



The New Frontier

*Public Charter Schools as a
Tool to Transform Education
in Clark County*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT OPPORTUNITY 180

At Opportunity 180, we believe that all children deserve great schools. We find it unacceptable that over 82,000 children in Clark County attend low-performing public schools and are committed to solving this problem. As a nonprofit organization, we offer resources to launch and support high-performing schools and organizations that will provide students with outstanding educational opportunities and help prove that every child can achieve, regardless of ethnicity, zip code, or family income. For more on Opportunity 180, please visit <http://opportunity180.org>.

ABOUT PUBLIC IMPACT

Public Impact's mission is to dramatically improve learning outcomes for all children in the United States, with a special focus on students who are not served well. We are a team of professionals from many backgrounds, including former teachers. We are researchers, thought leaders, tool-builders, and on-the-ground consultants who work with leading education reformers. For more on Public Impact, please visit www.publicimpact.com.

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Foreword

BY ALLISON SERAFIN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OPPORTUNITY 180

More than 80,000 Clark County students attend low-performing public schools. To put this figure into perspective, only about 40 of the more than 13,000 school districts nationwide even enroll that many students.¹ Imagine if *every* public school student in Boston, or San Antonio, or Seattle attended a low-performing school. Then add another 20,000 to 30,000 students. That is the scale of the problem that we face in Clark County. Of our 330,000 public school students, nearly one in four attended a school that earned just one or two of a possible five stars under the state's accountability system in 2013–14.

At Opportunity 180, we find these statistics unacceptable. Individually, our donors, board members, and staff have spent years working to improve education options in Clark County with only modest results. In the process, we all came to realize that something was missing from the education landscape here. So together we launched Opportunity 180 to mirror the economic development work happening in the private sector by focusing our efforts on recruiting and supporting the wide range of schools, pathways, and conditions necessary to grow the number of great public schools and inspire the transformational change that our children living in low-income communities deserve.

At Opportunity 180, we believe that all children can achieve, that all families want the best for their children, and that great schools offer our county's children the best chance for equity and opportunity. However, in Clark County, median home value and zip code determine a child's chance of success, and we want to do something to change that. So we set an ambitious goal: 25,000 Clark County students will attend great urban schools by 2025.

But how do we get there? Perhaps the most promising vehicle is public charter schools: those that are very much public—open and free to *all* children—but that have the autonomy to operate differently than traditional district schools in exchange for tight accountability for student performance results. Historically, however, we have not had a stream of proven charter operators knocking on Clark County's door.

To figure out how to build a pipeline of successful charter operators, we wanted to better understand the challenge at hand. So we reached out to Public Impact, a national education research and management firm with more than two decades of experience devising and advancing visionary, yet practical, ideas to improve K–12 education. We asked them to evaluate Clark County's education landscape and identify the barriers to growing the number of high-quality public charter schools.

Their findings put in no uncertain terms what we instinctively knew all along: that funding matters, and Clark County does not offer public charter operators enough of it. That great school operators need a building they can call home, yet free or low-cost facilities are few and far between. And that people make all the difference, but Clark County does not have enough excellent teachers and leaders to meet demand.

As the recipient of the state's charter school harbormaster fund, Opportunity 180 is poised and ready to lead the charge to overcome these barriers and create more great pub-

lic schools. In fact, Opportunity 180 has already started. We have partnered with Teach For America-Las Vegas Valley and Building Excellent Schools to attract and support high-quality educators committed to providing our most vulnerable Nevadans with a great education. We are actively recruiting high-performing charter organizations and awarded our first planning grant last spring. We are creating a pathway to affordable school buildings by finding and securing facilities. And we are working with nonprofits and community-based organizations to provide families with the support and information they need to advocate for great schools.

But we can do more and we can do better working in partnership with others unwilling to watch our community fail tens of thousands of students each year. This report outlines what it will take to overcome the obstacles standing between our students and great school options. It also shows how every facet of the community can play a role. Consider this report your invitation to join the fight. We look forward to working with you.

NOTE

1. Educational Finance Division. U.S. Census Bureau. (2016). "Public Education Finances: 2014." Available <http://census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2016/econ/g14-aspef.pdf>



Executive Summary

The number of Clark County residents has more than doubled in the past 25 years.¹ As a result, Clark County School District (CCSD) has become the fifth-largest in the country, and nearly two dozen public charter schools now serve local students.

Such tremendous growth has not always lent itself to thoughtful planning that supports high levels of student achievement, however. In 2013–14, only 64 percent of Clark County public school students who took the state exam were proficient in reading, and only 59 percent were proficient in math.² Moreover, an array of metrics consistently and strongly correlates school ratings, which are based largely on student performance and growth on the state exam, with student wealth and ethnicity. For example, only 10 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch attended a top-rated school, even though they constituted more than half of all public school students.³ The data look similar for black and Hispanic students. The inverse is also true: Poor and minority students were consistently overrepresented in the county's lowest-rated district and public charter schools.

Meanwhile, the consequences of an education system that fails to prepare its students extend well beyond each person's outcomes. By some estimates, cutting the number of high school dropouts by even a quarter would contribute more than \$12 million to the economy each year for each graduating class, and as much as \$56 million if those students go on to earn a college degree.⁴ The quality of public education is also linked to home values, civic participation, and spending on social programs.⁵

Public Charter Schools as a Tool for Education Reform

The good news is that something transformational happened in 2015. Under the leadership of Governor Brian Sandoval, legislators passed 25 bills aimed at advancing student learning. Several of these recognize and support the expansion of high-quality charter schools — those with demonstrated potential or records of success in getting students on track to graduate ready for college or careers — as a key strategy to turn around failing schools and create excellent ones anew.

To date, the county's charter schools tend either to produce poor outcomes or serve low percentages of high-needs students, including poor students and English language learners, who make up 55 and 16 percent, respectively, of public school students in Clark County.⁶ But it does not have to be this way. A small but growing group of charter networks across the nation, including Achievement First in Connecticut and New York and YES Prep in Texas, has demonstrated some of the best success serving high-needs students at scale.⁷ But for Clark County to attract and grow great charter schools, its politicians and policymakers must create the right conditions.

Access to Key Resources Poses Obstacle

To realize the promise charter schools offer of increasing students' access to a great education, everyone involved must first believe that Clark County *can* offer *all* its children a



great public education: Zip code, wealth, or the language spoken at home does not determine whether a child can learn.

Then, county and state leaders must put that belief and commitment into action. Clark County has many of the necessary conditions in place to grow a high-quality charter sector — namely a robust charter school law, strong accountability measures, and generous start-up funding for new charters. But the county would be in a much better position if it could offer charter schools three key resources identified in dozens of interviews, case studies, and reports:⁸

- **Competitive per-pupil funding.** In 2013–14, charter schools received about \$6,600 per student in non-federal public funds. For some charter operators, \$6,600 is simply not enough to make ends meet. That figure is also comparatively low. Nationally, the average charter school receives about \$7,800 in non-federal public funds.⁹ The figure is lower for other western states — \$7,000 — but still about 6 percent above what Clark County charter schools receive.¹⁰ Clark County’s current charter funding levels put it at a competitive disadvantage in attracting proven charter operators.
- **Access to free or low-cost facilities.** Charter schools in Clark County seldom have access to high-quality, low-cost facilities. While traditional district schools typically use bond levies to cover capital costs, Clark County charters do not have access to these or other facilities funds. Accordingly, charters often lease facilities and must spend operational funds — about 12 percent for the average Clark County charter school — to do so.¹¹
- **A ready supply of excellent teachers and leaders.** Teachers and school leaders affect student achievement more than any other school factor.¹² Highly effective teachers and principals are in short supply in Clark County, however. Since the 2008 recession, Nevada’s talent pipeline has suffered from layoffs, pay freezes, and cuts to educator training programs. As a result, the Clark County School district had nearly 800 teacher vacancies on the first day of the 2015–16 school year.¹³ Though the state has taken steps to shore up its teacher and leader pipeline, including funding programs that train prospective teachers and expanding leadership development programs,¹⁴ it still has a way to go to ensure that every student has access to a great teacher and that every teacher has access to a great leader.

Strategies for Improving Access to Key Resources

So what can state and local policymakers do to improve public charter schools’ access to key resources? While there are many possibilities, seven strategies stand out:

To overcome the funding obstacle:

1. **Make funding levels more competitive** by increasing state per-pupil funding for all students, supplementing state charter funding to compensate for the local funding that charters cannot access (approximately \$500 per pupil), and/or sharing local levy dollars with charter schools.
2. **Recruit within your means** by targeting charter networks that already successfully operate in states with funding levels similar to Nevada.

- 3. Grow your own** charter operators built to survive (and thrive) on available funding by creating a charter school incubator, identifying and training promising school leaders, or identifying successful local charters and supporting their expansion.

To overcome the facilities obstacle:

- 4. Provide facilities funding**, either through a new funding stream or by requiring that school districts set aside a proportionate share of new bond proceeds for charters.
- 5. Include charters in the siting process for new CCSD buildings**, giving them access to a low-cost facility.

To overcome the talent obstacle:

- 6. Give teachers an opportunity to grow and reward them for it** by creating career pathways that recognize their skills, enable professional development and advancement, and offer the chance to have a greater impact for more pay.
- 7. Invest in strategies that fully use existing talent** by offering education entrepreneurs opportunities, such as paid fellowships, to develop new, groundbreaking school models that allow the best teachers to reach more students.

