

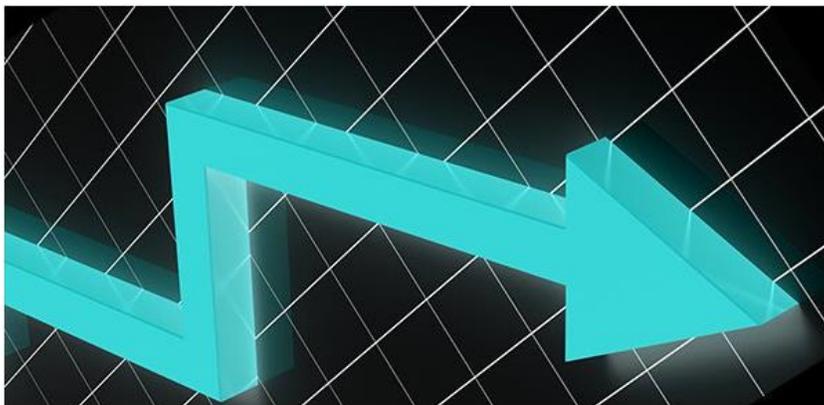
## Growth of Charter Schools Is Slowing Down.

### Here's What's Behind the Trend

By Arianna Prothero on January 30, 2018 12:01 AM

For many years, charter schools have been expanding at an impressive clip in the U.S.—adding thousands of students and hundreds of schools every year.

That growth—which has happened over most of the 25 years since the first charter law was passed in Minnesota—has given charter schools a unique status in American public education as the only real competition to the traditional district school system. In a handful of cities, charter schools now enroll more students than traditional district schools.



But since 2013, that growth rate has dropped sharply and some of the possible culprits are familiar: high real estate costs, teacher shortages, and politics.

The slowdown is a problem, charter supporters argue, because demand for charter schools is still outpacing supply in many cities.

To better understand this nationwide trend, researchers with the Center on Reinventing Public Education zeroed in on the San Francisco Bay Area, a region where a long run of robust charter growth has recently tapered off.

#### What's Behind the Slowdown in Charter School Growth?

Last year, more charter schools closed than opened in the Bay Area for the first time since California passed its charter law in 1992. (California was the second state to allow charters to open.)

CRPE researchers examined data on school authorizations, openings, student enrollment, and closings. They also conducted interviews with dozens of charter school officials.

"Overall our interviews revealed a fatigued sector dealing with a powerful trifecta of new factors: scarce facilities, rising costs, and rising political backlash," the report's authors write in a new report.

Student enrollment has also slowed, peaking in the 2012-13 school year. At that point in time, student enrollment grew by 18 percent over the previous year. By the 2016-17 school year, that enrollment growth had dropped to 6 percent. (By comparison, enrollment in district schools has remained flat.)

The number one issue impacting growth and expansion was finding affordable facilities, according to charter school officials. School districts are often reluctant to rent or share space with charter schools despite laws requiring them to, and finding real estate on the private market is often far too expensive especially in the Bay Area, home to some of the nation's most expensive real estate.

Charter schools have also become increasingly politicized, especially in districts that have seen lots of charter growth and are facing financial difficulties of their own at the same time.

As teachers' unions and local districts and their attorneys increasingly band together to organize against charter school interests, charter school advocates have also armored up.

This can be seen in the huge sums of money pumped into school board races. The CRPE report cites numbers saying that the California Charter Schools Association spent as much as \$12 million on electing charter-friendly candidates to local school boards.

A prime example of this was in California's largest district, Los Angeles Unified, where school board races continue to break records as the most expensive of their kind in the nation. Much of the campaigning in that district's races was centered around candidates' positions on charter schools.

And as political opposition to charter schools becomes more heated, according to the people interviewed for the CRPE report, it's depressing charter school growth.

"Some told us it is simply getting harder to find people who want to open a charter school or work in one, and some single-site, independent operators or would-be operators noted that the fights required to open their schools them from attempting to expand or continuing to pursue the process," says the report.

But it's not just competition between charter schools and district schools that are exacerbating some of these issues—there's also competition among charter schools.

This is particularly true when it comes to finding facilities and hiring teachers among an increasingly thinning supply of talent. This is in part because an improving economy means more young people are opting for other careers, write the report's authors. Special education teachers can be especially difficult to find.

Finally, the role of large charter school chains—charter management organizations—in the overall slowdown of charter growth can't be ignored.

CMOs have accounted for a large share of charter expansion in the Bay Area. Some of these CMOs are starting to shift away from opening new schools to focusing on expanding their philosophies and methods within the district system through consulting and professional development services.

Among its policy recommendations, CRPE suggests that charter schools coordinate to tackle shared problems such as teacher recruitment efforts. To read all of CRPE's recommendations, see the full report, ["The Slowdown of Bay Area Charter School Growth: Causes and Solutions,"](#) here.