



California  
Charter Schools  
Association

# GLOSSARY OF CHARTER-SPECIFIC TERMS

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## The Basics

**Charter Public School** – According to the California Department of Education, a charter school is an independently-operated, non-profit public benefit corporation public school that, in exchange for additional accountability, has the autonomy to hire its own staff and design and operate its own educational program so that it can innovate to develop instructional programs that meet the specific needs of local school communities or a target population. A charter public school operates under a charter petition with a charter school authorizer that holds it accountable to high standards under state law and must be “renewed” by its authorizer.

**501(c)(3)** – A short-hand reference to the federal tax code for nonprofit tax-exempt organizations based on its charitable purpose, which includes advancement of education. A charter public school may be operated as, or operated by, a nonprofit public benefit corporation under state law, which is also a nonprofit tax-exempt organization under federal tax law. In 2019, state law explicitly banned charters from being operated by or as private for-profit organizations.

**Authorizer** – A charter school “authorizer” decides, consistent with state law, who can start a new charter school, oversees school performance, and determines which schools should continue to serve students when a school is up for renewal. In California, school districts typically serve as charter school authorizers, however county boards of education (COEs) and the California State Board of Education (SBE) can serve as authorizers as well.



## Types Of Charter Public Schools



**Autonomous** – An autonomous charter public school operates independently from its local school district and receives funding directly from the state. This type of charter public school appoints its board of directors, is exempt from the local school district’s collective bargaining agreement, and is incorporated as a nonprofit public benefit corporation under state law and tax exempt under 501(c)(3). As such, an autonomous charter public school is also commonly referred to as an *independent* charter public school.

**Nonautonomous** – A nonautonomous charter public school is often referred to as a *dependent* charter public school because either the majority of its board is appointed by the authorizer, or the charter public school is under a school district’s collective bargaining agreement. Nonautonomous charter public schools typically are not incorporated as a 501(c)(3).

**Classroom-based or Site-based** – A charter public school where at least 80% of instructional time is offered within a brick-and-mortar facility (schoolsite), typically inside classrooms or dedicated spaces for teaching and learning, and where all pupils of the charter public school are required to attend instruction at the schoolsite.

**Nonclassroom-based School (NCB)** – A nonclassroom-based charter public school is a school model in which students spend less than 80% of their time physically in the classroom. The flexibility of NCBs allows them to offer students a blend of distance learning, independent study, home study, site-based instruction or other services offered at resource center facilities, and/or access to career technical education pathways.



## Management Models & Terms

**Board of Directors (or Governing Body)** – A charter public school’s Board of Directors (Board) is the legally responsible body monitoring school performance. The Board oversees a school’s academics, governance, finance, and legal compliance. A charter school’s board hires, evaluates, and supports the charter school leadership.

**CMO** – A short-hand reference for “charter management organization” which is a nonprofit organization that manages the day-to-day operations of at least three charter public schools. Charter public schools operated under a CMO are linked by a common philosophy, centralized management, and related governance.

**High, Middle, and Low Charter School Performance** – Under AB 1505, three performance categories were established to guide charter renewals. Per the education code, those are:

- **High Performing** – Presumptive five-to-seven-year renewal
- **Middle Performing** – Presumptive five-year renewal. These schools have the option to present additional “verified data.”
- **Low Performing** – Presumptive non-renewal. If renewed, it is for a term of two-years. Schools in the low track must present “verified data” to be considered for renewal.

**Network** – Entities linked by a common philosophy but typically have fewer than three schools and/or lack a centralized governance or operations like CMOs.

**Superintendent of Schools/Executive Director/CEO** – Administrators employed by charter public schools and charter management organizations (CMOs) who directly manage, recruit, and evaluate a school/CMO Leadership Team. The person in this role reports to the Board of Directors.



## Common School Models within the Charter Sector



**Arts** – Schools with a focus on the visual, fine, or performing arts.

**At-Promise** – Schools specifically designed to reengage students who dropped out, are adults, were/are incarcerated, or serve a target population that is considered “at-promise.” This includes recent immigrants, homeless youth, foster youth, teen parents, students with disabilities, and students on probation.

**Blended/Hybrid** – Schools that offer a combination of nonclassroom-based instruction and in-person meetings among students and teachers.

