

A photograph of two young children, a boy and a girl, smiling and wearing backpacks. The boy is on the left, wearing a blue shirt and a dark backpack. The girl is on the right, wearing a white shirt, a blue denim vest, and a green floral skirt, also wearing a dark backpack. The background is a blurred green wall.

Charter Schools in North Carolina

# A Choice for Children

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS BY THE NORTH CAROLINA EDUCATION ALLIANCE



– A Choice for Children –



Educational choice and empowerment.

Opportunities for *all* children.

And the autonomy to succeed.

CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE A MOVEMENT WHOSE TIME HAS COME –  
A FRESH ALTERNATIVE TO THE TIRED, OUT-OF-DATE POLICIES  
GOVERNING PUBLIC EDUCATION.

# A Movement Whose Time Has Come



**NO EASY ANSWERS TO THE PUBLIC EDUCATION CRISIS.**

**Low test scores.**  
**High dropout rates.**  
**Overcrowding.**



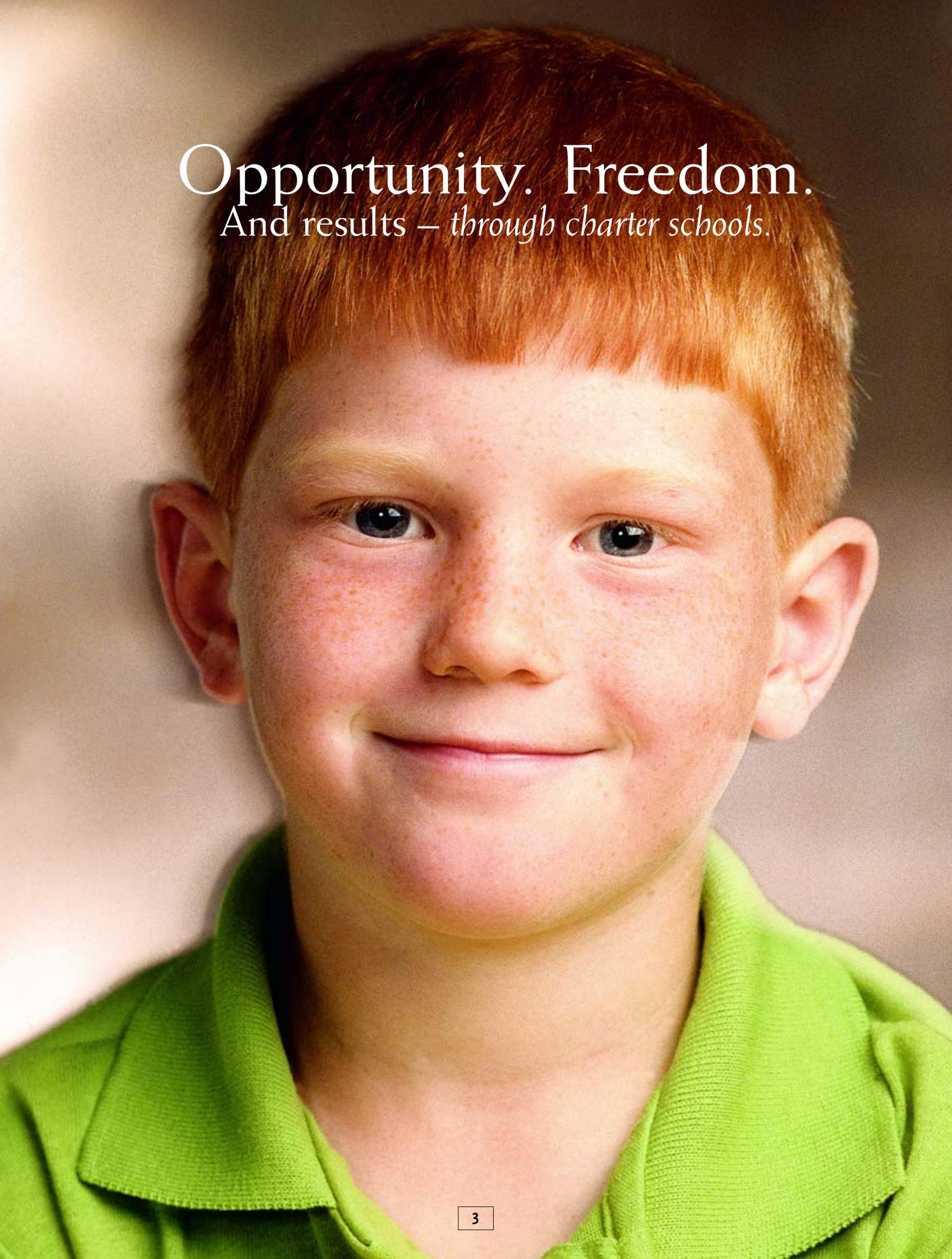
Most Americans agree that public education is in trouble. While legislators and educators have tried to fix failing schools by increasing funding, expanding regulations, or intensifying requirements for teachers, these changes have only served to patch a broken system.

