

# The Woke Capture of Charter Schools

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Charter schools may become less well aligned with the value preferences of local parents if heavy regulations force them to please state authorizers over parents.

Additionally, charter schools can stray from parental values if they are overly dependent on left-wing national philanthropies to subsidize their operations.

Regulatory and donor capture of charter schools must be reduced so that school choice is more responsive to parental preferences.

There is a loose set of political and social values that can succinctly be labeled as “woke.” These woke values tend to be characterized by a departure from traditional American and classical-liberal values of individual responsibility and equal treatment in favor of emphasizing differentiated treatment by group identity and social rather than individual justice. Of course, there is a constituency of parents who favor an education infused with these woke values—but they tend to be a distinct minority. As past research suggests, when parents have more control over the education of their own children, that education tends to be less woke.

Given that parental empowerment is associated with less woke education, one might expect that charter schools—which are chosen by parents rather

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than strictly assigned based on the location of a family's home—are less woke than nearby public schools operated by school districts. But school choice could produce more woke options if those choices are highly regulated and controlled by distant regulators and philanthropists. School districts still retain a fair amount of responsiveness to the preferences of the communities they serve given their democratic governance.

Charter schools, on the other hand, might become less responsive to the preferences of local parents if they have to please state authorizers to be established and remain open and if they are overly dependent on national philanthropies to subsidize their operations. Those charter schools may have to adopt woke values to gain permission to open from the public authorities that grant them their charter and to receive funding, especially for capital expenses, from large donors with progressive values.

Parents may nevertheless choose woke charter schools, either because they are among the minority that hold those values or because safety and quality of instruction may induce parents to select a school that is otherwise at odds with their values. By contrast, policies that permit private school choice with vouchers or K–12 education savings accounts do not require permission from an authorizer for schools to open their doors and therefore are less likely to require capital funds from donors since they often already have school buildings. That means that private schools are typically more directly accountable to parents than charter schools and so are more likely to reflect the values of the families they serve.

It is an open question whether highly constrained and regulated types of school choice, like charter schools, are actually less responsive to parental preferences regarding values than are public district schools, which are also regulated and insulated from parental control by unions and the imperfections of democratic governance.

The purpose of this *Backgrounders* is to examine whether, on average, charter schools embrace a woke education more strongly than do nearby public schools operated by school districts. By analyzing key words in student handbooks as a proxy for wokeness, the authors find that charter schools actually tend to be *more* woke than traditional district schools. The authors consider how regulatory and donor capture of charter schools could be reduced so that this type of school choice could be more responsive to parental preferences regarding the values emphasized in the education of their own children.

## Background

Education is not value neutral. Parents want more out of schooling than merely teaching the “three R’s.” Literacy and numeracy are essential, but they are far from the only important things that children should learn in school. Parents not only want their children to learn to be good workers, but also good citizens, good neighbors, and good people. That entails instilling within children certain civic and personal virtues and values. Parents expect that schools will aid them in this endeavor—or, at the very least, not actively undermine them.

**Heritage Foundation Survey.** In a recent Heritage Foundation survey, 83 percent of parents nationwide said that they believed their children’s school should “engage with character and virtue.”<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in 2018, the largest-ever survey of parents with children participating in a school choice program found that when asked to list their top three reasons for choosing a school, most parents cited the religious environment and instruction (66 percent) and “morals/character/values instruction” (52 percent).<sup>2</sup>

**EdChoice Survey.** Parents want their children to develop civic virtues as well as personal virtues. A survey by EdChoice published in March 2024 found that a majority of parents of K–12 students nationwide agreed that it is “important that my child’s school teach them to discuss contentious topics in a calm and rational manner” (86 percent) and that it is “important that my child’s school works to instill patriotism in its students” (60 percent).<sup>3</sup> As Gilbert K. Chesterton put it, “Education is simply the soul of a society as it passes from one generation to another.”<sup>4</sup> Parents want schools to avoid undermining their values. The same EdChoice survey found that most parents want their child’s teacher to “keep their politics to themselves” (84 percent), believe that “[b]ooks with explicit sexual content are inappropriate for my child” (68 percent), and do not want their child’s school “to discuss LGBTQ issues in class” (55 percent).<sup>5</sup>

**USC Survey.** Likewise, a recent survey by the University of Southern California asked parents about the appropriateness of numerous different scenarios in public elementary and high school classrooms, including several that involved LGBTQ themes (e.g., “discussing gender identity vs. biological sex,” “teacher is openly transgender,” “book about non-binary author’s experiences,” “classroom has LGBTQ-friendly decorations,” and “teacher asks students to share pronouns”).<sup>6</sup> A majority of parents expressed opposition to most of the 24 scenarios that involved LGBTQ themes at the elementary school level. Additionally, even when the survey used questions framed by transgender activists (e.g., referring to giving children

puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, and gender-reassignment surgery as “gender-affirming medical care”), a majority of parents opposed all of the scenarios involving transgender issues at both the elementary and high school levels. On matters of race, the vast majority of parents supported teaching “equal treatment regardless of skin color” (92 percent).<sup>7</sup>

In other words, most parents do not want “woke” schools that teach that gender is a spectrum, push left-wing ideology in the classroom under the guise of “equity” and “social justice,” or that divide people into categories like “oppressor” and “oppressed” based on immutable characteristics like race.<sup>8</sup>

**Regulation and Wokeness.** Given that markets tend to reflect the preferences of consumers and that most parents prioritize the teaching of values and want schools that eschew “woke” values, one might expect that the charter school sector would be primarily comprised of schools with more traditional values with only a minority catering to the segment of the public that wants woke schools. Indeed, since traditional district schools have lurched to the left, one might expect that alternatives to the government-run schools to be even more conservative.

But that may not be the case. Highly regulated and constrained markets are not as effective as freer markets at giving consumers what they want. Given the constrained choice between an academically ineffective district school that reflects the woke values of politicians and special interests and an academically effective charter school that reflects the woke values of charter authorizers and philanthropies, parents will often prefer the latter even if the school does not reflect their values.

In a previous Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, the authors devised a “wokeness measure” that was calculated by “searching publicly available parent-student handbooks and tabulating their usage of certain keywords (such as gender identity, justice, and equity) that could signal affirmation of fashionable progressive theories about teaching and learning.”<sup>9</sup> The prior *Backgrounders* then observed how those measures “correlate with charter school state rankings issued by the Center for Education Reform (CER), which assigns a score according to the degree to which the state charter sector is controlled by parental preferences rather than those of regulators.” The *Backgrounders* observed that charter schools “in states with more government regulation and oversight are more woke.” Arizona and Florida, which have charter school sectors with robust competition, had the lowest wokeness scores. Meanwhile, even red states like Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, and Kansas, which have more regulated charter school sectors, had considerably higher wokeness scores.

What explains the correlation between heavy charter school regulations and wokeness? Heavy regulations make it more difficult to open and operate charter schools, thereby giving more power to charter school authorizers and philanthropies that help charter schools open. If those gatekeeper organizations espouse certain values, then it should be no surprise when charter schools in states with heavier regulations espouse values that are closer to them than to the general population of parents.

**NACSA and DEI.** The National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) makes no secret about its ideological goals. As Jason Zwara, NACSA’s director of strategic partnerships, said: “‘School choice for school choice’s sake’ is completely misguided.... [S]ocial justice and equity are the GOAL not some political tactic.”<sup>10</sup> NACSA encourages charter authorizers to adopt race-based hiring and promotion practices under the guise of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In a report that offers “practical guidance and recommendations to authorizers who are ready to close the DEI gap and prioritize DEI in their organizations,” NACSA encourages authorizers to conduct “equity audits” and to create “affinity groups” based on “common backgrounds” such as employees’ race, gender, or sexual orientation.<sup>11</sup>

The same report warns that “‘worship of the written word’ can be a tool of exclusion,” and directs readers to a website called White Supremacy Culture by far-left activist Tema Okun.<sup>12</sup> According to Okun, who is white, “white supremacy culture” includes “individualism,” “objectivity,” “either/or thinking,” “perfectionism,” “defensiveness,” “fear of open conflict,” “a sense of urgency,” and a host of other traits and beliefs that have absolutely nothing to do with race or whiteness—let alone the odious belief in the supposed “supremacy” of the white race.<sup>13</sup>

**The WFF.** The main philanthropies that fund the creation of new charter schools also have a left-wing agenda. According to a 2018 analysis by the Associated Press, the top funder of charter school support groups was the Walton Family Foundation (WFF), which had given \$144 million to 27 groups by that point.<sup>14</sup> “We ought to be paying more attention to who these organizations are, and what kind of vision they have, and what drives them,” said Jon Valant of the Brookings Institution to the Associated Press. “A lot of these organizations have extraordinary influence, and it’s often pretty quiet influence.”<sup>15</sup>

Among the top three priorities of the WFF’s latest five-year plan is “prioritizing diversity, equity and inclusion in the grants the foundation makes and the voices it engages.”<sup>16</sup> The WFF has advanced that goal by pushing schools to adopt Okun-style DEI training sessions in which school leaders “were drilled on the harmful effects of ‘microaggressions,’ and sat through

PowerPoints on ‘intersectionality,’” and teachers were told that “perfectionism” is “white supremacy” and that “all our systems, institutions, and outcomes emanate from the racial hierarchy on which the United States was built.”<sup>17</sup> The WFF has even sponsored drag shows for children.<sup>18</sup>

**Gates Foundation.** Perhaps the second-largest funder of charter schools is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has spent upwards of \$2 billion on public education, including hundreds of millions on charter schools.<sup>19</sup> As Jonathan Butcher of The Heritage Foundation observed in a recent report, the Gates Foundation has been pushing critical race theory and other left-wing ideas in education:

The [Gates Foundation] underwrote the creation of a math curriculum in use at schools in California and Oregon that substitutes “dismantling white supremacy” for “getting the right answer.”<sup>20</sup> The curriculum wants teachers to focus on “infusing antiracist pedagogy” in math and “provide learning opportunities that use math as resistance.”<sup>21</sup> The philanthropic focus on critical theory and its applications, such as DEI...promote racial discrimination and do not promote diverse ideas or result in people feeling more included in workplaces or schools.<sup>22</sup>

**The NSVF.** Another major funder of charter schools has been the New-Schools Venture Fund (NSVF), which has given grants to 122 new schools.<sup>23</sup> The NSVF pushes for schools to adopt DEI practices and states that all the schools in its portfolio must be “committed to developing educational experiences” that are “aligned to...three design principles,” one of which is “equity.”<sup>24</sup>

Given the ideological predilections of the charter school authorizers and funders, it should be no surprise when charter schools like KIPP abandon their motto “Work Hard. Be Nice.” because the motto supposedly “suggests being compliant and submissive,” “supports the illusion of meritocracy,” and following its example would not “dismantle systemic racism.”<sup>25</sup> Nor should it be surprising when a raft of LGBTQ-themed charter schools—including in deep-red states like Alabama and Texas—have a focus on indoctrinating students in radical gender ideology.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that charter schools are 24 percent more likely than district schools to use “restorative” practices—an approach to student misbehavior that entails talk therapy instead of consequences—is yet another indicator that charters are too heavily dependent on the blessings of distant philanthropists and regulators rather than parents who covet a safe learning environment for their child.<sup>27</sup>

## Methods

There is no perfect method for capturing the abstract concept that represents a school's set of values and political priorities. The best approximation would require classroom observation. It was, after all, the unfettered access that parents acquired through COVID-era "Zoom school" that galvanized concerns that many K–12 schools are treated as pulpits by activist teachers to espouse radical left-wing propaganda. Unfortunately, however, logistical hurdles render impossible the prospect of conducting classroom observation over many schools.

**Woke Signaling.** The next best option for appraising school political orientation is to review materials that schools make publicly available. A previous Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders*, "Empowering Parents with School Choice Reduces Wokeism in Education," uses precisely this tactic. Specifically, the report scours parent-student handbooks of charter schools and determines the frequency with which they use the terms (or iterations of the terms) (1) diversity; (2) equity; (3) inclusion; (4) justice; (5) restorative; (6) social-emotional learning; (7) gender identity; and (8) culturally affirming/relevant. As that *Backgrounders* notes, "the use of these eight terms is often used as a signal for the commitment to a woke ideological agenda."<sup>28</sup> For example, "In practice, 'restorative' discipline often means no discipline at all rather than an effective way of 'maintaining all students' dignity.'"

Whereas the previous *Backgrounders* scored charter school handbooks to observe whether charter schools in states with stringent regulatory regimes are more progressive than charters in states with more relaxed regulatory environments (a hypothesis that holds true even after accounting for state political partisanship), it is necessary to understand how charter schools compare to the traditional public school system *overall*. To generate this charter sample for the present study, the school handbook data that was collected for the previous study has been repurposed. The number of woke terms in those charter school student handbooks is then compared to handbooks found from nearby public schools operated by school districts.

Overall, the original dataset for the previous *Backgrounders* scored the largest 20 charters in 35 states plus Washington, D.C., with the sample amounting to 661 observations. (It is less than the product of 35 times 20 because some of the states have less than 20 charters overall.) Louisiana and Washington, DC, are stricken from the present study. In Louisiana, the largest charter schools are overwhelmingly located in New Orleans, a city where 83 of the 86 public schools are charter schools, so there are not enough

appropriate comparisons among district schools.<sup>29</sup> Washington, DC, poses a similar challenge as more than half of the city’s public schools are charter schools.<sup>30</sup> Virtual charters are also omitted from this study, as they enroll students from across the state and lack an obvious district comparison.

The present study seeks to match as many of those charter handbooks as possible to handbooks published by neighboring district schools. To facilitate appropriate comparison, Google Maps was used to identify the nearest (as the crow flies) traditional public school that serves an equivalent educational stage (e.g., match elementary schools to other elementary schools). Often, charter schools serve students from multiple educational stages. In such cases, the comparison school is the one with the greatest amount of overlap. So, for example, a charter school that serves grades 6–12 is compared to the closest high school since it overlaps with four high school grades (9–12) but only three middle school grades (6–8).

Handbooks featured in the analysis must meet the following criteria:

- The school publishes a parent-student handbook linked from the school’s website;
- The parent-student handbook was published in 2020 or later; and
- The student–parent handbook exists in a digital format that makes word searches possible (i.e., excludes those that were uploaded as images).

Ultimately, 211 charter handbooks from the original study are linked to handbooks published by nearby grade-equivalent district schools. By far, the greatest challenge in matching handbooks is that most district schools do not publish their own handbook. Whether those schools do not have a handbook, defer to a district one, or simply did not make their handbooks publicly available online is not clear.

The availability of district school handbooks varies significantly across states. In four states (Illinois, Indiana, New Hampshire, and Utah) a handbook could be identified for 15 or more schools. In Alabama, Nevada, and Wisconsin, however, the authors could not identify a single handbook within the grade-equivalent district school sample. Most likely, handbook availability is random or explained by norms or statutes unrelated to differences in the political/values orientation of district schools compared to charter schools. Consequently, it is unlikely that missing data bias these results.



TABLE 1

### Number of District School Handbooks Featured in the Analysis, by State

State	Number of Handbooks	State	Number of Handbooks
Alabama	0	Minnesota	6
Arizona	1	Missouri	1
Arkansas	1	North Carolina	10
California	3	New Hampshire	18
Colorado	14	New Mexico	3
Connecticut	3	Nevada	0
Delaware	3	Ohio	10
Florida	4	Oklahoma	5
Georgia	9	Pennsylvania	12
Hawaii	11	Rhode Island	4
Idaho	12	Tennessee	1
Illinois	15	Texas	1
Indiana	15	South Carolina	13
Kansas	1	Utah	16
Massachusetts	5	Washington	2
Maine	7	Wisconsin	0
Michigan	5		

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of school handbooks. For more information, see the Methods section.

## Results

Among the 211 charter-district handbook pairings in this sample, the combined usage of the eight keywords was higher in charter schools than district schools in 122 of 211 cases, or 58 percent. In 68 cases (32 percent) the keywords were used more in the district school, while in 21 cases (10 percent) there was a tie, which occurs most often when zero keywords are observed. Overall, for every one district school that deploys the keywords more often than the comparison charter school, there are nearly two cases in which the opposite is true.