**Business** – Schools that focus on business, entrepreneurship, and/or financial literacy.

**Career Focused** – Schools that focus on preparing students for a specific (or set of) trades or careers.

**Career Technical Education (CTE)** – Schools in which CTE is core to their program.

**Civic Engagement** – Schools that focus on community service, service learning, civic engagement, as well as leadership/character development and personal/civic responsibility.

**Classical** – Schools that use a classical Greek and Roman literature/curriculum or are focused on American heritage or civil liberties.

**College-Ready** – Schools that focus on preparing students for the rigor of a four-year college or university. College-ready is the most common model within California’s charter public school sector.

**Cultural Enrichment** – Schools that focus on cultural enrichment, expanding worldviews, instilling a global perspective, and adopting practices from diverse cultures (i.e., Native American).

**DASS School** – A short-hand reference for “Dashboard Alternative School Status” schools which are typically alternative or continuation public school options. They have modified methods of measurement for indicators that are aligned with the evaluation rubrics of the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to evaluate the success or progress of schools that serve high-risk students

**Dual Enrollment** – Schools offering the opportunity for students to enroll in college classes while in high school.

**Expeditionary** – Schools that primarily teach through outdoor education and expeditionary learning.

**Global** – Schools that focus on international studies/focus, cultural enrichment, International Baccalaureate, are dual-immersion language programs, or are focused on foreign language instruction.

**Home School** – Schools that work with parents to tailor instruction to the individual student through “home school”.

**Independent Study** – Schools that tailor instruction to the individual student to complete independently outside of the regular school day or class.

**Inquiry-Based** – Schools whose program is built around inquiry-based or design-based thinking and learning.

**Military** – Schools that have a military focus/pedagogy.

**Online** – Schools in which instruction takes place either exclusively via the internet (virtual) or via blending learning.

**Personalized** – Schools that tailor instruction to the individual student through independent study, personalization, home school, individualized, or teach “at their pace.”



**Progressive** – Schools that identify themselves as “project-based” or “inquiry-based,” as a Waldorf or Montessori school, or describe their pedagogical approach as “experiential,” “hands-on,” “expeditionary,” “constructivist,” or as “design-thinking.”

**Project-Based** – A teaching method in which students learn by actively engaging in real-world, experiential, hands-on, and/or personally meaningful projects.

**Public Policy** – Schools that focus on topics including social justice, law, public policy, and restorative justice.

**STEM** – A short-hand for schools that have “Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM)” topics in their mission/vision, as well as in their instructional focus/pedagogy.

**STEAM** – A short-hand for schools that have “Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM)” topics in their mission/vision, as well as in their instructional focus/pedagogy.

**Virtual** – Schools that have no physical building where students meet with each other or with teachers. All instruction is online/remote.



## Key Charter-Specific Legislation

**AB 1505** – A short-hand reference to “Assembly Bill 1505” which maintained protections for charter public schools yet also introduced new provisions. AB 1505 was enacted by the California State Legislature in 2019. Key elements are:

- A three-tiered charter renewal process based on the California School Dashboard color indexes.
- Charter schools that are closing the achievement gap are granted a streamlined renewal, with the ability to be renewed up to seven years.

- Preservation of an appeals path to counties and the CA State Board of Education when a new or renewing charter public school petition has been denied at the local level.
- Consideration of fiscal impact in a new charter public school petition, though any consideration of fiscal impact must be balanced with consideration of the academic needs of the students who are going to be served.
- Certification by the Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) for all non-core, non-college prep charter public school teachers. A five-year transition period exists for non-core charter school teachers to secure appropriate certification.
- A three-year moratorium on new nonclassroom-based schools (NCBs) to January 1, 2025, based on last year's budget bill.

**California's Charter Schools Act** – California's Charter Schools Act of 1992 (the "Charter Act") is a landmark piece of legislation that authorized the creation of charter public schools. California became the second state after Minnesota to enact charter public school legislation. Here is the excerpt of the law:

"It is the intent of the Legislature, in enacting this part, to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, pupils, and community members to establish and maintain schools that operate independently from the existing school district structure, as a method to accomplish all of the following:

- (a) Improve pupil learning.
- (b) Increase learning opportunities for all pupils, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for pupils who are identified as academically low achieving.
- (c) Encourage the use of different and innovative teaching methods.
- (d) Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the schoolsite.
- (e) Provide parents and pupils with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.





- (f) Hold the schools established under this part accountable for meeting measurable pupil outcomes and provide the schools with a method to change from rule-based to performance-based accountability systems.
- (g) Provide vigorous competition within the public school system to stimulate continual improvements in all public schools.”

**Prop 39** – A short-hand reference to “Proposition 39” which was passed by voters in 2000 and requires school districts to make school facilities (including both classroom and non-instructional spaces) available to public charter schools serving students who reside in the district. In many districts with available facility space in currently operating schools, charter schools have been able to “co-locate” with the district school. The charter school typically pays the district for the use of the space.



## Charter-Specific State & Federal Programs

**Charter Schools Division** – The Charter Schools Division is part of the California State Department of Education (CDE) and is managed by CDE’s Legal and Audits Branch. This division was created to support, promote, and authorize high-quality charter public schools.

**Charter Schools Program (CSP)** – The federal Charter Schools Program provides financial assistance for the planning, program design, and initial implementation of charter schools and replication of high-quality charter schools. Federal grants are also available to share information about promising practices, help charter schools finance facilities, and invest in national initiatives that support charter schools.

**Public Charter Schools Grant Program (PCSGP)** – The PCSGP is administered by the CDE and utilizes federal funds allocated under the CSP to provide sub-grants to charter school developers to assist in the development and initial operations of newly established or conversion charter schools as well as to assist in the expansion and replication of high-quality charter schools. California was awarded approximately \$41 million in grant funds for 2020–23.

## Other Common Charter-Specific & General Ed Terms



**Abuse of Discretion** – The State Board of Education (SBE) may hear an appeal by a school which has been denied a charter under an “abuse of discretion” review standard. Under the “abuse of discretion” review standard, the decision by the governing board of a school district and a county board of education is reviewed to determine if it was conducted in accordance with law or supported by evidence in the record.

### **Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI)**

– Under federal law (ESSA), schools with all red/orange indicators on the California School Dashboard with a specific student subgroup (or subgroups) must partner with stakeholders to develop and implement a school-level plan to improve outcomes for those students.

**At-Promise** – Refers to “a pupil enrolled in high school who is at risk of dropping out of school.” Students are considered “at-promise” if they meet three or more of the following criteria: irregular attendance, underachievement, low motivation/disinterest, socioeconomic disadvantage, below/far below basic scores in ELA or math, and/or a grade point average of a C- or below.

**CCSA Advocates** – California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) Advocates is a related-advocacy organization to CCSA. It is a non-profit 501(c)(4) organization which coordinates grassroots advocacy and endorses political candidates and causes.

**CCSA Similar Students Rank (SSR)** – Measures how schools are performing on state tests compared to schools with similar student groups across the state.

**Charter Renewal Process** – The process which allows an established charter public school to formally submit a request to renew its petition with its authorizer so that it can continue operating for set amount of time until the next renewal date.

**College and Career Indicator** – The College/Career Indicator (CCI) is a measure on the California School Dashboard that defines college and career readiness through a combination of a–g courses, state standardized test scores, dual enrollment course completion, advanced placement exams, International Baccalaureate exams, and career technical education pathway completion.

**Co-Located Charter School** – Any charter public school which shares facilities space with one or more traditional public schools.

**Community Interest** – Under AB 1505, new charter public schools can be denied their charter if the petitioners will not serve the interests of the community. Factors relevant to assessing the community interest includes the identification of the community served; the school’s community engagement and demonstrated need; an assessment of duplicated services provided by existing schools, and academic and programmatic offerings; the ability to obtain appropriate facilities; and the financial impact of the school.

**Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI)** – Under federal law, schools with low graduation rates (below 68%) or that receive all red/orange indicators on the California School Dashboard are eligible to receive additional funding and must articulate/implement a plan for improving student performance.

**Conversion** – A charter school that existed as a traditional public school prior to becoming a charter school.

**De Novo Review** – Under the “de novo” review standard, the CA State Board of Education (SBE) exercises independent judgment in reviewing a charter petition and is not limited to the school district or county board’s findings of denial.

**Differentiated Assistance** – Targeted support provided to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools based on their performance on the California School Dashboard. Under California’s school accountability system, Differentiated Assistance is the second tier of assistance.



**Distance from Standard** – A state indicator on the California School Dashboard that shows, on average, the needed improvement to bring the average student score at a school to “Standard Met,” or the extent to which the average student exceeds the standard.