**PUBLIC EDUCATION IN AMERICA NEEDS RADICAL REINVENTION, AND CHARTER SCHOOLS PROVIDE AN EFFECTIVE AND POWERFUL WAY TO TRANSFORM THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM.**

## CHARTER SCHOOLS:

- ◆ Give parents the opportunity to choose the best school for their child. Charter schools offer options to families, regardless of income.
- ◆ Give schools the opportunity to innovate – to implement new educational methods alongside proven ways of educating students.
- ◆ Give teachers the independence to customize curricula that meet the needs of students, rather than the requirements of state bureaucracy.
- ◆ Give administrators the freedom to make school management decisions without interference from regulations and bureaucrats.

These kinds of opportunities and freedoms exist right here, right now, in North Carolina, through charter schools. Charter schools in our state are the pioneers in a reform movement seeking to empower families and students and redefine public education. In exchange for upholding high standards of accountability, charter schools are given the freedom to design world-class educational programs based on students' needs rather than educational mandates.



Opportunity. Freedom.  
*And results – through charter schools.*

# Revolutionizing Education in America

## THE CHARTER SCHOOL MOVEMENT

Charter schools already provide more than 20,000 North Carolina schoolchildren with unprecedented educational opportunities. In fact, the first North Carolina charter schools opened in 1997, a few years after the movement took hold nationally.

The first charter school legislation was passed in Minnesota in 1991, followed quickly by the passage of legislation in



California in 1992. The charter school movement has since become a powerful force, backed by parent-constituents unhappy with the quality of public education. And legislators are listening. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia have now passed charter school legislation. Currently, almost 3,000 charter schools operate nationally.

To most North Carolinians, these concepts of freedom and opportunity in education are very appealing. Yet some people may not understand how opportunity and freedom relate to charter schools. Many people have heard of charter schools before, but don't really know the nuts and bolts of what they are and what they do.

Let's look at the facts.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS A CHARTER SCHOOL?

**1** First, charter schools are *public*, not private, schools. Like traditional public schools, charter schools are free to the students who attend them. Charter schools also receive their funding from taxpayer dollars allocated for public education, just like traditional public schools. Funding for a particular charter school is based on that school's student enrollment.

**2** Second, charter schools function based on a "charter," or performance contract, between the school and the state where they are located. This charter lays out guidelines to which schools are held accountable if they want to remain open.

**3** Third, charter schools can be started by a number of different people. State law provides that any person, group of people, or nonprofit corporation may apply to establish a charter school. An application is submitted to the State Board of Education for final approval. Once established, a charter school is governed by an independent, nonprofit board of directors.



Unprecedented  
educational  
opportunities  
— *through charter schools.*



## Did you know?

- ◆ Charter schools do *not* charge tuition. Like other public schools, there is no cost to attend.
- ◆ Charter schools offer open enrollment to students across county lines.
- ◆ Parents or teachers can start a charter school.
- ◆ Charter schools are good for other public schools. In fact, research has shown that charter schools improve the performance of other non-charter, public schools because they provide healthy competition.
- ◆ Charter schools are typically smaller schools and have fewer students per class than traditional public schools, yielding more individualized instructional time for students.



