

# What is a Charter School?



## Study Guide

## Using This Study Guide

The Center for Ethics and Education created this curriculum plan to give faculty and students the tools to bridge philosophy and education. We connected empirical and philosophical readings on charter schools with this audio piece to help students consider the diverse proponents of charter schools, what makes charter schools distinct from public schools, and how parents and policymakers ought to think about charter schools and who benefits from them. This curriculum plan challenges students to go beyond common ideological debates about charter schools to think carefully about the types of questions and answers that should guide decision-making about charter schools, and in particular, how values and evidence should shape these arguments.

This study guide is intended for use in undergraduate and graduate education classes. The curriculum offers two plans: a one-week plan and a two-week plan, each with suggested guiding questions, activities, and assignments.

Student materials are available to download and print on our [website](#).

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## Audio

Grace Gecewicz interviewed three scholars for this audio piece on charter schools: Erica Turner, Gina Schouten, and Harry Brighouse. Erica Turner provides historical background on charter schools, describes their distinguishing features, and draws out some of the equity implications of the charter movement. Gina Schouten and Harry Brighouse, co-authors of “To Charter or Not to Charter: What Questions Should We Ask and What Will the Answers Tell Us?” speak to the philosophical questions embedded in questions parents and policymakers should ask about charter schools. We created this audio piece as a companion to philosophical and empirical readings on charter schools to challenge to students to consider how decision-makers (e.g., parents, policymakers) should use evidence and values to inform decisions about charter schools.

### Listen:

<http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/curriculum.html>

# Audio Hosts

Grace Gecewicz and Harry Brighthouse host this audio piece exploring the ethical implications of charter schools.



**Harry Brighthouse**

Harry Brighthouse is Professor of Philosophy and Affiliate Professor of Educational Policy Studies at UW—Madison, where he has taught since 1992. He is co-Director of the Center for Ethics and Education. Recent papers and book chapters include: (with Gina Schouten) “Principles of Educational Justice: Some Problems”, *Social Philosophy and Policy* (2014); and (with Gina Schouten), “To Charter or not to Charter: What Questions Should We Ask, and What Will the Answers Tell Us?”



**Grace Gecewicz**

Grace Gecewicz is a recent graduate from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and a certificate in gender and women’s studies. During her time as a student at UW, she was also an undergraduate project assistant at the Center for Ethics & Education where she created curriculum with the rest of the team.

# Featured Scholars

This audio piece features interviews with education scholar Erica O. Turner and philosopher Gina Schouten.



## Erica O. Turner

Erica O. Turner is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Policy Studies. Her research examines race and inequity in school district policy and practice. Her scholarship illuminates how diverse groups—from school district leaders to students to community members—make sense of and negotiate education problems, policies, equity, and justice amidst shifting social, political, and economic contexts. Through her research and teaching she seeks to deepen how we conceptualize policy problems, racial equity, educational aims, and policy alternatives and ultimately to contribute to the knowledge necessary to make public schooling more equitable and just. Professor Turner has published on these topics in her book *Suddenly Diverse: How School Districts Manage Race and Inequality* (University of Chicago Press, 2020) and in journals such as the *American Educational Research Journal*, *Educational Researcher*, *Journal of Education Policy*, and *Urban Education*.

Website: <https://ericaoturner.com/>



## Gina Schouten

Gina Schouten is an assistant professor of philosophy at Harvard University. She received her PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Madison before teaching at Illinois State University for three years. Professor Schouten's research interests are in the areas of social and political philosophy and ethics. Her most sustained research projects concern political liberalism and political legitimacy, educational justice, and the gendered division of labor. She recently authored *Liberalism, Neutrality, and the Gendered Division of Labor* (Oxford University Press, 2019). She has also written on issues of justice in higher education, on diversity problems within the discipline of philosophy, on the ethics and politics of abortion, on the use of social policy to curtail animal consumption and experimentation, on the practice of non-ideal theory in political philosophy, and on other issues in feminist philosophy.