TABLE 2

### Keyword Tally, Charter Schools vs. District Schools

Keyword	Charter Schools	District Schools
Diversity	342	188
Equity	212	165
Inclusion	158	91
Justice	121	35
Restorative	591	390
Social-emotional	486	161
Gender identity	422	260
Culturally relevant/affirming	185	27
<b>All keywords</b>	<b>2,517</b>	<b>1,317</b>

**SOURCE:** Authors' analysis of school handbooks. For more information, see the Methods section.

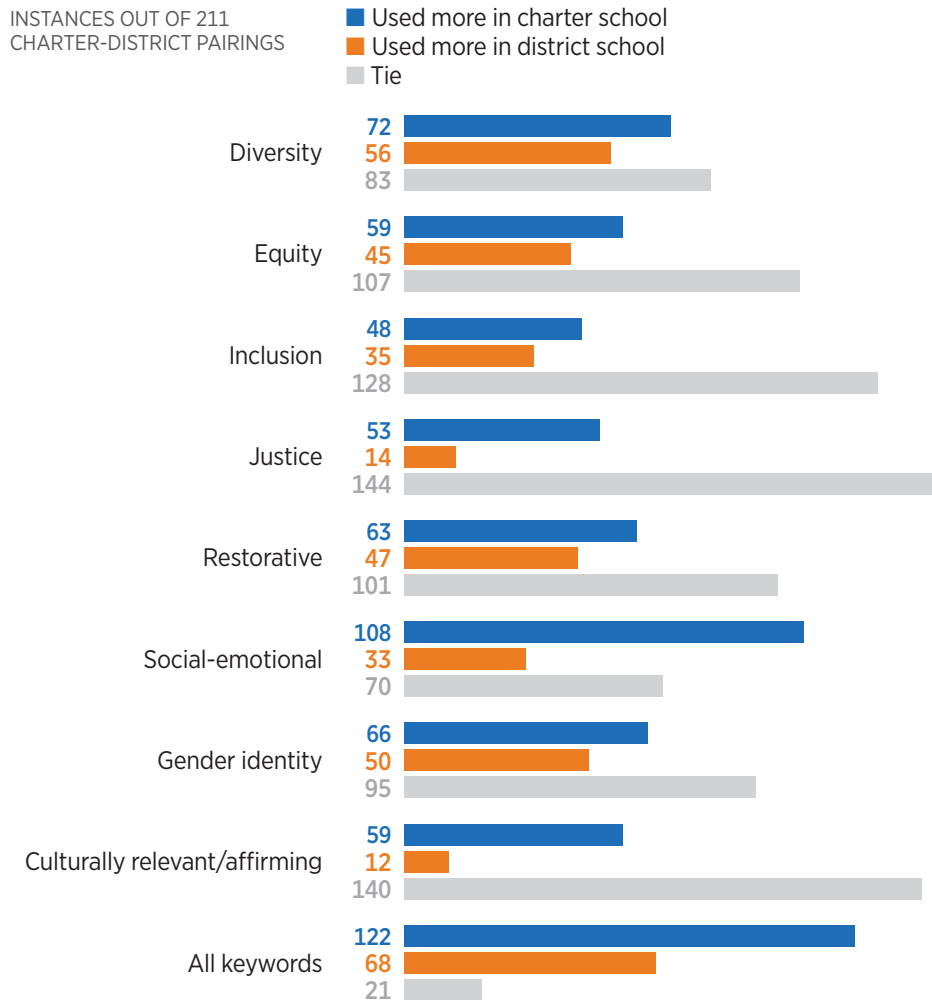
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Examining the usage of each keyword independently reveals some variation in the pattern. For example, the higher prevalence of the word “diversity” in charter schools was relatively modest, with the word appearing more frequently in 48 charter handbooks compared to 35 district handbooks. When it comes to the keyword “social–emotional” however, charter schools use the word more often by a margin of three to one. The numbers are even more lopsided when it comes to use of the terms “culturally relevant” or “culturally affirming,” which appear in charter handbooks more frequently by a margin of nearly five to one. Some of this ratio is plausibly explained by the fact that some charters make serving students from a specific ethnic, national, or tribal background central to their mission. Overall, however, the fact that each keyword appears more often in charter handbooks than district handbooks amounts to a strong and clear signal that most charter schools are more progressive in their politics and values than nearby district schools.

The results are largely the same if the outcomes are examined as tallies rather than head-to-head outcomes. For example, the word “restorative” appears a total of 591 times across the 211 charter handbooks, or about 2.8 times per handbook. Meanwhile, it appears in district handbooks 390 times, or about 1.8 times per handbook. In all eight cases, the keyword tally is higher in the charter handbooks than in the district handbooks.

CHART 1

## Woke Keywords in School Handbooks



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of school handbooks. For more information, see the Methods section.

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## Discussion: How Charter School Authorizers Fuel the Problem

The above review of district and charter school handbooks indicates that charter schools are more “woke” than nearby traditional district schools. As explained above, the constraints imposed by philanthropies—and especially charter school authorizers—lead charter schools to adopt values that differ significantly from the families they serve. Addressing this disconnect

requires a deeper understanding of the process by which charter authorizers influence the behavior of charter schools.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers is a kingmaker within the charter school world. With generous support from the Gates Foundation, Walton Foundation, and millions appropriated through federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) grants, the organization “sets the ground rules” for how authorizers (the entities entrusted with deciding when new charters should open or existing ones should close) should determine which petitions for new charter schools are approved and when charters should be revoked (i.e., when charters should be shut down).<sup>31</sup> NACSA wields a heavy hand in setting expectations and agendas for authorizer behavior. For example, 10 years ago they endeavored to “close a thousand of the lowest performing charters,” and they continue to advocate for sanctioning authorizers who “do not meet professional standards” set by NACSA.<sup>32</sup>

Conveniently, NACSA charges fees to help authorizers adopt their model of quality authorizing. Consulting services to authorizers include:

- Core Process Development,
- Authorizer Evaluations,
- Staff and Board Trainings,
- System Redesign and Implementation,
- Executive Searches and Leadership Cultivation, and
- Policy Analysis and Development.<sup>33</sup>

**NACSA Influence.** The NACSA racket has been unsurprisingly detrimental to the charter school movement. While their recommendations are not associated with sector growth or student learning, they are associated with weaker administrative responsiveness to parental priorities, less sector innovation, the disproportionate closure of charter schools operated by black educational entrepreneurs, and disproportionate entry barriers for would-be black educational entrepreneurs who aspire to open a charter school.<sup>34</sup>

NACSA’s left-wing ideological vision for charter schools is not limited to their preference for stringent regulation. In recent years, they have insisted that DEI should be infused into charter authorizing. Indeed, a

section of their website that lists “our priorities” names “diversifying the profession” as one of their top four priorities.<sup>35</sup> “Unfortunately,” they lament, “most educational organizations, including authorizing institutions, are not as diverse, equitable, and inclusive as their schools. To help close this gap, NACSA created a toolkit for authorizers committed to improving their work cultures and making authorizing a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive field.”<sup>36</sup>

NACSA’s “closing the gap” DEI toolkit features accusations that authorizers need to confront their “bias” and develop awareness of their own “privilege” and “prejudice.”<sup>37</sup> Specific guidance in undertaking these types of tasks points authorizers toward DEI “experts” like the Pacific Educational Group, “a consulting firm that, as the parental rights group Parents Defending Education discovered, encourages schools to adopt the use of critical race theory and racial affinity groups.”<sup>38</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

Policymakers are not powerless to reverse NACSA’s influence over charter authorizing. States that have taken legislative action against DEI, including Florida and Texas, continue to refer to NACSA as a resource for authorizers.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, although NACSA deleted their membership list soon after it was revealed that they were inflating their membership, it appears that many authorizers in red states continue to be affiliated with NACSA.<sup>40</sup>

Governors serious about rooting out DEI from K–12 public education can and should command the bully pulpit or the pen to ensure that authorizers do not become members of organizations that advocate for DEI. Furthermore, NACSA is financially dependent on millions received through CSP grants. Future budgets should strip NACSA of federal funding.

Likewise:

- **NACSA should no longer be able to dominate charter school policies.** Accomplishing this involves removing any direct or indirect support for NACSA in state and federal funding. It also involves removing NACSA from having any role in the charter-authorizing process in states.
- **States should have multiple authorizers of charter schools.** This will ensure that no single entity can exercise monopoly power over the ideological nature of charter schools.

- Charters should be granted for longer time periods and closure of charter schools should depend on the lack of parental demand rather than on test scores or the preferences of regulators.
- States should adopt and expand K–12 education savings accounts to foster greater parental choice and competition.

## Conclusion

School choice should empower parents to obtain an education for their own children that is consistent with their values. That is still occurring with private school choice, but with charter school choice it is falling short. Regulatory and financial constraints need to be removed from charter schools so they can better align with the values preferences of parents. In states and localities where charter schools have not been able to be more responsive to parents, private school choice is the better path for avoiding the woke capture of school choice.

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