Creating the Will

Knowing what Clark County will need to attract proven charter operators is only half of the challenge: Political leaders, educators, parents, students, and other community members must also create the will for change, both at the grassroots and grasstops levels. Lessons from other states, such as Louisiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee, demonstrate that community engagement and advocacy cannot be an afterthought.¹⁵ Clark County must be deliberate and proactive in developing strategies that help create the will for change.

Next Steps for Clark County

Excellent charter schools offer one tool for improving education options, and the Silver State has recently taken several steps to make it easier and more attractive for the best charter operators to open schools and grow in Nevada. But much more work remains to ensure that charter schools capable of preparing students for college and successful careers have access to the critical resources they need to grow — predictable and sustainable per-pupil funding from public sources, access to free or low-cost facilities, and a steady supply of excellent teachers and leaders.

Accomplishing those things will demand that all members of the Clark County community take action.

- State and local education agencies need to follow through on policies already in motion by ensuring that new high-quality charters have access to the resources they need to be successful, and holding chronically low-performing charters accountable for student outcomes.

- Legislators and other policymakers need to support a mix of initiatives that not only provide immediate relief to the challenges charters face today, but also emphasize sustainability and a role for charters over the long term.
- Education advocates, including teachers, parents, and students, need to engage the public and stoke its will to do the hard work necessary.
- Philanthropy and business leaders need to catalyze both the grassroots and the grass-tops by using their dollars to illuminate critical issues and amplify the demand for better education options.

Nevada has taken many of the first difficult steps to a better education system, but has much more to accomplish. Creating more schools that prepare students for a productive future is within Clark County's reach so long as community members build on the momentum that has started.

NOTES

1. US Bureau of the Census. *Population of counties by decennial census: 1900 to 1990*. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/nv190090.txt>; United State Census Bureau. *Quickfacts: Clark County, Nevada*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045214/32003,00>
2. Based on Public Impact analysis of Nevada assessment data retrieved from <http://nevadareportcard.com/di/> and <http://nspf.doe.nv.gov/>.
3. Based on Public Impact analysis of Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF) data retrieved from <http://nspf.doe.nv.gov/> and demographic data retrieved from <http://nevadareportcard.com/di/>.
4. Difference between earnings of a high school dropout, high school graduate, and college graduate based on 2014 earnings data for Clark County. Estimate assumes individuals save 5.5 percent of earnings (based on estimate from St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank) and that between 43 percent and 68 percent of money spent gets recirculated in the local economy. Each new graduate therefore adds between \$7,615 (low estimate for high school graduate) and \$33,246 (high estimate for college graduate) to the economy. Estimate also uses 2012–13 graduation data, when 6,800 students did not graduate. Cutting the dropout rate by 25 percent would therefore create 1,703 new graduates each year. Source: United States Census Bureau. (n.d.). *B20004 Median earnings in the past 12 months (in 2014 inflation-adjusted dollars) by sex by educational attainment for the population 25 years and over*. Retrieved from <http://factfinder.census.gov/>; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (n.d.). *Personal savings rate, 2015-12-01*. Retrieved from <https://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/series/PSAVERT>; Civic Economics. (2004). *The Andersonville study of retail economics*. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from https://bealocalist.org/sites/default/files/Andersonville%20Study%20of%20Retail%20Economics_0.pdf
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7. For example, both Achievement First and Yes Prep charter networks serve more than 10,000 students, the vast majority of whom are low-income and either black or Hispanic. Both of these charter networks consistently outperform surrounding district schools serving similar student populations, and often rival top schools in the state that serve far more advantaged student populations. Achievement First. *Annual report 2014–15*. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.achievementfirst.org/fileadmin/af/resources/images/AF_AR_2014_15.pdf; YES Prep. (n.d.). *2014 annual report*. Retrieved from http://www.yesprep.org/sites/default/files/media/YES_Annual_Report_2014.pdf; Yes Prep. *Results*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.yesprep.org/about/results>
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14. For example, Nevada Senate Bill 474 (2015) (retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/NV/bill/SB474/2015>) established a \$10 million fund to support Teach For America and TNTP to prepare 100 teachers each to teach in Clark County. Nevada Senate Bill 511 (2015) (retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/NV/text/SB511/2015>) allocated \$2.5 million per year to fund a scholarship program for prospective teachers to attend state colleges or universities, and \$10 million per year to pay incentives for new teachers to teach in high-need and low-performing schools.
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Introduction

Explosive growth defines Clark County. In 1990, fewer than 750,000 people called the county home.¹ Within 25 years, that number doubled to more than 2 million.² As the county grew, so did its school system—from 100,000 students³ to more than triple that. Today the Clark County School District ranks as the fifth-largest district in the country.⁴ In addition, 20 public charter school operators—none of which existed before 1997—served more than 20,000 Clark County students during the 2013–14 school year.


Such tremendous population growth has not always lent itself to thoughtful planning that supports high levels of student achievement. Simply providing enough seats has regularly been a challenge for a district growing by 1 to 2 percent year over year. Public charter schools have offered students another option. But there, too, growth has often happened without effective quality assurances.

And without question, quality has suffered. In 2013–14, only 64 percent of Clark County public school students that took the state exam were proficient in reading, and only 59 percent were proficient in math.⁵ Moreover, an array of metrics consistently and strongly correlates school ratings, which are based largely on student performance and growth on the state exam, with student wealth and ethnicity. Only 10 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch attended a top-rated school, even though they constituted more than half of all public school students.⁶ Even more troubling, Nevada ranked second to last in *Education Week's* annual assessment of state education metrics, and dead last in the assessment's "Chance-for-Success Index" in 2015, which scores states on 13 indicators that span a person's life, including family income, preschool enrollment, high school graduation, and adult educational attainment.⁷

A New Direction

In the face of these stark facts, something transformational happened in 2015. Under the leadership of Governor Brian Sandoval, state legislators took stock of the state's schools, with unprecedented results. Twenty-five bills aimed at supporting student learning became law. The legislation created new and improved opportunities for teacher development, changed the way schools are funded, provided scholarships and bonuses for new teachers, and allocated additional funding for schools located in high-poverty areas.

The new laws also recognized and supported the expansion of high-quality charter schools as a key strategy to turn around failing schools *and* create excellent new ones. Specifically, the legislature gave the state education department the authority to put underperforming schools in a new achievement school district (ASD), where proven or promising charter school operators will run them beginning in the 2017–18 school year.⁸ In addition, the legislature created and provided \$10 million in public funds for a nonprofit organization to recruit charter school leaders and management organizations to Nevada.⁹ Never before has a state taken such bold steps all at once to leverage charters as a tool for school reform.



Nevada's goal:
Attract charter
operators to Clark
County who have
proved they can
serve high-need
students well.

Why Charters?

Clark County charter schools have largely fallen short of expectations so far. Half serve few poor students or students with greater than average educational needs, while the rest are mostly low-performing schools. According to one study, on average, students attending Las Vegas charter schools (where most Clark County charters were located in 2013–14) actually learned less over the course of the year than comparable students attending traditional district schools.¹⁰

So why try to expand the charter presence in Clark County? Two reasons stand out:

First, in 2013 and 2015, Nevada amended its charter law to strengthen accountability measures for charter schools and their authorizers, creating the conditions for a higher-quality charter sector.¹¹

Second, a small but growing group of charter networks across the nation has demonstrated the best success at a systemwide level of serving poor students and students for whom English is a second language—55 and 16 percent, respectively, of the county's students. For example:

- Achievement First operates 30 schools serving 10,000 students in Connecticut, New York, and Rhode Island. Although 85 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 98 percent are children of color, 85 percent of Achievement First alumni graduate from college by age 24, compared with a national average of just 9 percent of low-income students.¹²
- In Houston, Yes Prep operates 15 schools, serving 10,000 students, 83 percent of whom are low-income and 97 percent of whom are children of color.¹³ In 2013–14, not only did YES Prep outperform state averages on all end-of-course state exams and on each of the four indices (student achievement, student progress, closing performance gaps, and post-secondary readiness) in the state's accountability rating, but its students also beat Texas, national, and global averages on Advanced Placement (AP) exams.¹⁴

Nevada's goal is to bring charter operators like these—with a proven track record serving students with the greatest needs—to Clark County.

About this Report

To support that goal, this report describes Clark County's students, its school operators, student and school performance, and how school quality varies across the county. Then it looks at what is at stake, detailing the many reasons why Clark County must do better by its students. Finally, it focuses on what Clark County must do to become a place where excellent charter operators want to work, drawing on what other cities have learned in attempting to recruit and grow great charters.

