



COLORADO K-12 PUBLIC EDUCATION OPTIONS

by Keshia Duncan

In Colorado parents and students have options when choosing a public school. Educational alternatives have grown in popularity in recent years. The most basic option available to families is open enrollment, which allows the flexibility of choosing which public school a student attends. Open enrollment policies are established by the districts and allow students the choice of a school within or outside the district in which they live.

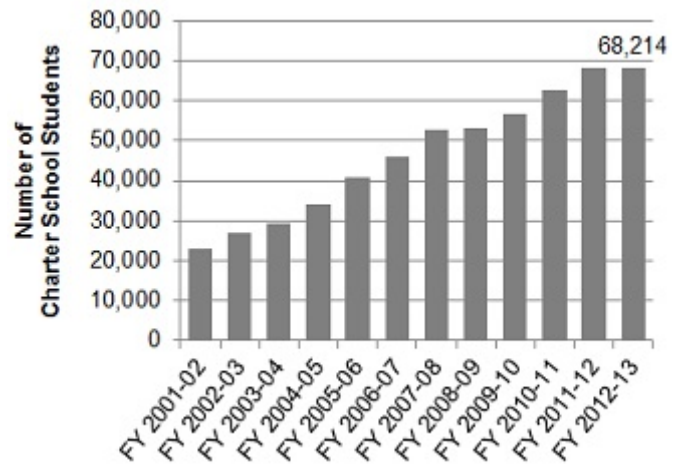
In addition, other types of public school options have been created within school districts such as charter, innovation, and online schools. All publicly funded schools are accredited by the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) and held accountable for improved student achievement. This *issue brief* provides an overview of educational options in the state and the programs that support and monitor their operation.

Charter Schools

The Charter School Act gives teachers, parents, and residents the ability to create public schools that function differently than traditional public schools.¹ These schools operate under a contract or "charter" approved by an authorizer (the local school district board of education or the State Charter School Institute). Generally, charter schools have greater flexibility than traditional public schools with regard to curriculum, staff, fiscal management, and school operations, and are governed by an independent board of directors. Since 1993, participation and interest in charter schools has grown to serve almost 9 percent, or about 68,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) of Colorado's K-12 students. Figure 1 shows the increase in charter student participation since FY 2001-02.

¹Section 22-30.5-101, et. seq., C.R.S.

Figure 1
Charter School Student Participation (FTE)*
FY 2001-02 to FY 2012-13



Source: Colorado Department of Education.

*Full-time equivalent (FTE).

Innovation Schools

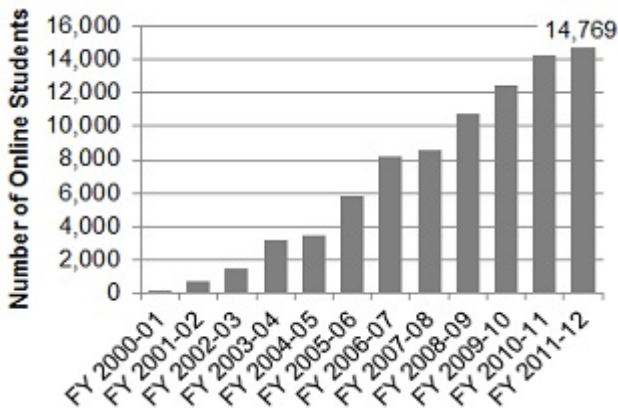
Innovation schools and innovation zones within a district are preexisting public schools that desire flexibility to apply new strategies. These innovations include, but are not limited to, delivery of educational services, personnel administration, and decision-making and budgeting. Schools may petition their local school boards for waivers from these district-level policies. The local board of education is required to review each plan and approve the school or group of schools as an innovation school or zone. Local school boards may then petition the State Board of Education for waivers from certain state-level laws. If the affected employees at an innovation school agree, collective bargaining agreement provisions may be waived as well.

Unlike a charter school, which is governed by an independent board of directors, an innovation school remains under the supervision of the locally elected board of education. Denver Public Schools has the largest number of innovation schools, with 19 in school year 2011-12. These schools are innovating in areas such as recruiting and retention strategies, curriculum changes, and new teacher evaluation systems.

Online Schools

Online programs use the Internet and computer technology to deliver educational services. Online schools may also be established as charter schools. Figure 2 shows the rapid increase in online FTE student participation since FY 2000-01.

Figure 2
Online School Student Participation (FTE)*
 FY 2000-01 to FY 2011-12



Source: Colorado Department of Education.
 *Full-time equivalent (FTE).

Parents and students have different options to use online programs. For example, supplemental online programs offer certain courses (e.g., a unique foreign language or an advanced math topic) in an online format within a traditional school setting. This allows a school to offer a more diverse composition of courses.

Full-time online schools may deliver services as a distinct program within a traditional school, or as separate full-time school that operates exclusively in an online format. Full-time online schools may be single-district

schools (i.e. the school offers educational services primarily to students and families within the school district), or as multi-district schools, which enroll students state wide. Full-time online education programs are authorized either by a local school district, the Charter School Institute, or by a board of cooperative educational services, all of which must be accredited by the state.

Other Public School Options

There are other options within the Colorado public school system. Concurrent enrollment allows a student to gain college credit while still enrolled in high school with limitations on the amount of funding and credits allowed per pupil. Early colleges are a form of concurrent enrollment where the school operates on a community college campus. A student can take college courses while obtaining high school credit, allowing the student to graduate with a high school diploma and an associate’s or bachelor’s degree at the same time.

District magnate, focus, option, contract, and pilot schools provide a specific educational focus. For example, a focus school may concentrate on mathematics instruction and be allowed to go outside of the traditional public school math curricula. Additionally, these schools may have certain criteria that must be met in order to enroll. Alternative education campus is a term for schools that provide assistance to students requiring certain services to succeed, for example, at-risk students, young parents, and special needs students.

Colorado Department of Education's Role

The CDE is responsible for implementing state and federal educational laws, the dispersion of funds, school accountability, and educator licensing for Colorado's schools. CDE's Innovation, Choice, and Engagement Division provides support and guidance to the various school options offered in Colorado including, but not limited to grants, waivers, and school training. For more information please follow the link to the CDE's website. <http://www.cde.state.co.us/choice/index.asp>