

Equitable Charter Transportation Grant Program

What is the problem?

The original 1996 law authorizing the establishment of charter schools in North Carolina included language stating that those schools were to “reasonably reflect” the traditional public schools of their community.¹ Over time, a growing disparity has become evident in the racial and socio-economic demographics of the state’s charter schools when compared with traditional schools.

In 2015–2016, 29.6 percent of students attending charter schools were considered Economically Disadvantaged (ED) compared with 50.2 percent of their traditional school peers.² Over a four-year period, while the percentage of ED students in traditional schools fluctuated between 50 and 60 percent, the number of ED students enrolled in charter schools declined each year, resulting in a net loss of 10 percent over that span.³ Of the 143 charter school submissions in 2015–2016, only 45 of those schools (31.4 percent) reported serving a population of greater than 50 percent ED students.⁴

Broadly, the racial and ethnic makeup of student populations at charter schools and traditional schools in North Carolina are similar, though some differences do exist. However, 94 of the state’s 160 charter schools (58.8 percent) have a student population that is either less than 20 percent minority or greater than 80 percent minority.⁵ As a result, nearly half of our charter schools lack diversity and fail to mirror the demographics of the Local Education Agency (LEA).

What can we do?

A major barrier to increasing charter school opportunity and attendance levels for poor and minority students is a lack of school-provided transportation. It is time to assist those charter schools and charter management organizations (CMOs) who are already providing transportation for their students and incentivize others to begin doing so. By alleviating this significant financial burden on schools, many more families will be able to choose the best school for their child.

House Bill 644 would provide funding for a \$2.5 million program to be administered by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI). Charter schools with at least 50% of their students qualifying for federal free or reduced-price lunch programs could apply to receive a reimbursement grant of 65% of their transportation costs. As a result, charter schools that are serving an economically disadvantaged population and choosing to provide the transportation to ensure every child gets to school will have additional resources to devote to providing an even more outstanding education than they already do.

This grant program will build capacity for charter schools to reach and serve underprivileged populations, providing students and their families with more educational options, and bringing our state closer to a future where every child has the opportunity to go to a great school.

1 “Charter Schools Act of 1996” North Carolina House Bill 995, paragraph (§ 115C-218.45.(e)). 1996. <http://ncleg.net/Sessions/1995/Bills/House/PDF/H955v4.pdf>

2 Annual Charter Schools Report G.S. 115C-218.110(b) (Draft). North Carolina General Assembly. 2017. https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/meetings/TempFolder/Meetings/JLEOC%20Annual%20Charter%20Schools%20Report_79615z4qp0uqzj_hauksflokjvxkcr.pdf

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. “Charter School Racial Demographics”. August 2016. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/docs/intern-research/reports/charterdemographics.pdf>