- ◆ There are more applications to start charter schools than there are spaces available.
- ◆ Nationally, most charter schools have waiting lists of children who would like to attend.
- ◆ Charter schools and traditional public schools are eligible for the same state and federal funding. However, estimates indicate that charters actually *save* taxpayers money each year in facilities costs.



- ◆ Charter schools are North Carolina's best example of public school choice, but they still add up to only 4 percent of the total number of public schools, educating just 1.5 percent of North Carolina's 1.3 million public school students.
- ◆ Charter schools do *not* take money away from public schools. They *are* public schools, and are simply another destination for education dollars within the public school system.
- ◆ Charter schools have much greater flexibility in how they spend their money than do traditional public schools.



# Charter schools are *different* from other public schools

## HOW ARE CHARTER SCHOOLS DISTINCT FROM TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

**1** First and foremost, charter schools are schools of choice. This means that students are not assigned to charter schools by the district administration. Rather, all charter students attend because they and their parents or guardians have made a decision to choose charter schools.

Charter schools provide choice and opportunity to a captive market – parents.

**2** Second, charter school parents tend to be more involved in their child's school than other public school parents. Some parents get started at the ground level, by developing and creating charter schools. Others volunteer as teachers' assistants, provide staff lunches, landscape school grounds, or serve as bus and hall monitors. All in all, parents who choose charters for their child seem to be more invested in the success of their child's school. Not surprisingly, parents also report high levels of satisfaction with charter schools. Overall, charter schools provide a *real* alternative to assigned public schools and foster a greater opportunity for parents to get involved.

Charter schools empower administrators to make the best decisions for their students.

**3** Third, because they are independent public schools, charter schools are free from many of the regulatory restrictions facing traditional public schools. Charter schools are given the power to make decisions for themselves about their day-to-day management as well as the instructional methods that best suit the needs of their student body. They are free to hire their own teachers, employees, or school administrators, and they may contract out for services, ranging from food service to maintenance help to transportation. Ultimately, charter schools are free to be creative in meeting their needs in the community at large, while still meeting their financial bottom line.