The State of Public Education in Clark County

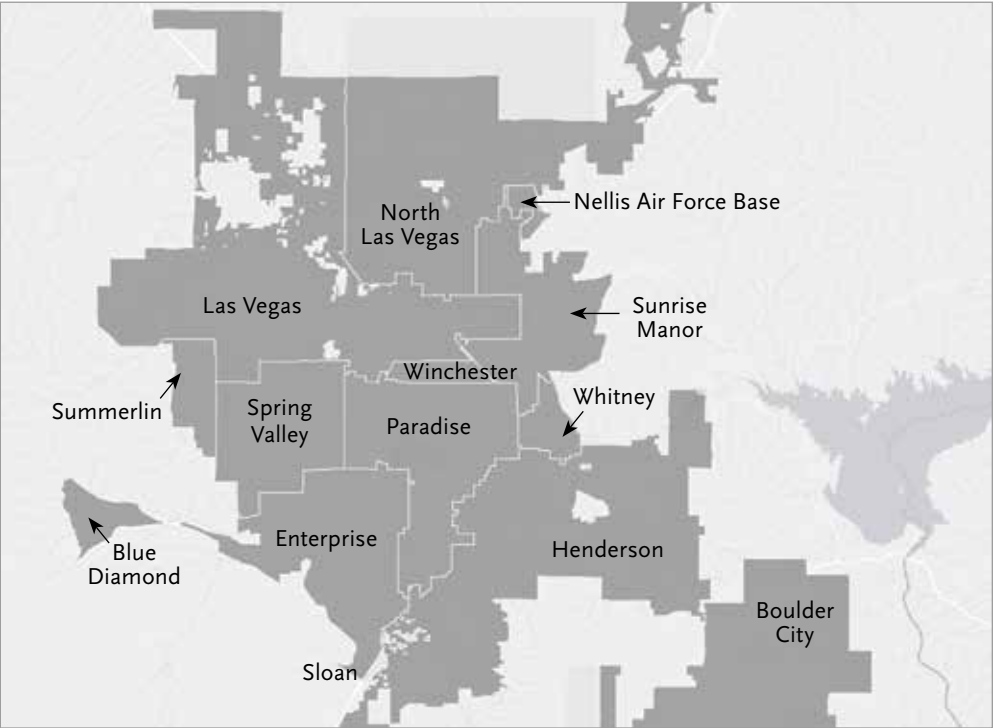
The county’s largest city, Las Vegas, sits near its center (see Figure 1). The cities and unincorporated towns adjacent to it—including North Las Vegas, Spring Valley, and Paradise—tend to have a lower median income than Las Vegas, and slightly higher percentages of black and Hispanic residents. In contrast, Summerlin, bordering Las Vegas’s southwest corner, and some of the communities a bit further out, such as Henderson, Enterprise, and Boulder City, have a higher percentage of white residents and higher median household income.¹⁵ Many of these more well-to-do communities are also among the county’s fastest-growing. Outside of Las Vegas and its suburbs, however, Clark County is mostly rural.

Clark County encompasses more than 8,000 square miles—an area at least twice as large as any other of the largest school districts in the country. Although desert occupies much of that space, so also do many contrasts—urban and rural communities, extraordinary wealth and poverty, immigrants and Native Americans, and more.

The schools serving Clark County reflect these contrasts, both in the students they do and do not serve and the results they produce. The county’s student outcomes are generally disappointing, but they vary considerably and are highly correlated with wealth and student need.

The county’s student outcomes are generally disappointing, but they vary considerably and are highly correlated with wealth and student need.

FIGURE 1. Map of Central Clark County

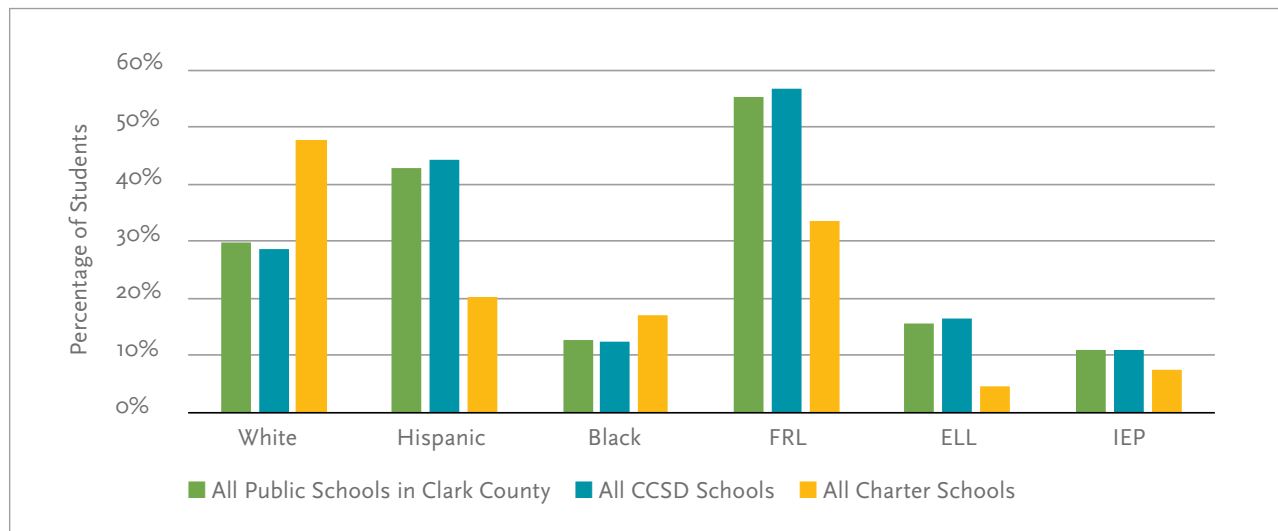


More than half of all public students are non-white, poor

More than 335,000 Clark County students attended a public school in 2013–14. Of these, 94 percent—314,500—attended one of the 372 Clark County School District (CCSD) schools.¹⁶ The remaining 20,700 students attended a public school that one of 20 charter operators ran.¹⁷

Thirty percent of all these public school students were white, 43 percent were Hispanic, and 13 percent were black (see Figure 2). Fifty-five percent of all students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL), 16 percent were English language learners (ELL), and 11 percent were students with disabilities who had an individualized education plan (IEP).¹⁸

FIGURE 2. Public School Student Demographics in Clark County by School Operator, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

Different Types of Schools Serve Very Different Types of Students

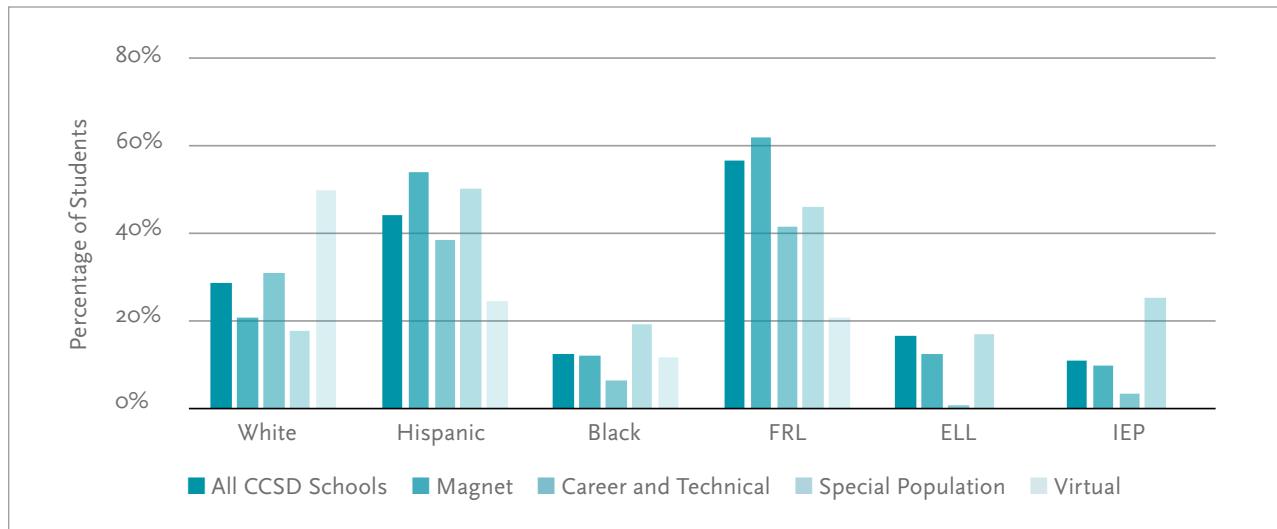
Enrollment across district-operated schools largely mirrored demographic trends across the county, but charter enrollment was markedly different. As a sector, charter schools located within Clark County enrolled a much higher percentage of white students (48 percent vs. 30), and lower percentages of Hispanic students (20 percent vs. 43), FRL students (34 percent vs. 55), ELL students (5 percent vs. 16), and students with an IEP (8 percent vs. 11). Charters enrolled a higher percentage of black students (17 vs. 13), however.

But these are just averages. For both district and charter schools, the demographics varied considerably depending on the type of district school or charter authorizer. For example, on average, the district's 29 magnet schools enrolled a lower percentage of white students (21 percent) and higher percentages of Hispanic students (54 percent) and FRL students (62 percent) than the district as a whole—but the opposite was true of the district's seven Career & Technical Academy high schools and one virtual school (see Figure 3).

Two authorizers chartered schools in Clark County in 2013–14—the Clark County School District itself and the State Public Charter School Authority (SPCSA), which can authorize schools across the state. On average, CCSD-authorized charters enrolled less than half the percentage of white students as SPCSA charters and more than twice the percentage of FRL students (see Figure 4). CCSD-authorized charters also enrolled higher percentages of Hispanic, black, and ELL students, and students with an IEP.

