Bilingual Charter Schools

A bilingual charter school is an independently operated public school that uses two or more languages for instruction. Charter schools differ from traditional public schools because they are schools of choice that receive public funds based on the number of students they enroll. Because charter schools operate autonomously, each school community decides how best to define and implement its bilingual program. According to the National Charter School Directory from the Center for Education Reform, most bilingual charter schools implement dual language programs. Dual language is an umbrella term that includes two-way immersion (TWI) programs, developmental bilingual programs, foreign language immersion, and heritage language programs. The defining factor in these bilingual charter schools is the use of a partner language in addition to English to teach content. Partner languages include Spanish, Chinese, Arabic, French, German, Hmong, and Native American languages. Charter schools implementing TWI programs aim to enroll equal numbers of language-minority students (also called English language learners) and language-majority (or English-dominant) students. Developmental bilingual programs target the needs of language-minority students often by emphasizing initial literacy in the home language of the minority-language students, while foreign language immersion programs emphasize partner language development for language-majority students. Heritage language programs aim to serve students who are usually English-dominant but whose family has used the partner language to sustain its cultural heritage.

The topic of bilingual charter schools is particularly relevant to discussions about diversity and education because bilingual schools aim to promote multicultural and multilingual learning among students who have been historically under-served in public schools. In addition, charter schools are the focus of recent debate over equity and academic achievement in diverse communities. Bilingual charter schools stand at the intersection of key discussions around race, ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status. These schools are often surrounded by controversies that typically plague charter schools, primarily pertaining to equitable access to education, in addition to controversies pertaining to language of instruction that pertain to the rate at which students are determined proficient in English.

Supporters of charter schools claim that their independent governance system allows them to work more efficiently and to escape bureaucracy to implement innovative programs. In states where anti-bilingual education propositions passed (such as California's Proposition 227), many bilingual programs—which were forced to close in traditional public schools—transformed into bilingual charter schools. Bilingual charter schools implementing TWI programs, which aim for a balanced population of language-minority and language-majority students, benefit from the charter system that allows them to draw from outside neighborhoods to ensure more integration across language, race, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.

Contrary to the aims of many bilingual charter schools, the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, has found initial evidence that charter schools may re-segregate public schools along racial and socioeconomic lines. However, bilingual charter school data have not been disaggregated. Other research has highlighted successful characteristics of bilingual charter schools such as their connection with bilingual communities, which has been shown to be especially effective for English language learners. Although the body of research about charter schools is growing, clearly more research is needed about bilingual charter schools, specifically, to understand how these schools are meeting the needs of diverse students.

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Further Readings


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