Website: <http://www.ginaschouten.com/>

# One-Week Lesson Plan

**Topic:** What are charter schools?

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to consider the diverse proponents of charter schools and gain an understanding of their historical roots
- Students will be able to articulate potential implications of charter schools for the least well off and consider how that should guide decision-making

**Readings:**

- Charter school news article (selected by students)
- Charter schools in perspective: A guide to research.  
Retrieved from <http://www.in-perspective.org/pages/a-guide-to-research>  
Read sections:
  - Key Facts about Charter Schools
  - Diversity and Inclusion
  - Governance and Regulation
  - Public Opinion
- Brighthouse, H. & Schouten, G. (2014). To charter or not to charter: What questions should we ask, and what will the answers tell us? *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(3), 341-365.
- Shanker, A. (1988, March). *National Press Club speech*. Speech given at the meeting of the National Press Club, Washington, D.C.

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## Guiding Questions

*Use these questions for class discussion, reading response assignments, or other activities.*

1. What is a charter school? How is it distinct from a public, private, or voucher school?
2. Who are the “strange bedfellows” that have historically supported charter schools? What makes their common support “strange” and what are their different reasons for supporting charter schools? What do they have in common?
3. In the audio piece you listened to for today, Erica Turner suggests that there are different notions of “choice” embedded in the charter movement. What does she mean by this?
4. In the audio piece you listened to for today, Gina Schouten suggests that disadvantaged students’ parents may not have the resources or cultural capital to navigate the charter system. Harry Brighthouse adds that the most disadvantaged students are unlikely to attend charter schools. How should these ideas shape our thinking about the role of charter schools in society?
5. How should parents think about whether to send their child to a charter school?
6. How should policymakers think about the potential implications of charter schools for the least well off?

# One-Week Lesson Plan

## Assignment: News Literacy

**Objective:** Students will critically engage with media portrayals of charter schools.

**Before class:**

Find and read a news article about charter schools. The article can be in opposition to or in favor of charter schools, but you should identify an article that takes a stance on charter schools. It should not be a scholarly article found in an academic journal.

In about 100 words, write a summary of what the author claims about charter schools.

**After class:**

Re-read the article and write a 200-word comment. In your comment, please pose a crucial question, describe an area of agreement or disagreement, and/or how your perception of the article changed since the first time reading it.

# One-Week Lesson Plan

## In-Class Activity: What is a Public School?

### Instructor's Notes

Distribute p. 8: What is a Public School? to students

1. In small groups, students deliberate which schools on the list are public schools.
2. Then, students share out to the whole group.

Whole-group discussion facilitation questions for instructor:

- For each school, why did you answer the way you did?
- What values did you take into consideration?
- What do we mean when we say “public”?

This exercise was initially developed for a convening of politicians, administrators, advocates, and researchers from around the US who had been specifically chosen to represent an extremely diverse set of views about charter schools. It included long time campaigners against charter schools, legislators who had introduced charter legislation in their states and others, people who run Charter Management Organizations, others who run traditional public schools, national leaders of teachers unions, and charter school researchers from several disciplines whose attitudes to charter schools ranged from extremely enthusiastic to outright opposition. This exercise took place toward the end of a 3 day retreat. Our aim was to explore agreement and disagreement about what people mean when they say that something is a public school (and, hence, what they mean when they say something is a private school). Is it just a matter of how involved the government is in the administration and funding of the school, or it is also, or only, about the purposes which the school serves? If the latter, which purposes count for the purposes of deciding whether a school is public or private, and how much weight should we attach to each different factor?

We've used the exercise successfully in several classroom contexts. We'd welcome feedback on the exercise, and want to emphasize that this is a public, not private, resource, and you should feel free to adapt and adjust it if you find that adaptations will work better!

# What is a Public School?

## **Saint James Elementary School**

Funded entirely by the State government. Located in a city with a substantial Muslim population. The governing body has 4 representatives from the local Roman Catholic Church, 1 from the local mosque, 4 from the city council, and 2 parents elected by the PTO. The school is subject to the same curricular requirements as all government-funded schools – curricular requirements that specify what must be taught during about 60% of the school day -- and must report value-added student outcomes to the state government. The students have daily prayer sessions, which parents can opt them out of. If the school is oversubscribed, it is permitted to select the first 30% of students from a lottery including only the applicants from Roman Catholic families; for the remaining 70% the school must select from a lottery of all other applicants, weighted heavily toward local residents. The local area has 30% of students on free and reduced lunch, so does St. James. There is no union contract in the school, but the state government specifically allows teachers and other staff to unionize

## **CLR James Elementary School**

Funded entirely by the state government, and run by the principal, who is chosen by a superintendent accountable to a directly elected school board (members of which are paid expenses but receive no stipend). Curricular requirements are minimal, and the school must take only students from the local neighborhood. The local area has 30% of students on free and reduced lunch; CLR James school has just 3% of students on free and reduced lunch. Teachers and non-management staff are represented by a closed-shop union.

## **Bob James Elementary School**

Funded by the state government via school vouchers. It is run by a private (non-profit) foundation devoted to music education, in which the school specializes. It is entirely secular, but a school of choice in a system in which all schools are funded through vouchers, and every parent is required to provide a list of 5 choices. Students are selected by lottery. The local area has 30% of students on free and reduced lunch, so does Bob James School. All voucher schools in the city are required to abide by a curriculum that specifies what must be taught during about 60% of the school day and must report student outcomes to the state government.

## **Sally James Prep School**

Funded entirely through philanthropic donations and tuition fees charged to families and run by a non-profit. It is required to abide by a government imposed curriculum that specifies what must be taught during about 60% of the school day and must report student outcomes to the state government. It is consistently oversubscribed and, rather than expanding, the school selects students in a lottery weighted to produce a socio-economic mix like that of the city in which it is located: so, like the local area in which it is located, it has a free and reduced lunch rate of 30%. (FRL students are funded through generous philanthropy). It is inspected by a team of government inspectors annually, and faces fines and possibly closure if its value-added outcomes (which are keyed to the curricular requirements) fall below a certain level.

# Two-Week Lesson Plan

## Week One

**Topic:** What are charter schools?

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to consider the diverse proponents of charter schools and gain an understanding of their historical roots
- Students will be able to articulate potential implications of charter schools for the least well off and consider how that should guide decision-making

**Readings:**

- Charter school news article (chosen by students)
- Charter schools in perspective: A guide to research.  
Retrieved from <http://www.in-perspective.org/pages/a-guide-to-research>
- Brighthouse, H. & Schouten, G. (2014). To charter or not to charter: What questions should we ask, and what will the answers tell us? *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(3), 341-365.
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### Guiding Questions

*Use these questions for class discussion, reading response assignments, or other activities.*

- What is a charter school? How is it distinct from a public, private, or voucher school?
- Who are the “strange bedfellows” that have historically supported charter schools? What makes their common support “strange” and what are their different reasons for supporting charter schools? What do they have in common?
- In the audio piece you listened to for today, Erica Turner suggests that there are different notions of “choice” embedded in the charter movement. What does she mean by this?
- In the audio piece you listened to for today, Gina Schouten suggests that disadvantaged students’ parents may not have the resources or cultural capital to navigate the charter system. Harry Brighthouse adds that the most disadvantaged students are unlikely to attend charter schools. How should these ideas shape our thinking about the role of charter schools in society?
- How should parents think about whether to send their child to a charter school?
- How should policymakers think about the potential implications of charter schools for the least well off?

# Two-Week Lesson Plan

## Week One

### In-Class Activity: Small Group Discussion

Read Charter Schools in Perspective: <http://www.in-perspective.org/pages/a-guide-to-research>

Student can read the entire site, but are only required to read the following:

- Key Facts about Charter Schools
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Governance and Regulation
- Public Opinion

After reading, students discuss the following questions in small groups:

1. In what areas were you misinformed about charter schools? If you weren't misinformed, what is something that you learned?
2. What additional empirical evidence would you like to know about charter schools?
3. In light of the empirical evidence, which values or principles do you think are most important to make judgments about charter schools?
4. Does your opinion about charter schools change if you are a parent, teacher, or policymaker? In what ways?

# Two-Week Lesson Plan

## Week One

# Assignment: News Literacy

**Objective:** Students will critically engage with media portrayals of charter schools.

**Before class:**

Find and read a news article about charter schools. The article can be in opposition to or in favor of charter schools, but you should identify an article that takes a stance on charter schools. It should not be a scholarly article found in an academic journal.

In about 100 words, write a summary of what the author claims about charter schools.

**After class:**

Re-read the article and write a 200-word comment. In your comment, please pose a crucial question, describe an area of agreement or disagreement, and/or how your perception of the article changed since the first time reading it.

# Two-Week Lesson Plan

## Week Two

**Topic:** “No-excuses” charter schools

### **Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to discuss how the specific case of “no-excuses” or “high commitment” charter schools should shape charter school debates.
- Students will be able to discuss the types of questions, values, and evidence that should inform decision-making about charter schools
- Students will be able to articulate potential implications of charter schools for the least well off and consider how that should guide decision-making

### **Readings:**

- Ben-Porath, S. (2013). Deferring virtue: The new management of students and the civic role of schools. *Theory and Research in Education*, 11(2), 111-128.
- Golann, G. (2015). The paradox of success at a No-Excuses school. *Sociology of Education*, 88(2), 103-119.
- Jason, Z. The battle over charter schools. *Harvard Ed. Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/ed/17/05/battle-over-charter-schools>
- Pondiscio, R. (2019). No apologies for ‘no excuses’ charter schools. *Fordham Institute*. Retrieved from <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/no-apologies-no-excuses-charter-schools>

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## Guiding Questions

*Use these questions for class discussion, reading response assignments, or other activities.*

- This week’s readings focused on the case of “no-excuses” or “high commitment” charter schools. What are the defining characteristics of these schools?
- What do schools following a “no-excuses” approach aim to do?
- According to their detractors, Ben-Porath and Golann, what are the harms of the “no-excuses” approach? According to Pondiscio, what are the strengths of these schools, and why shouldn’t we apologize for them?
- Imagine that a “no-excuses” charter school has better academic outcomes (i.e., math and reading test scores) than a similar public school. Is there still reason to find it objectionable?
- Last class, we considered how parents and policymakers ought to make decisions about charter schools. In light of the readings for today, how, if at all, have your answers changed?
- What are the implications of “no-excuses” charter schools for the least well off?

## Assignment

- “Charters Near Me” assignment (p. 13)

# Assignment:

## Charters Near Me

**Objective:** Students will use both empirical evidence and philosophical reasoning together to determine how parents and policymakers should make decisions about charter schools.

### Assignment:

#### **I. After class, research a charter school in your area\* and determine the following information:**

- School type (elementary, middle, high, or some combination)
- Student demographics (% economically disadvantaged, racial/ethnic makeup)
- Philosophy or mission
- Application process/ parent involvement

You may search the school website and/or state department of education website to find this information.

*\*Instructors: you may want your class to research charters in your area. However, for some of you, there may not be many, or any charter schools, so you may give your students a specific region or city to research.*

#### **II. Imagine you are a parent. With this information in mind, consider the following questions:**

1. What additional *empirical evidence* would you need to consider in order to make a decision about whether or not to send your child to this school?
2. What additional *values* or *principles* would you need to consider in order to make a decision about whether or not to send your child to this school?

#### **III. Imagine you are a policy maker. With this information in mind, consider the following questions:**

1. What additional *empirical evidence* would you need to consider in order to draw a conclusion about the success of this school?
2. What additional *values* or *principles* would you need to consider in order to draw a conclusion about the success of this school?

# The Center for Ethics and Education

## **Organizing conversations between philosophers, educators, and researchers about policy and practice**

The Center for Ethics and Education is a research center in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER), housed in the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Center supports the field of philosophy of education by supporting scholars, graduate students, practitioners, and policymakers in thinking analytically about ethical issues in education.

<http://ethicsandeducation.wceruw.org/>

The creation of this curriculum was supported by a grant from the Spencer Foundation.

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