

RECORD NUMBER OF CHARTER SCHOOLS TO OPERATE IN ARKANSAS IN 2008-2009 SCHOOL YEAR

“Charter schools create an alternate form of public schooling where schools are granted significant autonomy but are held accountable for results. The 'charter' is essentially a contract ... Unlike other public schools, parents specifically request the charter school and if the school fails to attract students, or if it fails to meet the terms of the charter, the charter can be revoked and the school closed.” Arkansas Policy Foundation, 1996 report, 'Arkansas' Weak Charter School Law,'

“Broaden Arkansas' inadequate charter school law.” Murphy Commission recommendation, 1998.

(February 2008) Twenty-six charter schools, a record number, are scheduled to operate in Arkansas in the 2008-2009 school year.

The development underscores the broad support that has emerged in the last decade for an education reform once viewed as controversial. This support extends across the political spectrum, and includes two former Arkansas governors--Bill Clinton and Mike Huckabee—and current Gov. Mike Beebe. Clinton praised charters during his Presidency, and Huckabee (1999, 2005) and Beebe (2007) signed measures expanding Arkansas's charter act.

Most policymakers discouraged Arkansas charters a decade ago. The new consensus is that charters have an important role to play in Arkansas's K-12 education system.

Definition: Conversion and Open-Enrollment Charter Schools

There are two basic types of Arkansas charter schools, according to the state Department of Education:

A *conversion school* is a public school converted to a charter school. Conversion schools can only draw students from within the school district's boundaries.

An *open-enrollment school* is a charter school run by a governmental entity, an institution of higher learning or a tax-exempt non-sectarian organization. Open enrollment schools can draw students from across district boundaries.

Conversion Charter Schools

Following is the department's list of conversion charters: Academic Center of Excellence (Osceola); Arkansas School for Education Systems and Technology (Greenland); Blytheville Charter School and ALE (Blytheville); Cabot Academic Center of Excellence (Cabot); Felder Alternative Learning Academy (Little Rock); Mountain Home High School Career Academies (Mountain Home); Raider Open Door Academy (Jonesboro); Ridgeroad Middle (North Little Rock); Vilonia Academy of Technology (Vilonia); and West Woods Charter Elementary (El Dorado).

Other conversion charters are Badger Academy (Beebe) and Vilonia Academy of Technology (Vilonia).

Open-Enrollment Charters

Following is the department's list of open-enrollment charters: Academics Plus (Maumelle); Arise Charter (Monticello); Benton County School of the Arts (Rogers); FOCUS Learning Academy (Conway); Haas Hall Academy (Farmington); Imboden Area Charter School (Imboden); KIPP Delta College Preparatory School (Helena); and the LISA Academy (Little Rock)

Open-enrollment charters scheduled to operate in the 2008-2009 school year are the Northwest Arkansas Academy of Fine Arts (Rogers); e-STEM Elementary, Middle and High Public Charter schools (Little Rock); LISA Academy (North Little Rock); Osceola Communication Arts and Business School (Osceola); and the Humphrey Charter School of Excellence (Humphrey).

Conclusion

A decade after the Murphy Commission's call for charter school expansion, a record number will operate in Arkansas. Charter school expansion is perhaps the most significant education reform won by Arkansas market-based groups.

-- Greg Kaza

Sources: (Arkansas Policy Foundation) www.arkansaspolicyfoundation.org and www.reformarkansas.org. (Arkansas Department of Education) http://arkedu.state.ar.us/schools/schools_charter_conversion.html#Conversion. "Arkansas Charter Schools," *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, Feb. 10, 2008 (www.ardemgaz.com).