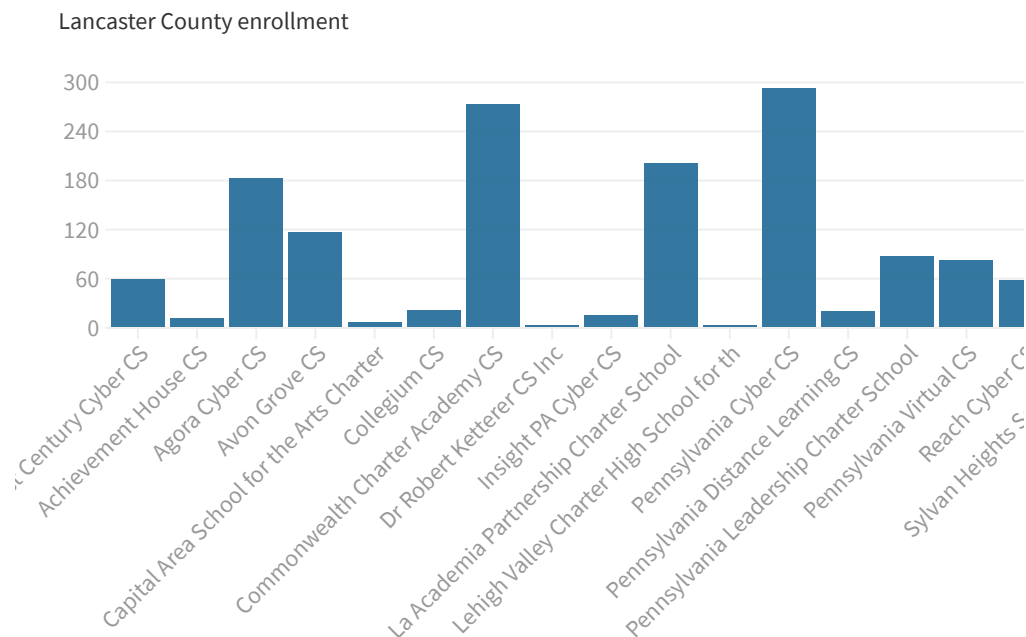
There is no tuition cost for families who choose to enroll their child in a charter school.

How are they funded?

The majority of charter school funding comes from their students' resident school districts. Costs are essentially supposed to follow the child.

For example, if a Manheim Township High School student transfers to a charter school, Manheim Township School District must then pay the charter school what it spends to educate the average student. Costs are vastly different for nonspecial education students and special education students. At Manheim Township, for example, the annual cost for a nonspecial education student is \$11,664, according to 2018-19 data from the state education department. For a special education student, it's \$22,821.

Many public school advocates say this funding model is arbitrary and unfair, especially regarding cyber charter schools, which critics say have far fewer costs than a brick and mortar school.



Source: PA Department of Education, 2017-18

✱ A Flourish data visualisation



LOCAL NEWS

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ALEX GELI | Staff Writer 📖 2 min to read

Do charter schools typically perform better than traditional public schools?

Typically, no. A report out of Stanford University in June 2019 found “overwhelmingly negative” results from cyber charter schools. Students in cyber charters lose the equivalent of about 106 days of learning in reading and 118 days of learning in math, the study shows. Eleven of Pennsylvania’s 15 cyber charters were designated as needing “comprehensive support and improvement” by the state last year.

La Academia, too, has had its fair share of struggles. Last year, its proficiency rates on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment were among the worst in the county. Only 22%, 2% and 13% of students scored proficient or advanced in English language arts, math and science, respectively. However, a new principal, Tommy Henley, said he’s seen improvements this year.



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How are charter schools created?

Charter schools can be formed by any of the following, according to the education department: an individual; teachers; parents or guardians; an independent college, university or museum located in Pennsylvania; an independent nonprofit; a corporation, association or partnership.

For a brick and mortar charter school, an application must be sent to the school board of the district where the charter school will be located. The school board must hold public hearings and grant or deny the application within 75 days of the first hearing.

Cyber charter school applications go to the state education department. Public hearings are held, then applications are granted or denied within 120 days.



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If the application is denied, applicants can either submit a revised application or appeal to the state Charter School Appeal Board.

One local example is the TLC Leadership Charter School, which applied to the Conestoga Valley school board twice last year. It was rejected both times. The state's charter school law allows it to apply a third time or take its case to the state appeal board. No decision has been made.

[Stanford Charter Schools Report](#) by [Alex Geli](#) on Scribd



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