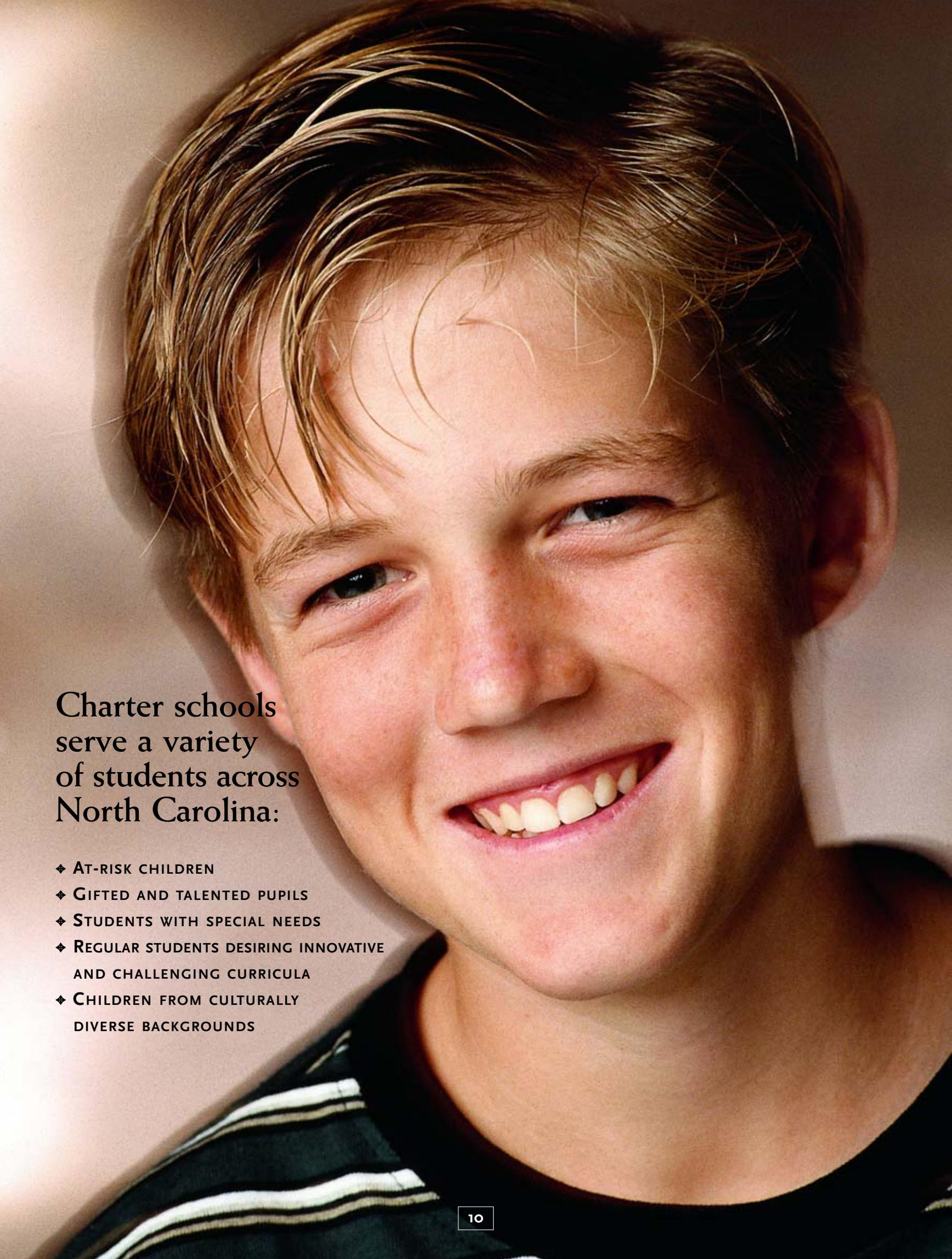
Charter schools are held to a higher standard than other public schools.

**4** Fourth, charter schools have even greater accountability than traditional public schools. This is because charter schools are judged not only on the academic performance of their students (like traditional public schools), but they are also evaluated based on the standards written in their charters. Above all, charter schools must work to please the customer – parents and students – or face a dwindling student body as unhappy parents remove children from the school. And charter schools that fall short of the requirements of their charters or fail to teach students well, are ultimately shut down.

A photograph of a woman with short brown hair, wearing a light-colored ribbed sweater, smiling as she reads a book to a young girl with dark curly hair, wearing a blue sweater. They are in a library or bookstore, with colorful book spines visible in the background.

# Hallmarks of a Successful Charter School

- ◆ HIGH PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND SATISFACTION
- ◆ CUSTOMIZED CURRICULA THAT MEET STUDENTS' NEEDS
- ◆ TEACHING STAFF COMMITTED TO ACHIEVING SCHOOL'S MISSION
- ◆ FREEDOM FROM BURDENSOME REGULATIONS
- ◆ HIGH ACADEMIC STANDARDS



Charter schools  
serve a variety  
of students across  
North Carolina:

- ◆ AT-RISK CHILDREN
- ◆ GIFTED AND TALENTED PUPILS
- ◆ STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS
- ◆ REGULAR STUDENTS DESIRING INNOVATIVE  
AND CHALLENGING CURRICULA
- ◆ CHILDREN FROM CULTURALLY  
DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

# Our Need is Great

## **WE NEED CHARTER SCHOOLS IN NORTH CAROLINA**

Charter schools offer choices for parents and students whose needs are not being met by their assigned public school. Many traditional public schools do an excellent job of educating students, but many do not. Even in successful traditional public schools, though, there are children who would thrive in a charter school environment, either because they need more attention, or because they would benefit from a more specialized curriculum. Charter schools provide educational options not available at the local public school because they are free to teach in a variety of ways. For example, some charter schools focus on a specific kind of curriculum, like the arts, while others serve a targeted group of students. Some charter schools attract gifted and talented students, while others serve children who are at-risk or have special needs.

