

Frequently Asked Questions about the Charter System Model

On September 25, 2015, the State Board of Education voted unanimously to approve the Atlanta Public Schools charter system application during its state board meeting. A charter system is a school district that operates under a performance-based contract between the local board and the state board of education. Atlanta Public Schools is the 33rd school system in Georgia to achieve Charter System status. Atlanta Public Schools will begin operating under a 5-year contract in July 2016.

1. Why did Atlanta Public Schools consider becoming a Charter System?

Georgia law required that every school system in Georgia decide by June 2015 whether it will become an IE2 (Investing in Excellence in Education) system, a charter system, or issue a public acknowledgment of satisfaction with the current status of operation under the rules, processes, and practices of the Georgia Department of Education (a status quo system).

After exploring the merits of all three (3) operating models, the Atlanta Board of Education determined that the Charter System model would be the best fit for Atlanta Public Schools. Further, the charter system model was favorably recommended by the advisory council composed of APS parents, community members, principals, and central office staff as well as by the majority of our APS community on our flexibility options survey.

2. What is a Charter System?

As a charter system, Atlanta Public Schools will gain freedom and flexibility from many state education laws and regulations in exchange for increased accountability for student achievement. Additionally, charter systems must distribute meaningful decision-making authority to individual schools by maximizing school-level governance through local school governance teams.

As part of the charter system contract, Atlanta Public Schools will implement the following approved educational enhancements:

- Authentic community engagement in school site decision making through Local School Governance Teams.
- Creation of a College and Career Academy in partnership with Atlanta Tech to increase access to career pathways;
- Create cluster signature programs allowing each cluster to develop a signature program plan that responds to the needs and vision of the communities by utilizing flexibility to adopt the curriculum and instructional structures that best serve the cluster and community schools.

3. What was the process for reviewing the operating models?

As part of the initial phase, an advisory committee was established to review the operating models and outline a recommendation for the Superintendent to review. The advisory committee was comprised of community members, school principals, teachers, district staff and students. The advisory committee spent seven weeks reviewing student performance data, understanding the advantages and disadvantages of each operating model, listening to presentations from other districts on their operating model and discussing APS' current operations and waivers. The advisory committee also reviewed stakeholder feedback from the community.

4. How is the freedom and flexibility from the law used in a charter system model?

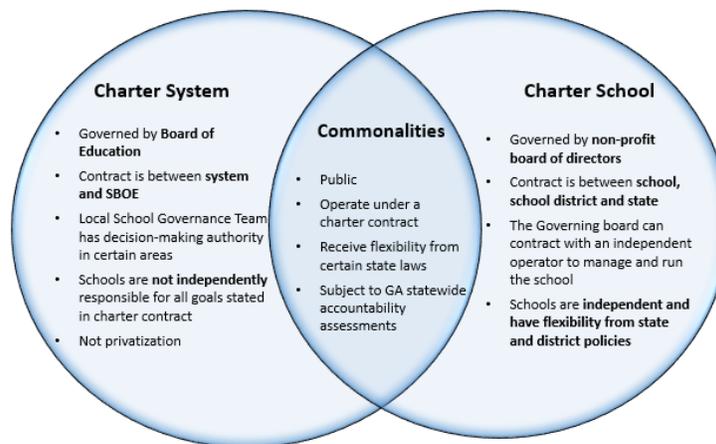
The charter system model is based on the idea that freedom from state education laws and regulations allows school districts to craft innovative solutions to meet the individualized issues schools face. A charter system receives a broad flexibility waiver once it enters into a contract with the state, which then allows the charter system the freedom to waive state laws, regulations, rules, and policies without having to request individual waivers to the State Board of Education every year. Charter systems must use their flexibility waiver to innovate to increase student achievement and improve operational performance.

5. How is the Charter System model different from a Charter School?

With a charter system, the district enters into a contract with the state, and therefore the responsibilities for management and oversight remain with the elected system-level school board – the Atlanta Board of Education. Thus, the Atlanta Board of Education retains its legally granted authority for setting the vision and strategic plan for the district, hiring and holding the superintendent accountable, maintaining district facilities, and a few other key responsibilities, while at the same time distributing a meaningful level of decision-making autonomy to the individual district schools.

A charter school, however, is a public school of choice that operates under the terms of a charter, or contract, with an authorizer, such as the state and/or local board of education. The school is directly and individually accountable for meeting the requirements outlined in the contract. Charter schools are governed, not by a local board of education, but by an autonomous non-profit board of directors, and they receive flexibility from certain state and local rules and regulations in exchange for a higher level of accountability. Charter schools can be operated by for- or non-profit educational management organizations, whereas charter system schools cannot and thus remain under the control of the local board of education.

Charter System vs. Charter School



6. How will a Charter System improve education in Atlanta Public Schools? How will the charter system improve the disparities in the current system?

Community input and local school governance teams under the Charter system model will drive engagement and decision making at the local school site. Atlanta Public Schools will utilize the waivers granted under the Charter System to innovate, to increase student achievement and improve operational performance across all of our schools. While our contract with the state won't be effective until 2016-17, we aren't waiting to lay the groundwork for this new structure. What you can look forward to seeing during the 2015-2016 school year is:

- Community members interested in getting more information about future school governance in APS can submit their contact information to the Candidate Bank (<http://www.atlantapublicschools.us/candidatebank>). You can email questions and feedback to rkaye@atlanta.k12.ga.us.
- October – Charter System Overview presentations by the Local School Council and Principal at each local school
- November and December – Candidate Information Sessions will be held online and in-person around the system to share information about what being a member of the school governance team means and how to run
- January – Candidates file to run and district-wide elections are held
- February – Newly elected teams meet with their principals to select community, swing seats and student members
- February and March – Initial governance training
- April and May – Teams begin working on school strategic plans
- July 1, 2016 – APS begins operating under a charter contract