What About Charter School Libraries?
Understanding Library Services in Charter Schools

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Starting a library in a charter school was one of the hardest jobs I’ve ever done. So when I returned to graduate school in pursuit of my PhD, I knew I wanted to do research in this area. I wondered why charter schools are less likely than traditional public schools to have libraries, what services charters are providing when they don’t have a library, and how we can make it easier to put library services in place. I began my investigation with a survey asking charter school administrators what library services their schools provide (Klein 2023).

Charter Schools

Charter schools are a growing segment of the K-12 education market. Enrollment grew from 4% to 7% of U.S. K-12 learners from fall 2010 to fall 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics 2023). Charter schools are a publicly funded, privately run alternative to traditional public and private schools. Currently 43 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., allow charter schools. State laws regulating charters vary from place to place. Normally, a sponsoring organization applies for a charter from their state with a proposal for how the school will run. Once a charter school opens, their charter is reviewed periodically to determine whether they are delivering the education they promise.

Because charter schools are evaluated based on the outcomes described in their own charter, they are not accountable to traditional public school accreditation standards (including school library standards). Depending on state law, sponsoring organizations may be for-profit companies, nonprofits, or academic institutions. Funding formulas and regulations are also unique to each state, and charters often face barriers to financing capital projects. Limited access to capital funding has meant that charters are not only less likely to have dedicated space for libraries, they are also less likely to have cafeterias, gymnasiums, and other specialized facilities (National Charter School Resource Center 2020). Each charter school is unique with their own school culture. Charters are often experimental and entrepreneurial. Some are started by grassroots community groups, while
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A recent National Teacher and Principal Survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found 62% of charter schools have a library (2018). My survey found a slightly lower library presence with 57% of the schools (n=50) reporting that they have a physical library. Of those charters with a library, 58% are staffed with a librarian (n=29) and 14% have a library assistant (n=7). None of the schools without a physical library have a librarian on staff. Schools with a physical library were more likely than those without to teach some important information literacy skills. While schools without libraries were more likely to have policies or consequences for plagiarism, schools with libraries were more likely to teach learners about copyright (66% vs. 51%) and how to quote and cite sources (72% vs. 65%). Teaching those research skills builds information literacy for college readiness.

Other than a school library, the most common ways charters surveyed promoted reading were classroom libraries (63% n=55), book fairs (56% n=49), summer reading (47% n=41), and reading incentive programs (46% n=40). Each of those activities can be organized by classroom teachers or volunteers but were more common in schools with a library. Seventy-four percent of schools with a library hosted book fairs compared with 32% of schools without. Author visits were also much more likely to happen in charter schools with a library (38% vs. 14%).

Just over half the charter schools reported using databases (n=46); schools with a library were similar to those without a library. Generally, whether or not a school had a library was not closely associated with the technology topics offered in curriculum or extracurricular activities. A higher percentage of schools without a library reported teaching learners web searching (68% vs. 56%), using research databases (59% vs. 50%), evaluating websites for schoolwork (43% vs. 32%), and media literacy (41% vs. 30%). Schools with a library were more likely to teach coding/programming (57% vs. 43%). Not only having a library, but staffing it with a librarian made a significant difference in one critical technology skill: Online safety and digital citizenship was taught in 83% of schools with a librarian (24 out of 29 schools) and only 59% of schools without (34 or 58).

Implications

The findings support our understanding that libraries and librarians encourage reading for fun, teach technology topics, and help learners engage with research projects. Charter schools without libraries may also do so in various ways and to various degrees, but libraries remain valuable educational intervention. Partnerships with local public libraries could provide supplemental services for charters, but few (n=7) of the participating schools partnered with public libraries. Some charter schools (29% of schools surveyed) share facilities with another organization, so some
Figure 1. School library programs at surveyed charter schools by proportion.

Figure 2. Programs encouraging reading for fun at surveyed charter schools.
School libraries play different roles for learners at different levels, and charters further complicate the data by enrolling different grade mixes than traditional schools.

As many past studies have shown, quality school libraries contribute to better test scores, reading proficiency, and college readiness (Achterman 2008; Huisman 2015; Kuon et al. 2014; Library Research Service 2018). The impacts are greatest among learners who are most marginalized (Adkins 2014; Wood et al. 2020). Of the charters I surveyed, 52% (n=45) have a student body with enough low-income families that at least half of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Nationally a higher percentage of charters are located in urban areas than traditional schools, and charters are more likely to enroll more than 50% Black or Hispanic learners (NCES 2022). When schools do not provide library access it presents a possible equity issue. More study is needed to find out in what ways charter schools are providing the kinds of services usually offered by school libraries. If those services are inadequate, advocates should be working to make sure policy and funding are available to make sure charters offer the educational opportunities their learners need to be successful in school and beyond.

Katie Klein is a PhD student and adjunct instructor at University of South Carolina. She holds an MLIS from Rutgers University and was a school librarian for ten years. Her research article “What Library?: A Survey of Charter School Leaders About School Library Services” is published in School Libraries Worldwide and won a 2023 AASL Research Grant. She was also awarded the 2023 Association for Library and Information Science Education / University of Washington Information School Youth Services Graduate Student Travel Award. She currently serves on the Library Research Round Table Steering Committee, AASL Professional Learning Committee, and South Carolina Association of School Librarians Legislative Committee.
Works Cited:


