

Institutional Evolution of Charter Schools and its Implementation for Career Education in the United States

Takaaki Horai^{1*}

¹ Department of Early Childhood Education and Care, Tokoha University, Japan

**Corresponding author: thorai@sz.tokoha-u.ac.jp*

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the characteristics of the California Charter Schools Act and examines how the accountability mechanisms mandated by the system function in practice. Drawing on interviews with school personnel, the study explores their perceptions of accountability, thereby elucidating the dynamics between federal and state-level policy expectations and the understandings held by charter school operators. The American education system has historically emphasized the pursuit of excellence, a value that continues to shape educational practices today. With nearly three decades of experience in charter school implementation, California is home to a diverse array of such institutions. The purpose of this study is to examine the positioning of career education within charter schools by focusing on the interplay between charter school autonomy and federally mandated accountability systems.

Keywords: Charter School, Accountability System, Vocational Education, Assessment

1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine the positioning of career education within charter schools by focusing on the interplay between charter school autonomy and federally mandated accountability systems. The United States has undergone numerous public education reforms over the years. One of the most influential initiatives advocating for reform was the 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*, published by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This report sharply criticized the foundations of American public education for stagnating in "rising mediocrity" compared to educational reforms and systems in other countries, thereby heightening societal concern for effective education. This movement came to be known as the "Excellence Movement."

Scholars have identified two major strands within the Excellence Movement (Berube, 1994). The first, emphasized by Chubb and Moe (1990), sought to improve overall quality by introducing market principles and competition through decentralization and expanded school choice. The second aimed to guarantee a minimum level of educational standards through national benchmarks and statewide standardized testing. To promote school choice for students and parents, regulatory relaxation was implemented, leading to the creation and expansion of diverse public-school models such as magnet schools and alternative schools. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of traditional district-led reforms fueled a movement toward school-based autonomy. Particularly during the 1980s, school choice gained bipartisan support, culminating in the establishment of the first charter school in Minnesota in 1991. Charter schools are distinctive in that they guarantee not only the right of students and parents to choose schools but also autonomous school management akin to private institutions, despite being public schools. They may be founded by individuals or private organizations. Unlike district-controlled public schools criticized for inefficiency, charter schools set innovative educational goals tailored to local contexts and needs, and have proliferated nationwide (Nathan, 1996; Crane et al., 2007). According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, charter schools operate in 45 states and jurisdictions across the United States, totaling approximately 8,000 schools and serving over 3.7 million students. The largest concentrations are in western states such as California and Arizona, followed by southern states such as Florida and Virginia. California has the highest number of charter schools and students, with 1,248 schools serving more than 600,000 students. Washington, D.C. has the

highest proportion of charter schools, accounting for 49.3% of all public schools and enrolling 43.7% of students (Jacobs D et.al., 2024).

Conversely, seven states—Kentucky, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Vermont—do not permit charter schools.

In a nation characterized by decentralization, the introduction and support of charter schools vary significantly by state, reflecting local conditions and challenges. Some states adopt a favorable stance toward charter schools, while others remain resistant. Laws governing charter schools are often classified as "strong" or "weak" (Finn, 2001; Bierlein & Mulholland, 1995). "Strong laws" impose fewer restrictions on charter school authorization, operation, and renewal, and tend to result in a higher number of charter schools. States with strong laws expect charter schools to provide educational practices distinct from traditional public schools, thereby stimulating competition and improving overall quality. In contrast, states with "weak laws" often cite limited local demand, concerns that competition may exacerbate educational inequality, and the risk of instability in student learning due to potential school closures. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the characteristics and challenges of California's charter school system and investigates how a system emphasizing autonomous educational practices is implemented by charter school founders and operators.

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

As mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to examine the positioning of career education within charter schools by focusing on the interplay between charter school autonomy and federally mandated accountability systems. The United States operates under a decentralized governance structure, where federal standards coexist with state-level requirements. This dual framework creates a complex policy environment that influences educational practices and priorities. By analyzing both federal and state accountability mechanisms, this research seeks to clarify how career education is integrated into charter schools, identify the constraints and opportunities arising from these systems, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the balance between innovation and compliance in public education.

Charter School in California

California enacted its charter school law in 1992, becoming the second state in the nation to do so after Minnesota, and now has nearly 30 years of experience in charter school implementation. Historically, California has had a long-standing role as a state that established a charter school system, and until the early 2000s, its charter school law was regarded as a "strong law" (Wells, 2002).

Table 1. Overview and Evaluation of California Charter School Law

Item	Content & Score
Establishment and Growth	California actively promotes the expansion of charter schools. Currently, nonclassroom-based charter schools (similar to correspondence schools) are an option; however, due to concerns over opaque operations and insufficient academic achievement, new establishments have been suspended since 2020 and the moratorium extended through 2025. Score: 16/16
Types of Charter Schools	Includes start-up charter schools established from scratch (site acquisition, curriculum development, staff hiring, student recruitment) and conversion charter schools that transition from traditional district-operated public schools. Score: 8/8
Authorizing Entities	Multiple authorizers are permitted, including local education agencies and county offices of education, ensuring diverse oversight. Score: 6/6
Accountability System	Requires comprehensive accountability measures, including annual school reports, financial audits, and student performance evaluations. Score: 4/4
Autonomy in School Operations	Charter schools enjoy significant autonomy in curriculum design, staffing, and budget management, while maintaining compliance with state standards. Score: 4/4

Item	Content & Score
Appeals Process	Provides a clear appeals process for denied charter applications, allowing review by county or state-level authorities. Score: 6/6
Renewal and Revocation Procedures	Renewal decisions are based on academic performance, fiscal stability, and compliance with charter terms; revocation occurs for persistent noncompliance or failure to meet standards. Score: 12/12
Collective Bargaining for Staff	Charter school employees retain collective bargaining rights comparable to those in traditional public schools, reducing employment instability. Score: 12/12
Student Recruitment and Enrollment	Schools must adopt non-discriminatory enrollment practices and conduct transparent recruitment processes. Score: 12/12
Special Education	Charter schools are required to provide special education services consistent with state and federal law, ensuring equitable access. Score: 8/8
Virtual/Nonclassroom-Based Schools	Permitted under specific conditions; however, new establishments are currently suspended due to accountability concerns. Score: 6/6

(Source: National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Website)

However, according to Ziebarth (2022), who compared the characteristics of charter school laws nationwide and classified them as either "strong" or "weak," California's law ranked 24th among 45 states in 2021 (a drop of four places from the previous year), placing it in the middle range and no longer considered a "strong law."

An examination of California's charter school law reveals that the state actively promotes the expansion of charter schools. Currently, no classroom-based charter schools (similar to correspondence schools in Japan) are one available option; however, due to concerns over opaque management practices and insufficient academic achievement, the establishment of new schools of this type has been suspended since 2020 for two years, and the moratorium has now been extended through 2025. Regarding the "types of charter schools," the "start-up" model refers to charter schools established from the ground up, requiring site acquisition, curriculum development, hiring of necessary staff, and student recruitment—literally creating a new school. In contrast, the "conversion" model refers to schools that were originally traditional district-operated public schools but have transitioned to charter status. In these cases, the same location and often the same staff and students remain, resulting in significant differences in founding processes as well as strategies for school management and educational practice compared to start-up schools.

California's charter school law scores highly in several categories, such as "comprehensive school governance" (12 points), "student recruitment" (12 points), "collective bargaining for staff" (12 points), and "special education" (8 points), with many items receiving full marks (Table 1). Notably, "collective bargaining for staff" is often a contentious issue, as employment instability for charter school personnel is frequently debated. Although charter schools are publicly funded, staff members are not always guaranteed the status and benefits of public employees, and in some cases, even the right to negotiate may be denied, leading to significant reductions in income and allowances. However, in California, employment conditions for charter school teachers are generally comparable to those of traditional public-school teachers, and transitions between charter schools and traditional public schools are relatively unobstructed.

On the other hand, several items received relatively low evaluations, such as "Authorization by Non-District Entities" (6 points), "Public Funding Allocation" (4 points), and "Regulations for Virtual Charter Schools" (6 points). "Authorization by Non-District Entities" refers to whether entities other than public agencies can grant approval for the establishment of charter schools, and whether reapplication is possible to a higher-level authority (e.g., from a local school district board to the state board of education) if initial approval is denied. States scoring highly in this category often allow authorizations by higher education institutions such as state universities and provide multiple options for reapplication. In contrast, California's charter school law offers relatively few such alternatives. "Public Funding Allocation" concerns the extent to which operational funds are withheld by school

districts. Although the percentage is small, districts are permitted to collect a portion of these funds. As noted, establishing and operating a school rent-free is virtually impossible, particularly for start-up charter schools, which inevitably require fundraising to cover costs not met by public funding, often relying on external organizations (Horai, 2010, 2015). Furthermore, although not numerous in absolute terms, cases of charter applications being denied or schools being unable to continue operations are frequently attributed to financial difficulties (Lake et al., 2005; Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2005). These challenges are closely linked to failures in student recruitment and persistent low achievement among students, representing one of the most frequently cited systemic issues in charter school operations (Slayton, 2002).

3. ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM IN THE UNITED STATES AND CALIFORNIA

3-1. National Level

As noted earlier, since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, public attention toward American education has shifted toward excellence and the introduction of systems to evaluate it. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), enacted in 1965, was amended under the Bush administration in 2002 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which introduced provisions related to academic achievement. Under this law, states were required to administer annual assessments in reading and mathematics to all students in public schools from grades 3 through 8. In addition, every state was mandated to evaluate whether public schools (and school systems) were achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) toward universal proficiency in reading and mathematics (Lanich et al., 2006). AYP represented annual benchmarks designed to ensure that all students reached proficiency in these subjects. A distinctive feature of AYP was that results were assessed not only at the school level but also disaggregated by subgroups such as grade level, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and English language proficiency, with performance targets calculated for each subgroup. Both overall school-level targets and subgroup-specific targets were imposed on all public schools (California Department of Education, 2007). Furthermore, schools receiving Title I federal funding—intended to support students from low-income households—faced interventions such as student transfers or staff restructuring if they failed to meet AYP standards for a specified period (Hess, 2007). In a nation characterized by decentralization, the establishment of federal standards for public schools marked a significant turning point in U.S. education policy. However, the actual outcomes in terms of achievement fell far short of expectations. Although AYP was designed as a multi-year goal, the NCLB Act was ultimately replaced in October 2015 under the Obama administration by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). While ESSA retained the core framework of NCLB, it introduced four major revisions:

1. **Educational Authority:** Under NCLB, the federal government provided the framework for national education policy and allocated budgets accordingly. ESSA required states to submit budget proposals that included specific elements: proficiency standards, assessment tools, accountability measures and reporting methods, plans for supporting and improving struggling schools, and performance targets for academic progress and English proficiency.
2. **Teacher Quality Assurance:** NCLB linked teacher evaluations to student test scores, but ESSA allowed states to apply for waivers to remove such penalties. This change was influenced by persistent opposition from teachers' unions, which argued that tying evaluations to test scores undermined educational quality. Ultimately, 42 states requested flexibility under NCLB.
3. **Parental Roles and Responsibilities:** ESSA strengthened parental involvement in accountability processes, enabling parents to request reviews of learning content and goals and to receive reports on school performance, particularly for students requiring special attention.
4. **Academic Testing:** NCLB required annual standardized tests in reading and mathematics for grades 3 through 8, as well as at least one science assessment during elementary, middle, and high school. ESSA maintained these requirements but allowed states greater flexibility in test administration, eliminating the rigid standardized tests used under NCLB. ESSA encouraged diverse methods for measuring student achievement and progress, aiming to reduce test-driven instruction and promote effective monitoring by educators, administrators, and parents.

Under NCLB, states were compelled to implement statewide standardized tests, resulting in students taking both state-specific exams and assessments tied to AYP targets. This dual burden, combined with its impact on budget allocations and teacher evaluations, drew widespread criticism for forcing schools into test-centric instruction. While NCLB's emphasis on excellence, accountability, and closing achievement gaps was not fundamentally flawed, ESSA introduced greater flexibility in testing and curriculum, granting states, districts, and teachers more discretion in implementation (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

3-2. State Level

One of the accountability systems functioning in California is the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program. This program is a collective term for four types of assessments, categorized by target population and content, as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Overview of California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program

Assessment	Description
California Standards Tests (CSTs)	Assess core academic subjects. Students are classified into performance levels: Proficient, Advanced, Below Basic, and Far Below Basic. Required for nearly all public school students unless exempted for specific reasons.
California Modified Assessment (CMA)	Administered to students for whom CSTs are deemed inappropriate due to disabilities. Targets students scoring Below Basic or Far Below Basic on CSTs. Diagnostic evaluation based on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).
California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA)	Designed for students with severe disabilities. Includes multiple-choice and open-ended questions, often administered with teacher assistance.
Standards-based Tests in Spanish (STS)	Intended for Spanish-speaking students whose first language is not English. Multiple-choice format. Students with approximately 12 months of U.S. residency may take the test without Spanish-language support.
California Achievement Test (CAT)	Administered to students in grades 3–7. Covers reading, language, spelling, and mathematics. Provides relative evaluation within grade cohorts and individual percentile rankings.

(Source: California Department of Education Website)

The California Standards Tests (CSTs) primarily assess core academic subjects. Students are evaluated based on their scores and classified into performance levels such as "Proficient," "Advanced," "Below Basic," and "Far Below Basic." Except under special circumstances, nearly all students attending public schools are required to take CSTs. Although distinct from the STAR Program, the California Modified Assessment (CMA) is administered to students for whom CSTs are deemed inappropriate due to disabilities or other reasons. CMA targets students who scored "Below Basic" or "Far Below Basic" on CSTs and involves diagnostic evaluation based on an individualized education plan (IEP). In their final two years, these students aim to achieve "Proficient" or "Advanced" levels through the California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA), which is designed for students with severe disabilities. CAPA includes multiple-choice and open-ended questions, often administered with teacher assistance.

The Standards-based Tests in Spanish (STS) are intended for Spanish-speaking students whose first language is not English. These tests consist of multiple-choice questions. Depending on the student's English proficiency, those who have resided in the United States for approximately 12 months may take the test without Spanish-language support. In addition, the California Achievement Test (CAT) is administered to students in grades 3 through 7, covering reading, language, spelling, and mathematics. CAT provides a relative evaluation of a student's position within the same grade cohort and indicates individual percentile rankings.

As illustrated above, California's accountability system comprises a mix of federally mandated and state-level assessments—a situation not unique to California. Although NCLB was criticized for forcing

students to focus excessively on test preparation, the required standards remain rigorous. Since charter schools are public schools, their students must take all of these assessments. While the system emphasizes autonomy and allows charter schools to offer more flexible and innovative educational services compared to traditional public schools, this autonomy may be constrained by accountability requirements.

4. CAREER AND TECHNICAL STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS (CTSOS)

Career and technical education pathways to further their knowledge and skills by participating in activities, events, and competitions. They provide various career educational services or programs with schools. According to National Coordinating Council for Career and Technical Student organizations (NCC-CTSO), the purpose of CTSO are described as follows.

Career and Technical Student Organizations (CTSO) enhance student learning through contextual instruction, leadership and personal development, applied learning and real world application. CTSOs work as an integral component of the classroom curriculum and instruction, building upon employability and career skills and concepts through the application and engagement of students in hands-on demonstrations and real life and/or work experiences through a Career and Technical Education (CTE) program. CTSO's help guide students in developing a career path, a program of study and provide opportunities in gaining the skills and abilities needed to be successful in those careers through CTSO activities, programs and competitive events. In addition, students have opportunities to hold leadership positions at the local, state, and national level and attend leadership development conferences to network with other students as well as business and industry partners.

In the U.S, there are 8 career and technical student organizations which meet the standards required by NCC-CTSO.

Table 3.8 CTSOs

CTSO	CTSO
Business Professionals of America	DECA
Family, Career and Community Leaders of America	National FFA Organization
Future Business Leaders of America-Phi Beta Lambda	Skills USA
HOSA-Future Health Professionals	Technology Student Association

(Source: CTSOs homepage)

All 8 CTSOs are officially supported at the national level. Often, on the state level, they are integrated into departments of education or incorporated as non-profit organizations. Some states define CTSOs as "integral parts" of not only middle school but also high school or college education programs. Moreover, the following 16 career clusters are made up by CTSOs based on the practice of teaching specific career in specific industries: 1) Health Science, 2) Business, 3) Sales, 4) Finance, 5) IT, 6) STEM, 7) Manufacturing, 8) Logistic, 9) Hospitality, 10) Government, 11) Law, 12) Agriculture, 13) HS, 14) Construction, 15) Training, and 16) Arts. The aforementioned organization operates as a nonprofit entity providing career education services at the federal level. Many of these organizations have a long-standing history, with some having delivered such services for over half a century. Their approach is characterized by systematic and measurable strategies designed to support students' career development. Importantly, these services are not confined to the school setting; rather, they extend into partnerships with local communities, creating a comprehensive network that integrates educational institutions and community resources. Through this collaborative model, the organizations aim to ensure equitable access to career education, foster practical skill development, and align educational outcomes with labor market needs. This historical continuity and community-based orientation underscore the pivotal role these organizations play in shaping federal career education policy and practice.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although charter schools are institutionally guaranteed autonomy to implement distinctive educational practices, their status as public schools obligates them to meet academic standards established at both federal and state levels. This dual accountability framework creates inherent tensions between innovation and compliance (Oberfield, 2016; Millot, 1996). For instance, when a curriculum prioritizes career education, schools must not only demonstrate measurable outcomes—such as graduation rates, college enrollment patterns, and employment statistics—but also maintain satisfactory performance in standardized assessments of core subjects like reading and mathematics. This requirement often places pressure on schools to allocate resources toward tested subjects, leading to the marginalization of non-core areas such as career education, arts, and physical education (Gawlik, 2016). Historically, during the 1990s and early 2000s, charter schools faced criticism for financial instability and low academic achievement (Zimmer et al., 2003; Renzulli & Evans, 2005). However, contemporary evidence suggests a significant shift: charter schools are now widely recognized as a legitimate alternative within public education, and many located in economically disadvantaged communities outperform private schools in academic achievement (Cohodes & Parham, 2021; CREDO, 2023). This transformation has been supported by a growing network of public agencies and private organizations that provide financial, technical, and policy assistance to charter schools (National Charter School Resource Center, 2025; NAPCS, 2023). Their involvement underscores the evolving role of charter schools in promoting educational equity and innovation, while also highlighting the persistent challenge of balancing specialized programs like career education with the rigorous accountability demands imposed by federal and state systems.