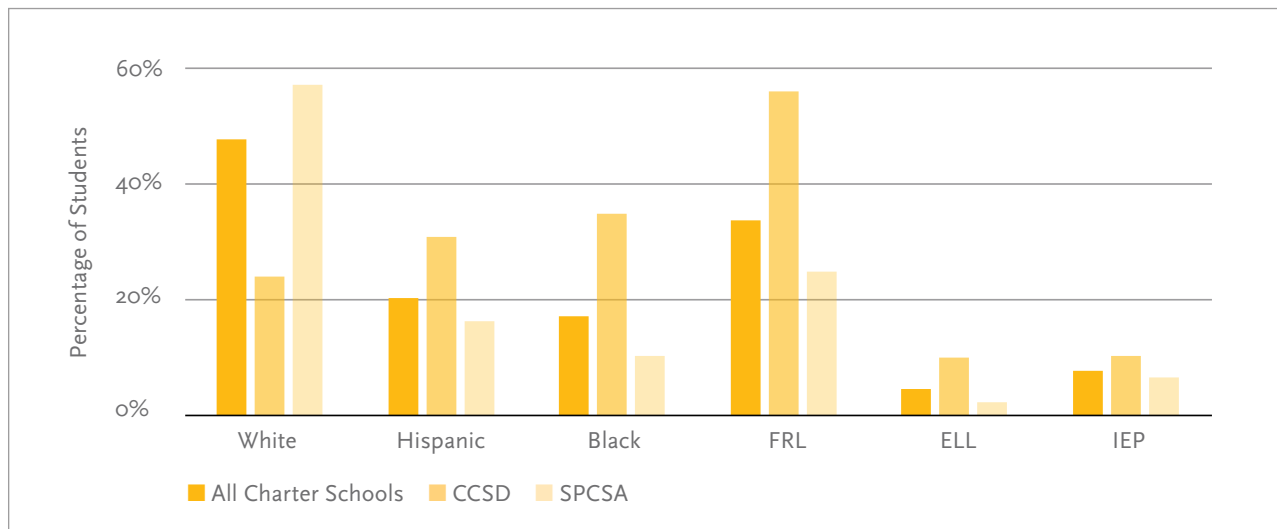
As “Virtual Charter Schools” (page 16) shows, student enrollment in brick-and-mortar charters and virtual charters also looked very different. The factors underlying those differences are not clear, however.

FIGURE 3. Student Demographics of Clark County *District* Schools by School Type, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

FIGURE 4. Student Demographics of Clark County *Charter* Schools by Charter Authorizer, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

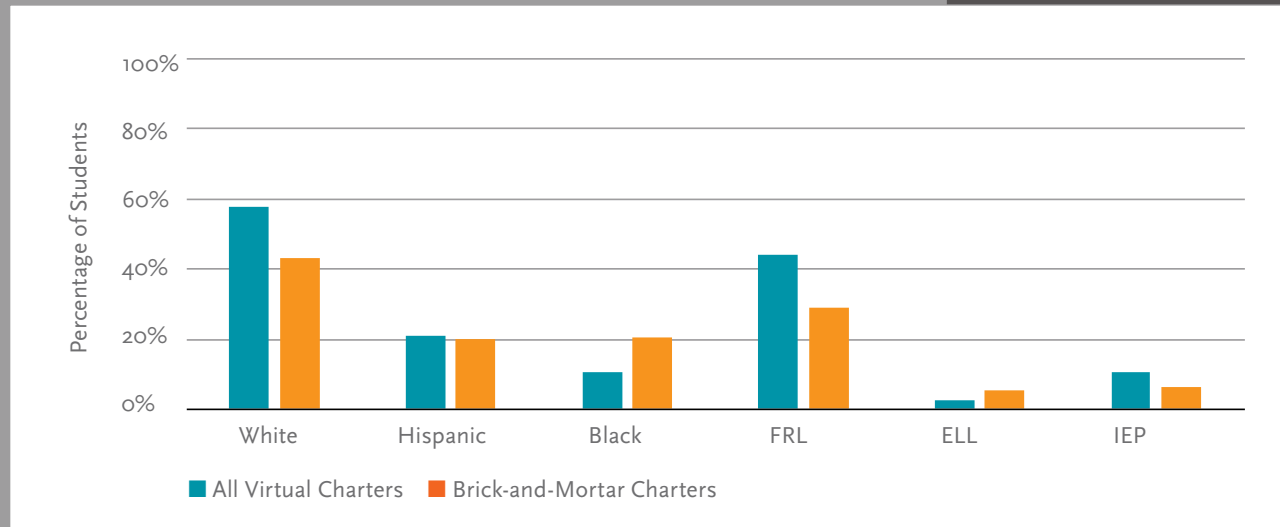
Virtual Charter Schools

Most charter school students attend class in a school building. But for more than 6,500 charter students in Clark County, school is “virtual” for at least part of the day. Four virtual charter school operators serve Clark County students. Three are fully online, while the fourth (Odyssey), uses a hybrid model in which students take some classes online and others in person at a brick-and-mortar site.

In 2013–14, students attending virtual charter schools were considerably more likely to be white, qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and have an IEP than students attending brick-and-mortar charters.

Unlike brick-and-mortar charters, which largely operate in and draw students from Clark County’s cities and suburbs, students in the county’s most remote corners can “attend” virtual charter schools, and thus many more rural students attend the state’s virtual charters—and many of those students are both white and low-income. Less apparent is why virtual charters have attracted higher percentages of students with IEPs.

Student Demographics, Virtual Charters vs. Brick-and-Mortar Charters, 2013–2014



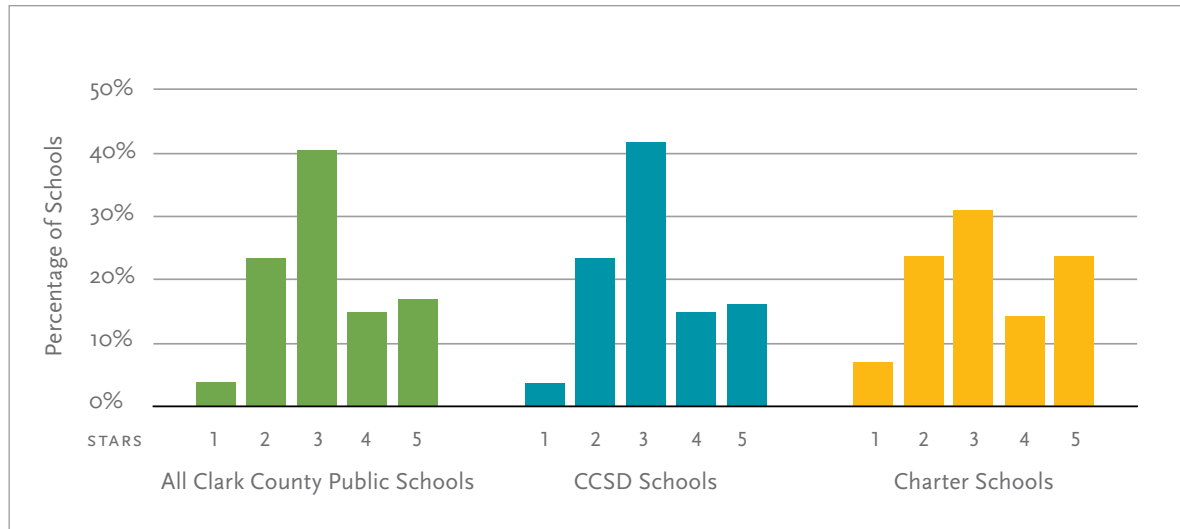
SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data. Demographics data for SPCSA-authorized virtual schools based on schoolwide averages since it was not possible to identify just Clark County residents in the data.

Student Performance Also Varies Across Sectors and School Types

In 2012, the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) implemented a new accountability system that rates schools with one to five stars, with five stars denoting the highest-performing schools. For elementary and middle schools, stars are based on student growth, student achievement, reductions in achievement gaps, and attendance. High school ratings do not include attendance but do include graduation rates and measures of college and career readiness.¹⁹ Though the metric is imperfect, it is the only one in Nevada that offers a composite score of several aspects of student achievement.²⁰

In 2013–14, the NDE assigned 370 Clark County schools a star rating.²¹ More than 40 percent of schools received three stars, while 17 percent received five stars and 4 percent received just one star. Among charter schools, 24 percent received the state’s highest rating, versus 16 percent for district-operated schools; 7 percent of charters received the lowest rating, versus 4 percent of district-run schools.²²

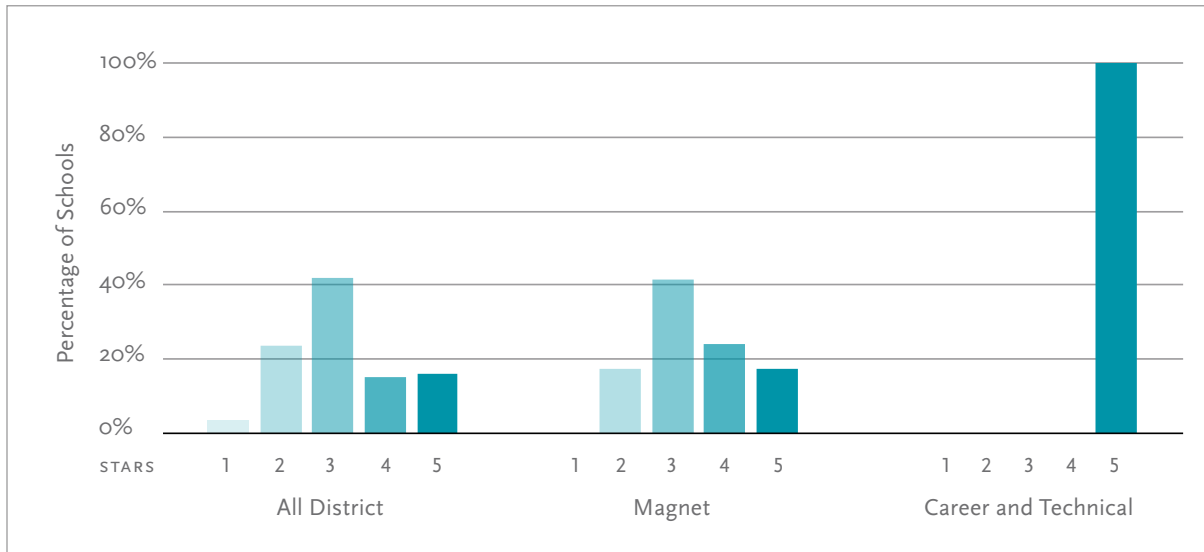
FIGURE 5. Breakdown of Clark County School Performance by Star Rating, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