Charter schools meet the needs  
of students who are falling  
through the cracks in the public  
education system.

Some students come to charter schools because they are attracted to the intensive, educationally rigorous curriculum offered at these schools. For example, the Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy is a charter school in Rutherford County offering educational excellence to a general population of local students. This school provides students with a classical education and boasts the eighth-highest SAT scores in the state. Other students come to

charter schools because they have fallen through the cracks in regular public schools and are simply out of options. The John H. Baker School in Raleigh serves at-risk kids, many of whom have been identified as troubled youth and have had difficulties in conventional schools. For these children, some of whom have been homeless or abused, the Baker School provides a lifeline, enabling them to start over with a clean slate and to achieve educational goals.

## **MORE CHARTER SCHOOLS MEAN MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NORTH CAROLINA'S CHILDREN**

Currently, North Carolina has a legislative cap of 100 charter schools statewide. To date, the General Assembly has not eliminated the cap, meaning that most North Carolina students will not have the option of attending a charter school. To lift this cap, the General Assembly would need to pass legislation. Eliminating the cap in North Carolina would remove onerous restrictions and would allow parents, teachers, or members of the community around the state to form more schools. Nationally, 11 states have already taken the important step of allowing unlimited charter schools.

Here's where we stand in North Carolina. According to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, there were 2,251 public schools operating in our state during the 2002-2003 school year. However, only 93 of these schools – just 4 percent of the total – were charter schools. In fact, more than 50 counties in North Carolina do not have even one charter school. And many North Carolina counties have only one charter school that may end up serving several nearby counties.

# You Can Help

As a result, many children around our state do not have the option of attending a charter school because there simply are not enough schools to meet the need. No child should be trapped in a failing public school because he or she is out of options.

There is so much you can do to work for greater educational opportunities for North Carolina schoolchildren.

**North Carolinians deserve educational options and opportunities, and charter schools provide them.**

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- ◆ Learn about the charter school movement. Contact the North Carolina Education Alliance to obtain a copy of our educational report *Charter Schools in North Carolina: Innovation in Education* and learn as much as you can about charter schools. Call us at 704.231.9767 to request a copy of the report or visit us online at [www.nceducationalliance.org](http://www.nceducationalliance.org).
- ◆ Inform your local representative in the North Carolina General Assembly of your views on charter schools. Access a directory of House representatives online by county of residence at [www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/members/reports/countyRepresentation.pl?House](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/members/reports/countyRepresentation.pl?House). Access a directory of Senate representatives online by county of residence at [www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/members/reports/countyRepresentation.pl?Senate](http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/gascripts/members/reports/countyRepresentation.pl?Senate).
- ◆ Find out about charter schools in your area. Access a directory of North Carolina charter

schools online at [www.ncpublicschools.org/charter\\_schools/directory.html](http://www.ncpublicschools.org/charter_schools/directory.html) or see your brochure pocket for a copy of the directory. Contact your local charter school to find out how you can help as a supportive member of the community.

- ◆ Get involved in education! Work with us at the North Carolina Education Alliance to improve the quality of education for all North Carolina children. For more information, please call us at 704.231.9767 or visit us online at [www.nceducationalliance.org](http://www.nceducationalliance.org).

Charter schools are a movement whose time has come. North Carolina charter schools are reinventing public education, through competition, educational excellence, and regulatory freedom. Although the growth of these innovative schools has, at times, been limited by legislative restrictions, charter schools have nevertheless succeeded in providing opportunities to the children who need them most – those students who have not been well-served by their assigned public schools. Above all else, charter schools acknowledge that parents, not bureaucrats, know best when it comes to the educational needs of children. One school at a time, North Carolina's charter school movement is empowering parents and students, giving them the freedom to choose and the opportunity to succeed.

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For more information about charter schools  
and bringing more choices to North Carolina's children, call us at:

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