REFERENCES

- Berube, M. R. (1994). *American school reform: Progressive, equity, and excellence movements, 1883–1993*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Bierlein, L. A., & Mulholland, L. A. (1995). *Comparing charter school laws: The issue of autonomy*. Morrison Institute for Public Policy.
- California Department of Education. (2007). *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports and accountability requirements*. Sacramento, CA: Author.
- California Charter Schools Association. (2022). *Research and data on California charter schools*.
- Chubb, J. E., & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America's schools*. Brookings Institution.
- CREDO. (2023). *National Charter School Study III*. Stanford University. Retrieved from <https://credo.stanford.edu>
- Cohodes, S. R., & Parham, K. S. (2021). *Charter schools' effectiveness, mechanisms, and competitive influence* (NBER Working Paper No. 28477). National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Every Student Succeeds Act*, Pub. L. No. 114-95, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015).
- Finn, C. E. (2001). *Charter schools in action: Renewing public education*. Princeton University Press.
- Gawlik, M. A. (2016). The U.S. charter school landscape: Extant literature, gaps in research, and implications for the U.S. educational system. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 24(95), 1–27.
- Government Accountability Office. (2005). *Charter schools: To enhance education's monitoring and research, more charter school-level data are needed* (GAO Publication No. GAO-05-5). U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Hess, F. M. (2007). *No Child Left Behind: A primer*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Horai, Takaaki. (2010). Role of Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) and Strategy of Charter Schools. *American Education Studies*, 21, 43–54.
- Horai, Takaaki. (2015). Network Mechanism Created by Charter Management Organizations. *Bulletin of Takada Junior College*, 33, 23–32.
- Jacob, D., & Veney, D. (2024). *Do you know where the children are? A five-year analysis of public school*

enrollment. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Lake, R., et al. (2005). Charter school finance and accountability. *Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2005*. University of Washington.

Lanich, G., et al. (2006). *Adequate Yearly Progress and accountability under NCLB*.

Millot, M. D. (1996). *Autonomy, accountability, and the values of public education: A comparative assessment of charter school statutes leading to model legislation*. University of Washington.

Nathan, J. (1996). *Charter schools: Creating hope and opportunity for American education*. Jossey-Bass.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS). (2023). *Principles and standards for quality charter support organizations*.

National Charter School Resource Center. (2025). *Charter school management organizations and support resources*. U.S. Department of Education.

National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. U.S. Government Printing Office.

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2022). *Measuring up to the model: A ranking of state public charter school laws* (13th ed.). Washington, DC.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 6319 (2002). Retrieved from <https://libanswers.dominican.edu>

Oberfield, Z. W. (2016). A bargain half fulfilled: Teacher autonomy and accountability in traditional public schools and public charter schools. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(2), 296–323.

Renzulli, L. A., & Evans, L. (2005). School choice, charter schools, and white flight. *Social Problems*, 52(3), 398–418.

Slayton, J. (2002). Defining democracy in the neoliberal age: Charter school reform and educational consumption. *American Educational Research Journal*, 39(2), 337–361.

Wells, A. S. (2002). *Where charter school policy fails: The problems of accountability and equity*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Ziebarth, T. (2022). *Measuring up to the model: A ranking of state public charter school laws*. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.

Zimmer, R., Buddin, R., Chau, D., Daley, G., Gill, B., Guarino, C., Hamilton, L., Krop, C., McCaffrey, D., Sandler, M., & Brewer, D. (2003). *Charter school operations and performance: Evidence from California*. RAND Corporation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers 22K02342.