Again, the results vary among school types and authorizers, often reflecting their students' demographics. All seven of the city's career and technical high schools, which require students to both apply and meet minimum qualifying criteria, received five stars. None of them—and none of the city's magnets—received one star (see Figure 6). Meanwhile, SPCSA-authorized charters, which, on average, serve higher rates of white students and lower rates of FRL and ELL students, performed much better than CCSD-authorized charters; more than half of SPCSA schools received five stars, a score no CCSD-authorized charter earned (see Figure 7).²³

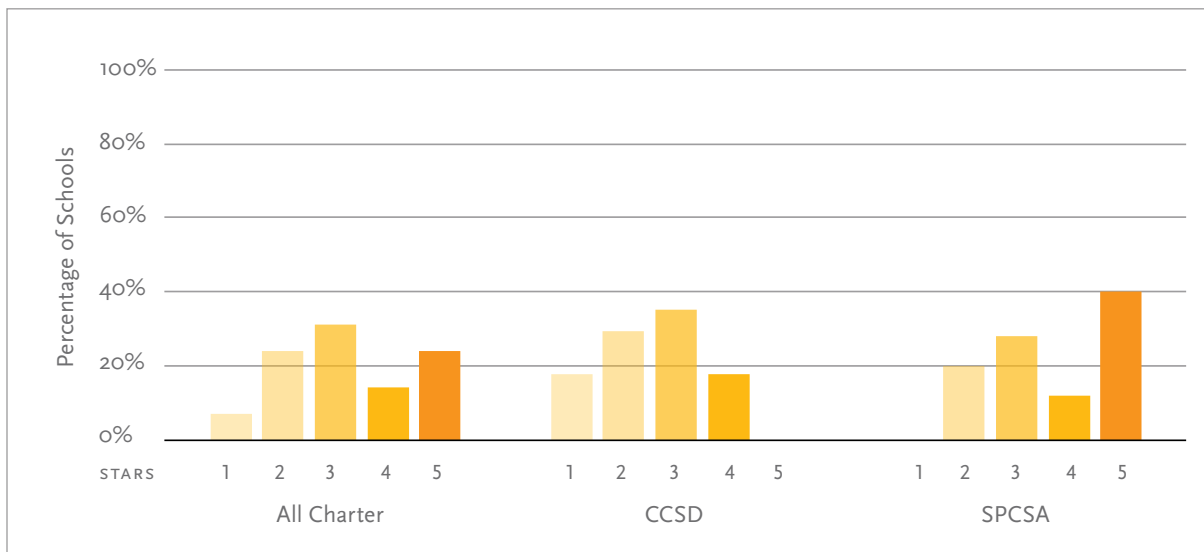
FIGURE 6. Star Ratings for Clark County *District* Schools by School Type, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

NOTE: This graph shows only school types for which star ratings were available for more than five schools. As a result, it excludes schools serving special populations and the district's one virtual school.

FIGURE 7. Star Ratings for Clark County *Charter* Schools by Authorizer, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.



Disadvantaged Students Less Likely to Attend Top-Rated Schools

Schools' star ratings were very highly correlated with the demographics of the students they served. On average, nearly half of students enrolled in a 5-star school in 2013–14 were white, approximately a third qualified for free or reduced-price lunch, and just 5 percent were English language learners. In contrast, just 8 percent of students attending a 1-star school were white, while 79 percent were FRL students and a third were ELL (see Figure 8, page 20). And almost without exception, the percentage of high-need students enrolled at a school decreased as schools' star ratings increased. Nor were these trends exclusive to overall star ratings. Public Impact's analysis of 2014 student performance and demographic data found that a school's proficiency rates and student growth scores were correlated with student demographics, with the percentage of white students increasing and the percentage of FRL and minority students decreasing as scores increased.

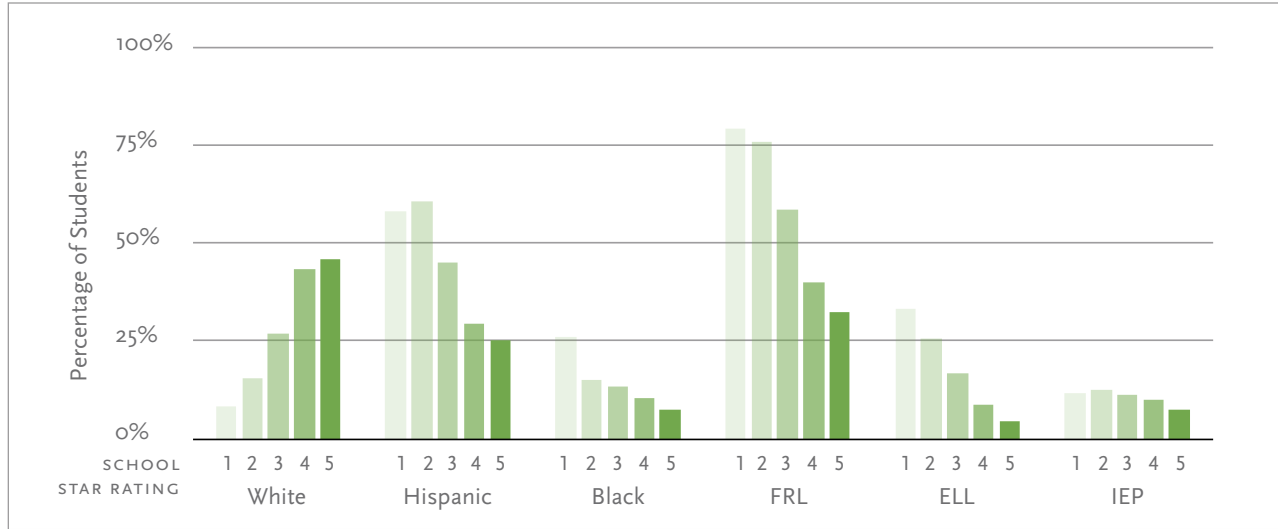
As a result, half of white students in Clark County attended a 4- or 5-star school in 2013–14, while less than a quarter of Hispanic, black, FRL, or ELL students did (see Figure 9, page 20). Moreover, Hispanic, black, FRL, and ELL students were two to three times more likely to attend a 1- or 2-star school as their white peers. Students with an IEP were slightly more likely to attend a 1- or 2-star school than a 4- or 5-star school.

District and charter schools performed similarly on other performance metrics, including proficiency and growth.²⁴ Again, however, school performance was highly correlated with student demographics.

In 2013–14, about a third of Clark County schools, serving approximately 110,000 students, earned four or five stars under the state's accountability system. Meanwhile, the county's remaining 200,000-plus students attended a school that was middling at best.

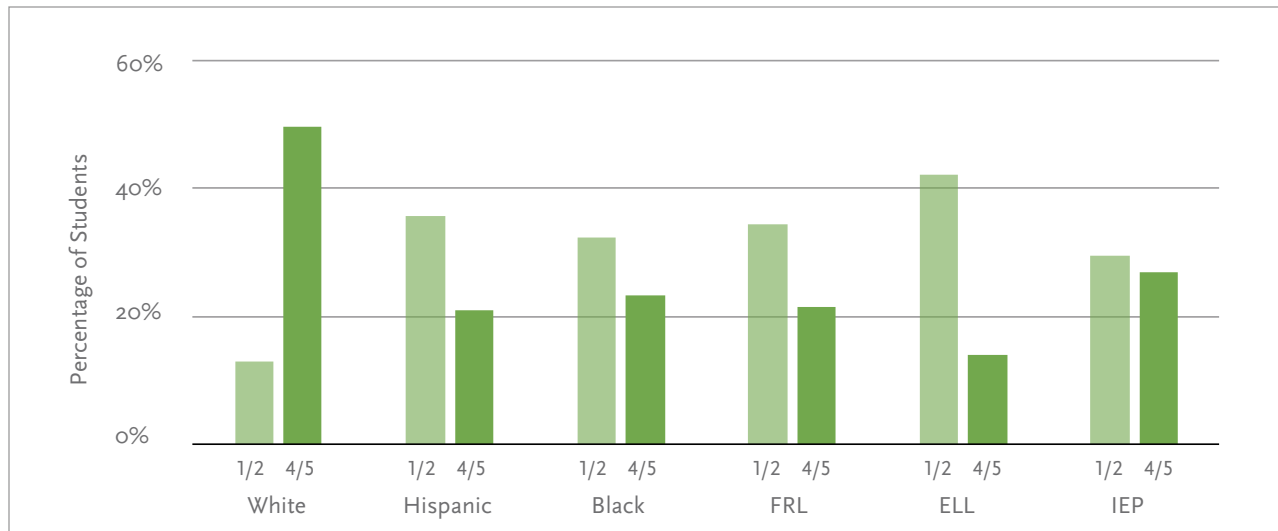
Schools' star ratings were very highly correlated with the demographics of the students they served.

FIGURE 8. Student Demographics by School Star Rating, All Clark County Schools, 2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

FIGURE 9. Percentage of Clark County Students Attending a 1- or 2-Star School vs. a 3- or 4-Star School by Student SubGroup, 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data. Demographics data for SPCSA-authorized virtual schools based on schoolwide averages since it was not possible to identify just Clark County residents in the data.



Identifying Communities with the Greatest Need

Clark County clearly needs to provide students with more high-quality options that prepare them to graduate from the K-12 system ready for college or careers. However, students in two different kinds of communities most need better school options: those with explosive growth—largely the Las Vegas suburbs, with upper-middle-class families, and “quality school deserts”—those areas with no 4- or 5-star schools, which are some of the poorest in the county.

Although all students should have access to an excellent education, data and experience show that fast-growing, wealthier communities are exactly the type where high-quality schools are most likely to open. As the data show, even Nevada’s top-rated charter schools tend to serve students who come from more affluent backgrounds than the average student. Consequently, the rest of this report focuses on the “quality school deserts,” and how education leaders can remove obstacles and thus attract great school operators to work there.

High-Quality Schools Most Often Absent in Clark County’s Poorest Areas

Figure 10 shows the average star rating for all of the schools within each of Clark County’s zip codes, with darker shades of green indicating a higher star rating. The figure shows that communities on the outskirts of the county—specifically the southern and western suburbs of Las Vegas—tended to have the highest concentrations of top-rated schools.

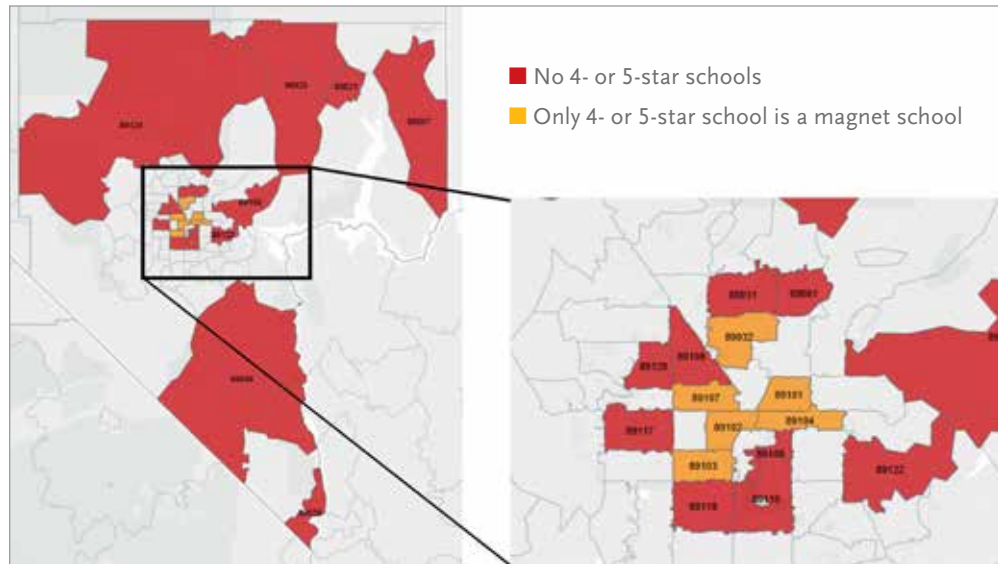
In most of Clark County’s 64 zip code boundaries, at least one 4- or 5-star school operated in 2013–14. But 16 were “quality school deserts,” where there were no 4- or 5-star schools. And three of those deserts also did not have a 3-star school: every school received one or two stars.²⁵ In six other of these communities, the only 4- or 5-star school was a

FIGURE 10. Average 2013–2014 School Star Rating by Clark County Zip Code



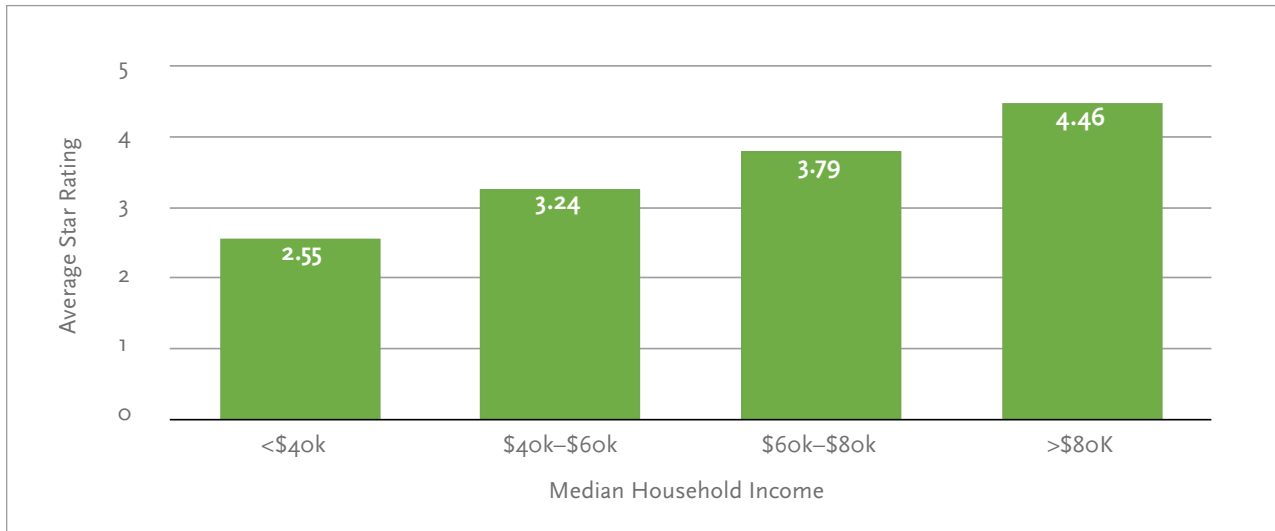
SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

FIGURE 11. “Quality School Deserts” lacking 4- or 5-Star Schools in 2013–2014



SOURCE: Public Impact analysis of publicly available data.

FIGURE 12. Average 2013–2014 School Star Rating within a Zip Code Boundary, by Median Household Income



SOURCES: Star ratings available at: Nevada Department of Education. Nevada School Performance Framework. <http://nspf.doe.nv.gov/>. Median income data pulled from United State Census Bureau. American Community Survey 2014. Table S1901: Income in the past 12 months. Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>

magnet school, which neighborhood students cannot necessarily attend.²⁶ As Figure 11 highlights, these pockets of low performance generally existed in parts of North Las Vegas, central Las Vegas, and in the county’s outlying, usually rural, communities.

As Figure 12 demonstrates, school quality and household income are clearly correlated in Clark County. As median household income increased within a zip code, so did the average star rating of the schools located there.



Why Clark County Must Do Better

2

The data leave no question—most students residing in Clark County and relying on the public school system do not have access to a high-quality education. This failing is unacceptable. As long as the demand for high-quality schools exceeds the supply, both individual students and the larger Clark County citizenry lose out financially. Fortunately, efforts that chip away at that gap between supply and demand offer a long list of benefits that can transform a student's life *and* reap large benefits for the community.

A Poor Education's Consequences

A subpar education creates long-lasting and insidious consequences. Only 71 percent of Clark County students entering the ninth grade in 2010 received a diploma four years later.²⁷ For the remaining 29 percent—approximately 6,800 students—the future does not look bright. In 2014, the typical high school dropout in Clark County earned just \$24,050 annually, nearly a quarter less than the typical high school graduate and just more than half as much as the typical college graduate.²⁸

And that's if those dropouts can find work at all. During the economic downturn, up to 15.6 percent of high school dropouts were unemployed, compared with 11.0 percent of high school graduates and 5.0 percent of college graduates.²⁹ Moreover, one study found that even two decades later, previously displaced workers earned as little as 80 percent of what similar workers who had not been displaced earned.³⁰ Not surprisingly, high school dropouts were twice as likely as graduates to live below the poverty line, and more than five times more likely than their peers with a college degree or higher.³¹

Even students who graduate may not have all of the skills they should. According to the 2015 ACT college readiness assessment, only 8 percent of high school juniors in Nevada were truly "college-ready."³² For many, that means taking remedial courses in college because they lack basic skills. The research shows, however, that a four-year degree and all of the benefits associated with it may still be out of reach for those students. Students who need to take remedial courses are less likely to graduate by as many as 20 percentage points, depending on the subject matter and the number of remedial courses he or she must take.³³



Nor are all of the consequences related to lost wages. Nationally, incarceration rates of high school dropouts are nearly 50 times those of college graduates.³⁴ High school dropouts are also much more likely than their more educated peers to draw on public assistance. According to 2011 data, for example, they are twice as likely as high school graduates (24 percent vs. 12 percent), and 12 times more likely than college graduates (2 percent) to rely on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).³⁵

In addition, a host of health factors, from the likelihood that someone will smoke or exercise, and even life expectancy are correlated with education, with lower levels of educational attainment predicting worse health behaviors and outcomes.³⁶ Perhaps most startling is that the life expectancy gap between the most and least educated Americans has been growing for half a century and is a full decade for women—and 14 years for men.³⁷

What Clark County Stands to Gain

So what would be the impact of transforming Clark County's lowest-performing schools into top performers?

For the individual student who would gain access to a seat in those schools, it would mean a completely different future, a future where he would be more likely to hold a job, achieve financial independence, contribute to his family and community, and live a healthier, longer life. But these benefits would extend well beyond the life of the individual student and his family.

