**The Big Lie About Charter Academic Achievement:**

**Arizona charter schools are failing all but the brightest students**

**(54% of charter schools did not meet academic standards in 2019)**

Every year theArizona State Board for Charter Schools (ASBCS) is required to submit an annual report to the Auditor General[[1]](#footnote-1). Despite the claims of school choice proponents that charter schools out-perform public district schools, the ASBCS annual reports for the last four years show a steady decline in student achievement, to the point where only 46% of Arizona charter schools met academic performance standards in 2019. Although charter enrollment makes up just 18% of total K-12 enrollment, half of all schools in Arizona that are required to be under Comprehensive Improvement Plans because of low academic performance are charter schools.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Charter schools meeting academic standards 2016-2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| **Current number of charters authorized as of July 1** | 426 | 424 | 420 | 420 |
| **Number of schools operated by authorized charter holders as of July 1** | 539 | 546 | 540 | 543 |
| **Number of schools that meet or exceed academic performance measures** | 290 | 286 | 305 | 250 |
| **Percent Meeting Standards** | 54% | 52% | 56% | 46% |

The tremendous growth and success of college prep charters like BASIS, Great Hearts, and Legacy Traditional (all with curriculums that are one or more years above grade level) has increased the number of charters exceeding academic standards from 29 schools in 2016 to 138 schools in 2019. But overall, charters that met academic standards declined from 54% in 2016 to 46% in 2019.

**Breakdown of academic achievement ratings 2016-2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Academic Performance | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| Exceeds | 29 | 27 | 89 | 138 |
| Above Standard |  |  | 139 | 81 |
| Meets Standard | 261 | 259 | 77 | 31 |
| **Total Meets** | **290** | **286** | **305** | **250** |
| Does Not Meet | 143 | 142 | 15 | 105 |
| Falls Far Below | 15 | 14 | 87 | 96 |
| **Total Not Meeting** | **158** | **156** | **102** | **201** |

ASBCS failed to evaluate the academic performance of 92 schools in 2019 - that’s down from 132 charter schools that were not evaluated in 2018. The ASBCS Academic Performance Framework purposely excludes many charters from academic evaluation - charters serving grades K-2 that do not take the AzMerit test, special education schools, and very small charters are not assessed by the Framework so there is no way of knowing if these schools are educating children or not.

**Charters Not Evaluated academically 2016-2019**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| First 3 Years in Operation | 68 | 81 | 29 | 44 |
| Not Applicable |  |  | 58 | 11 |
| Not Reported | 23 | 22 | 45 | 37 |
| **Total Not Evaluated** | **91** | **103** | **132** | **92** |

But academic evaluation appears to be random. Some online schools and alternative schools are not assessed – others are. The second largest online charter in the state, Arizona Virtual Academy (K-12), with 3600 students was labeled “Not Applicable” and was not evaluated for academic achievement last year but Primavera Online, an alternative online school was evaluated. Since poor academic achievement is the primary tool used by the Board to close charter schools – the 92 schools not evaluated in 2019 could be providing no education what so ever to their students without consequence.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) became law on December 10, 2015, replacing the No Child Left Behind Act on July 1, 2017.  Under the provisions of ESSA the state is required to provide interventions to improve identified low-performing schools. The lowest performing schools are put on a Comprehensive School Improvement Plan and are required to submit detailed plans to increase student achievement.[[3]](#footnote-3) Each school is given an Arizona Department of Education Specialist to monitor and assist the school’s progress. This year there are 196 schools in Arizona that are in Comprehensive School Improvement - 96 are charter schools.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The next tier of low achieving schools that are approaching the need for Comprehensive Improvement are required to submit to Targeted Assistance according to ESSA.[[5]](#footnote-5) There are 253 districts and charter holders in Arizona receiving Targeted Assistance to increase low student achievement – 107 (42%) are charters.

It is easy to have high student achievement in accelerated college prep charter schools. BASIS, for example, brags that they have the most rigorous curriculum and standards in the U.S. and they retain students in 7th grade if they cannot pass high school Algebra. Elite college prep charters, with few poor and at-risk students, have expanded exponentially in Metro Phoenix suburbs in recent years. There are 175 new charter schools in Maricopa County since 2008, with only a handful being opened in inner city Phoenix and Mesa. On the other hand, rural Arizona is not a focus for charter operators. The counties outside of Maricopa and Pima County had a net loss of 10 charter schools since 2008.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Charter school numbers by county 2008 -2019**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Total 2008 | Total 2019 | Change |
| Apache | 5 | 0 | -5 |
| Cochise | 16 | 7 | -9 |
| Coconino | 9 | 13 | 4 |
| Gila | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| Graham | 4 | 2 | -2 |
| Greenlee | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| La Paz | 1 | 0 | -1 |
| Maricopa | 275 | 450 | 175 |
| Mohave | 14 | 13 | -1 |
| Navajo | 8 | 4 | -4 |
| Pima | 86 | 120 | 34 |
| Pinal | 14 | 17 | 3 |
| Santa Cruz | 4 | 6 | 2 |
| Yavapai | 29 | 29 | 0 |
| Yuma | 7 | 10 | 3 |
| Total | 477 | 676 | 199 |

Despite attracting some of the brightest students in Arizona to elite charter schools in affluent Phoenix suburbs– overall charter academic performance continues to decline. 54% of charter schools failed to meet academic standards, 96 charter schools were forced into Comprehensive School Improvement and 107 are receiving Targeted Support from the state for poor academic performance in 2019...while the Charter Board simply looks the other way.

School choice proponents often dismiss concerns about charter transparency and oversight by saying it is the educational outcomes that are important. The academic outcomes for the majority of Arizona charter schools are dismal.

1. The ASBCS Annual Reports are not available online. They can be found at azcsa.org [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.azed.gov/improvement/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.azed.gov/improvement/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The list of schools under Comprehensive School Improvement is at azcsa.org [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.azed.gov/improvement/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Superintendents Annual Report 2008 Vol. 1. page 10 and 2019 Vol.1 page 8 at: https://www.azed.gov/finance/reports/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)