

# The School-Community Relationship in the Age of Choice

*Ann Allen*

**“T**he charter school movement began approximately 15 years ago and ignited more rapidly in some areas than others,” according to Dr. Ann Allen, assistant professor in the School of Policy and Leadership in the College of Education. “Even though there are growing numbers of charter schools throughout the country,” Allen continues, “until recently, little research has been done on the impact of this new education delivery system on the community as a whole.” As an Ohio State University P-12 Policy Scholar, Allen sought to determine how the school-community relationship changes with the spread of these autonomous charter schools.

Allen studied the history of the Dayton, Ohio, charter schools and how charter schools differ from district schools in terms of school-community relationships. Dayton charter schools began with a local group of business people who expressed interest in bringing an Edison charter school to the Dayton Public Schools. Although Dayton Public Schools did not contract with Edison, the charter school movement in Dayton flourished. Dayton now has the second largest number of charter schools in the nation, with approximately 32 charter schools. “Until recently,” says Allen, “when New Orleans passed Dayton, Dayton had the largest concentration of public charter schools in the United States.”

## How Charter Schools Differ

According to Allen, charter schools differ from district public schools because charter schools focus more on the students who enroll in the school and their parents than on the geographic community, and unlike district school boards, charter school boards are independent from the larger community so there is less direct accountability to citizens. Also, because of the variety of charter schools available, and because charter schools open and close more often than district schools, understanding the educational opportunities available can be difficult for parents seeking a school for their children. "A more connected system should be available," says Allen, "so parents can make the best possible choices for their children's education." Advocates of charter schools are working to create ways parents can better understand their options. Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE) is a group that is working to coordinate information on schools in Dayton and to help parents understand all their school options, Allen explains.

Charter schools are also meant to be places of innovation, so there are differences across these schools as to how they are structured and managed. Some schools are run much more efficiently and effectively than others. "The reality is that although some schools are doing well, a great deal of money is spent on some schools that are not providing the best educational service for our students," Allen said.



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## Preparing Educators for Charter Schools

Allen said that the change in the delivery of education has implications for schools of education as well. "As these schools become a major provider of public education, we need to think about how best to prepare teachers and administrators for these different environments." Charter schools offer educators more choices for employment, Allen explains, but it is important that educators understand the different governing models, the responsibilities of teachers and principals in the various types of schools, and how the school-community relationships that exist affect the way educators do their work.

As charter schools become more prevalent in our communities, Allen recommends that policymakers and researchers understand the potential and challenges of these schools. "The system of choices made possible by charter schools must ensure that all students are learning," says Allen. "This change in the educational landscape should offer the best educational options to the community. With thoughtful and research-based planning," Allen says, "policymakers can continue to evaluate the changing educational landscape and work to create the best environment for our students to achieve their greatest potential." ■