MORE MONEY IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY

People who earn more also spend more. According to the St. Louis branch of the Federal Reserve Bank, Americans saved no more than 5.5 percent of their after-tax earnings in 2015.³⁸ This means that 94.5 percent of an individual's after-tax earnings generally flows back into the economy. In the case of a high school dropout turned high school graduate, that's an additional \$5,300 a year on average.³⁹ And a high school dropout turned college graduate could be expected to pump nearly \$20,000 more into the economy each year. By some estimates, between 43 percent (when spent in chain businesses) to 68 percent (when spent in locally owned businesses) of that money stays in the local economy, where it continues to recirculate.⁴⁰ All told, reducing the number of high school dropouts by even a quarter would contribute more than \$12 million each year for each graduating class if students simply get a diploma, and as much as \$56 million if those students go on to earn a college degree.⁴¹

HIGHER HOME VALUES

In addition, great schools have been shown to lead to higher home values. Studies have found that an increase of one standard deviation in student test scores (about 5 percent) increased housing prices by between 2 and 11 percent.⁴² Similarly, a Florida study found that after the state adopted an accountability system that allowed consumers to easily compare schools, home prices near highly rated schools increased beyond what was otherwise predicted.⁴³

BETTER BUSINESS CLIMATE

Communities with an educated work force are also more attractive to businesses. In recent years, businesses have become more mobile and increasingly choose areas with high consumer spending.⁴⁴ Consequently, great schools serve as a lever by which to attract new businesses. Yet in a CNBC analysis evaluating the business climate in all 50 states, Nevada ranked dead last for education, making it among the least desirable states for business.⁴⁵ Better schools can change that.

Increased educational spending is correlated with population growth in cities, another boon to new businesses. And just as improved educational opportunities encourage business development, they also suppress detriments to business and city growth, including crime and spending on social support programs.⁴⁶

COST SAVINGS

Better educational outcomes for students save the public money as well, which policymakers can then redirect toward other priorities. With higher earnings and greater civic and community engagement from more highly educated students, governments need to spend less on prisons and welfare. The RAND Corporation estimates that the net benefit of turning a U.S.-born male who is a high school dropout into a high school graduate is somewhere between \$68,000 and \$179,000 as a result of savings in social programs and incarceration costs. Meanwhile, the net savings for turning a U.S.-born female who is a high school dropout into a high school graduate is approximately \$72,000 to \$92,000.⁴⁷

BEYOND DOLLARS AND CENTS

Alongside contributing financially to their local economies, citizens who achieve higher levels of education are also more likely to vote, volunteer, and be active members of their communities. Drawing on data from the 2012 presidential election, researchers found that voting rates increased as education increased, across all age groups.⁴⁸

Most important, creating better schools creates a virtuous cycle that produces more and better outcomes with each generation. Studies show that more highly educated mothers spend more time actively caring for their children, and in ways that create a lasting impact.⁴⁹ For example, one study found that as a mother's education level increased, so did her children's math scores.⁵⁰

The takeaway is clear: Improving public schools in Clark County is good for students and good for the community. Moreover, in an increasingly competitive economic climate where the wounds of recession are still fresh, the county and the state cannot afford to stand idle and let business go elsewhere.

Creating better schools creates a virtuous cycle that produces more and better outcomes with each generation.

3

How Clark County Can Create More High-Quality Public Charter Schools

The data make two things abundantly clear. Clark County needs significantly more high-quality school options to meet the needs of a diverse—and growing—student population. If the county fails to meet those needs, the consequences will be severe for both students and the broader community.

So where to start?

Everyone involved must first believe that Clark County *can* offer *all* its children a great public education: Zip code, wealth, or the language spoken at home does not determine whether a child can learn.

Then the community and its leaders must take decisive action, making the best use of resources and creating the will to ensure a better future for Clark County and its children.

State Policy Changes Offer Promising Start

Following Nevada state legislation passed in 2013 and 2015 creating state policies that support the growth of high-quality charter schools, Nevada now has an accountability framework for both charter schools and their authorizers.⁵¹ The 2015 legislation also established a new Achievement School District (ASD) that has the authority to take over the lowest-performing traditional district schools from across the state and work with charter operators to run and transform them.⁵² Additionally, Nevada lawmakers voted to award \$5 million in matching funds to a new “harbormaster” charged with recruiting both proven charter operators and promising school leaders to open new charter schools to serve students in poverty. Charter management organizations (CMOs) with a track record of success have access to a streamlined application process as they open additional charter schools.⁵³ And legislative changes to special education funding aim to make the process more transparent, predictable, and fair.⁵⁴

As a result of these measures and others, in 2015 Nevada garnered the top spot on the National Association for Charter School Authorizers’ (NACSA) annual ranking of the quality of state laws governing charter school accessibility, autonomy, and accountability.⁵⁵ And it ranked eighth of 43 jurisdictions on the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools’ (NAPCS) annual assessment of state charter laws, an improvement of six spots over 2014.⁵⁶

Improving Access to Resources

These policy changes represent an important start, though they are just that—a start. Many communities around the country offer examples that should inspire the Silver State to do more. A number of cities—Indianapolis, Memphis, Miami, Nashville, and San Antonio to name a few—have sought to recruit, create anew, and, ultimately, grow high-performing charter networks as a way to increase the number of high-quality public school options available to students.

The experiences of these cities—as chronicled in case studies and dozens of interviews with high-performing charter operators, charter funders, and city-based education orga-

Everyone involved must first believe that Clark County *can* offer *all* its children a great public education.

nizations capturing lessons from U.S. communities committed to expanding high-quality charter schools—consistently highlight four critical supports necessary to attract and sustain high-quality charter organizations:⁵⁷

1. Start-up funding as charter schools open in new places or expand
2. Predictable and sustainable per-pupil funding from public sources
3. Access to free or low-cost facilities
4. An ample supply of excellent teachers and leaders.

Fortunately for Clark County, new supports for charter school start-ups and expansion have recently emerged. Per the 2015 legislation noted earlier, Nevada awarded its first harbormaster grant to Opportunity 180, a nonprofit founded in 2015 to help 25,000 Clark County students attend great urban schools in the next 10 years. In addition to \$5 million in state funding, Opportunity 180 is raising \$5 million in matching funds to recruit and develop high-performing charter operators to open new schools.

Several new sources of public funding are also now available to charter operators in Nevada:

- *State funds.* In addition to the \$5 million in harbormaster funding (plus another \$5 million in matching funding), charters will have access to new categorical funds targeting specific student groups. Charters are eligible to apply for and receive funding targeting low-income students,⁵⁸ students with limited English proficiency,⁵⁹ kindergarten students enrolled in full-day programs,⁶⁰ and students struggling to read by third grade.⁶¹
- *Federal funds.* In 2015, Nevada received its first installment of a three-year, \$16 million federal Charter Schools Program grant.⁶² The state plans to use the award to: increase the number of high-quality charter schools, especially those serving students at the greatest risk of failing to meet state academic standards; improve student achievement in Nevada charter schools; promote the dissemination of best practices; and strengthen the overall quality of charter authorizations across the state.⁶³

These new funding sources will undoubtedly support the start-up and expansion of charter schools capable of supporting high student achievement. But the county would be in a much better position to recruit proven charter operators if it could offer three key resources as identified in dozens of interviews, case studies, and reports:⁶⁴

- competitive per-pupil public funding,
- access to free or low-cost facilities, and
- a ready supply of excellent teachers and leaders.

Why are these three important, and how do they relate to Clark County? Other communities provide insights.

PER-PUPIL FUNDING

Money alone does not guarantee charter success, but school operators of any kind must have enough money to keep the lights on, provide excellent teachers with a competitive salary, and offer students with special needs appropriate supports. Although many charter organizations tap into philanthropic support to fill funding gaps, they also expect that public funds can meet their basic needs.

Clark County must supplement new state and federal charter funding with competitive per-pupil public funding, access to free or low-cost facilities, and a ready supply of excellent teachers and leaders.

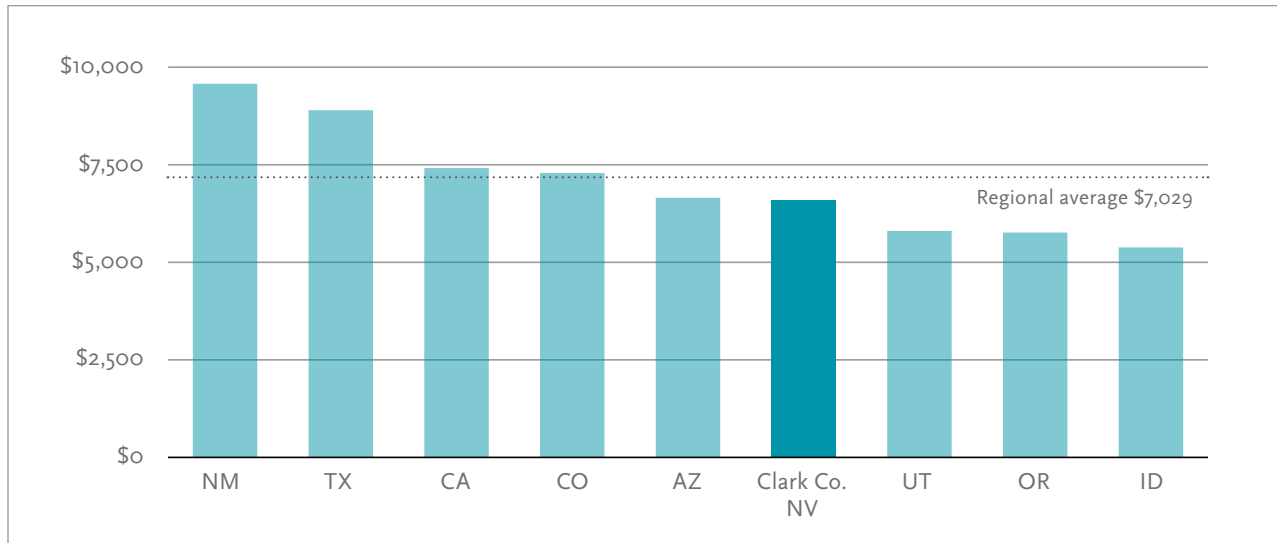


SMILE SAY PLEASE & THANK YOU
HEAR make music
DANCE LIKE CRAZY Sing loudly
BE A GOOD LISTENER Repeat
SHUGGLE work hard and teach
GIGGLE laugh often
DREAM BIG WORK HARD
GIVE BIG HUGS
MAKE MEMORIES

Vocabulary

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FIGURE 13. Non-Federal Public Revenue for Charter Schools in Select* States, 2014



*States selected for comparison include Western states neighboring Nevada that were included in a 2014 analysis of 2010–11 public education revenue. The table also includes Texas because it has several large charter markets that serve high percentages of ELL students, making it comparable to Clark County, and a state with which Nevada must compete to attract charter operators.