**Educational Options** – School and program alternatives that provide students with the environment, curriculum, and support systems needed to ensure that they achieve their full academic potential.

**English Learner (EL)** – A student whose primary language is not English and is not proficient in speaking, reading, writing, or understanding English. English learners make-up 18% of the total enrollment in California public schools.

**Enrollment Period** – The period in which parents can submit applications for a school. If there are more applications submitted than seats available, charter public schools will hold a randomized lottery to determine which students will be offered admission following the processes they have outlined in their petition and agreed to with their authorizer.

**Equity** – Equally high outcomes of access, opportunities, or success for all individuals, regardless of any social or cultural factor.

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)** – Federal law requiring the California Department of Education (CDE) identify schools for support based on performance, as defined by the state’s ESSA plan.

**Expenditures Per Pupil** – The total amount of money spent on education by a school district or charter school, including facility and administration costs, divided by the number of students educated.

**Fiscal Distress** – A term that describes a public school district that meets the following fiscal conditions: disapproved budget, negative interim report certification, three consecutive qualified interim report certifications, downgrade of an interim certification by the county superintendent, “lack of going concern” designation. School districts that are in fiscal distress may have their management taken over by the state.



Charter public schools in fiscal distress may not be able to renew their charter or may close altogether.

**Free** – Charter public schools, like all public schools, are tuition-free.

**Freestanding School** – A term that refers to a single-site charter public school that is not affiliated with a network or CMO.

**LCFF** – A short-hand reference to California’s “Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF),” hallmark legislation that fundamentally changed how all local educational agencies (LEAs) in the state are funded and how they are measured for results. Signed into law in 2013, LCFF overhauled California’s school finance system, replacing “revenue limits” and most “categorical funds” with a per-pupil base grant plus additional money for high-needs students, specifically low-income, English learner, homeless, and foster youth students.

**Low-Income** – Typically refers to whether students are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch. Eligibility is based on household income and includes students who are migrant, homeless, or foster youth.

**Material Revision** – A material revision is a substantive change to elements of a charter public school's program. A material revision must be approved by the authorizer rather than the school's own board of directors.

**Multiple Measures** – An approach that relies on more than one indicator to measure a student or a school’s academic strengths and weaknesses.

**“No District Boundaries”** – A phrase that refers to charter public schools that do not have traditional school boundaries like district schools, allowing them to attract a diverse student body.

**Positive/Negative/Qualified Certification** – Terms that describe whether a local educational agency (LEA) can meet its financial obligations.



- A positive certification is assigned when the district will meet its financial obligations for the current and two subsequent fiscal years.
- A qualified certification is assigned when the district may not meet its financial obligations for the current or two subsequent fiscal years.
- A negative certification is assigned when a district will be unable to meet its financial obligations for the remainder of the current year or for the subsequent fiscal year.

**Revenues Per Pupil** – The total amount of money provided to a school district or charter school from all sources divided by the number of students educated.

**Schools of the District vs. LEAs for Special Education** –

The way charter schools serve students with disabilities depends on whether they choose to be either independent local education agencies (LEAs) for special education purposes or as “Schools of the District.”



- **Schools of the District** – Charter schools that operate as schools of their authorizing school district and participate in the Special Education Local Planning Area (SELPA) in which their authorizer is a member.
- **LEAs for Special Education** – Charter schools that join a SELPA independently of their authorizer.

**Socioeconomically Disadvantaged** – The state classifies students as socioeconomically disadvantaged if they meet the criteria for “low-income,” neither parent received a high school diploma, or they are enrolled in a Juvenile Court School.

**Start-up** – A newly established charter public school.

**Reclassified Fluent/English Proficient (RFEP)** – A term used to describe a student who is reclassified from an English learner (EL) status to Fluent English Proficient (RFEP) status. Reclassification can take place at any time during the academic year, immediately upon the student meeting all the criteria.

**Verified Data** – As required in Assembly Bill 1505, verified data may be used in the charter school renewal process for schools in the low and middle performance categories. Low track schools must use verified data to show measurable increases in academic achievement or strong postsecondary outcomes. Increases in academic achievement are defined as showing one-year’s progress for each year in school. Strong postsecondary outcomes are defined as achieving rates of college enrollment, persistence, and completion that are equal to those of their peers.