SOURCE: National figures from Batdorff, M., Maloney, L., May, J. F., Speakman, S. T., Wolf, P. J., & Cheng, A. (2014). *Charter school funding: Inequity expands*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas. Retrieved from <http://www.uaedreform.org/wp-content/uploads/charter-funding-inequity-expands.pdf>. Adjusted for inflation to reflect 2014 dollars. Clark County figure assumes all students are residents of Clark County. Figure based on Public Impact analysis of charter funding data presented in: Guinn Center for Policy Priorities. (2015). *Nevada K-12 education finance*. Las Vegas, NV. Guinn Center for Policy Priorities. Retrieved from <http://guinncenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Guinn-Center-K-12-Education-Finance-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

The State of Per-Pupil Funding for Clark County’s Public Charter Schools

Clark County charter schools receive approximately \$6,600 in non-federal public funds.⁶⁵ While charters do not necessarily require a particular dollar amount, \$6,600 is comparatively low. Nationally, the average charter school receives about \$7,800 in non-federal public funds.⁶⁶ That figure is lower for other western states—\$7,000—but still about \$400 per pupil (about 6 percent) above what county charters receive (see Figure 13).

Clark County is competing not only with nearby communities in surrounding states such as Houston or Los Angeles, but also with cities and counties across the country that are increasingly looking to charters to turn around failing schools and grow the number of high-quality public school options. Many factors influence where a charter network can be successful and whether a proven network will expand to a new site. But interviews with charter operators reinforce the connection between access to public funding and charter growth: Though the availability of public funding is not the only factor driving a charter operator’s decision to move to a new city or expand, it is a key factor.

So what is the bottom line? Unless Clark County can offer charter operators more competitive per-pupil funding, the best will likely pass on by.

Overcoming the Funding Obstacle

Policymakers can pursue at least three strategies to overcome the obstacles that low per-pupil funding poses to providing Clark County students with high-quality public charter school options:

Public funding is not the only factor driving a charter operator’s decision to move to a new city or expand, but it is a key factor.



Strategy 1. Make Funding Levels More Competitive

The most direct strategy to address low per-pupil funding is to increase funding levels. There are several ways to do so:

- The state legislature could vote to *increase per-pupil funding for all students* in both traditional district and charter schools. This option would require the state to raise additional funds or redirect other tax revenues toward K-12 education.⁶⁷
- The legislature could *increase funding for charter schools only*, to fill the funding gap between charter schools and traditional districts caused by charter schools not receiving local tax revenues—about \$500 per pupil. Again, the state could raise additional tax dollars or reallocate existing funds to do so.
- Alternatively, CCSD could *share local levy dollars with charter schools* since charter families also pay into those and taxpayers benefit from good schools, charter or district. Such an option might seem outlandish, but it is actually happening in Denver and Cleveland. Since 2013, Denver Public Schools (DPS) has shared a portion of local levy dollars with its charters, totaling more than \$13.5 million in 2014–15.⁶⁸ Similarly, as part of a historic property-tax levy that Cleveland taxpayers passed in 2012, the district agreed to share one mill (a tax rate equal to one-thousandth of assessed property value) with charters that “partner” with the district.⁶⁹

Strategy 2. Recruit Within Your Means

If the state or district is not able to increase charter funding, Nevada will need to focus on recruiting successful charter networks that are already working in states with similar funding levels. Consider San Antonio's recent charter growth. Since 2012, Choose to Succeed, a nonprofit tasked with creating 27,700 quality charter school seats by 2020, has recruited three proven charter school operators from outside of Texas—Basis, Great Hearts, and Carpe Diem.⁷⁰ Although charter funding in Texas is lower than the national average, all three charter networks hail from Arizona, where charter funding is even lower. Since the cost of living is not dramatically different, San Antonio offers these CMOs a funding boost compared to the Arizona budget to which they had been accustomed.

Strategy 3. Grow Your Own

Alternatively, Nevada could focus more energy on developing its own high-performing charter networks built to survive (and thrive) on available funding. For example, The Mind Trust (TMT), a nonprofit organization in Indianapolis working to inspire innovative education reform across the city, spent several years trying to recruit top CMOs from across the country. But they often heard the same story—funding levels were just too low in Indianapolis for CMOs to be successful there. In time, TMT shifted its approach to focus on identifying successful homegrown charter networks and supporting their expansion. In addition, TMT continues to encourage the development of new, innovative charter models via its charter school incubator.


Similarly, the Tennessee Charter School Incubator's \$14 million investment enticed and supported more than a dozen school leaders to open 14 charter schools and one district-run school between 2012 and 2015.⁷¹

Building Excellent Schools (BES), a Boston-based organization that trains promising leaders to open and lead urban charter schools throughout the country—including in conjunction with the Tennessee incubator—is playing the role of charter school incubator for Las Vegas. To date, however, just one BES fellow plans to open a school in Clark County.

ACCESS TO FACILITIES

Low per-pupil funding for charters exacerbates a conflated challenge: financing facilities. Traditional district schools can pass bond referendums to cover capital costs separate from and in addition to regular per-pupil funding. In contrast, charter schools must often secure their own facilities using regular per-pupil funds, or with the help of significant philanthropic dollars.

In most cases, building a new facility is off the table because charters lack both the capital to do so and the financial standing to obtain a reasonable loan (many lenders view charters as risky investments because authorizers must renew them every five to 10 years and they can be closed at any time). A number of organizations either provide charter schools with a free or low-cost facility or help charters access funds to build or renovate a facility. For example, the Turner-Agassi Charter School Facilities Fund works with charters opening at full enrollment to finance school facilities. These organizations serve just a small percentage of all charter schools, however, and often still require the charter school to pay back a loan from its regular operating budget.



Consequently charter schools typically rent space. Studies show, however, that those spaces are often smaller than traditional district schools, lack kitchens and other amenities (such as libraries and sports fields), and require charters to spend significant operating dollars.⁷² The Charter Schools Facilities Initiative has researched the cost and condition of charter facilities in 14 states and found that, on average, charters spend up to 13.7 percent of their operating budget on facilities—money traditional district schools can put toward instruction.⁷³

The State of Charter Facilities in Clark County

Clark County is no exception to these charter facility trends. Data on the facility costs for SPCSA-authorized charters operating in Clark County show that just two owned their facility in 2014–15. On average, the remaining state-authorized brick-and-mortar charter schools operating in Clark County spent approximately \$900 per pupil on rent, accounting for about 12 percent of their operating budgets.⁷⁴

In 2013, the legislature approved the governor’s recommendation to make facilities capital more accessible to charters by allocating \$750,000 to a revolving loan account for charter schools. By statute, loans to charter schools from that account are capped at \$200,000 per school,⁷⁵ meaning only a few charters will benefit at a time. And while that fund may help charters finance basic start-up expenses or secure a loan for additional funds, it still fails to address the main problem, which is that charters must divert significant operating dollars to pay for facilities.

More promising is the ASD law that gives charter operators that take over failing ASD schools free access to that school building (though like traditional district schools, those charters will have to pay for utilities and regular maintenance). But this benefit will extend only to a small group of charter schools⁷⁶ and will not help the same high-performing CMOs secure facilities to open new charter schools outside of the ASD. Recognizing the facilities challenges that charters face in Clark County, Las Vegas’ new harbormaster, Opportunity 180, has prioritized identifying ways to garner philanthropic support to help charters secure facilities. But, as other communities have experienced, philanthropic funds are finite and cannot cover facilities for all expanding charters.

Overcoming the Facilities Obstacle

Addressing the facilities challenge will require that charters receive additional funding with which to pay for a facility, or access to existing or new public school facilities.

Strategy 4. Provide Facilities Funding

Nevada could follow the example of several states and the District of Columbia by providing charter schools with some sort of per-pupil facilities funding. In Washington, D.C., for example, all charter schools receive about \$3,000 per pupil as a facilities allowance. Elsewhere, facilities funding is conditional. In California, for instance, the state provides up to \$750 per pupil in lease reimbursement for charter schools in which at least 70 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.⁷⁷ Similarly, the Guinn Center, a nonprofit think tank that addresses policy challenges facing Nevada, has recommended that the Silver State consider new charter facilities funding options, such as requiring school districts to set aside a proportionate share of new bond proceeds for charter schools or creating a state funding mechanism to support charter school facilities financing.⁷⁸



Strategy 5. Include Public Charters in the Siting Process for New CCSD Buildings

Another option is to give qualifying charters access to new district facilities as they become available. Denver is one of the only districts to pursue this route. Charters that have a proven track record and are willing to open in a priority neighborhood (as determined by the district) can lease a facility from the district at cost. As a result, 86 percent of Denver charters were located in Denver Public Schools-owned facilities in 2014–15. This arrangement offers both charters and the district a win; charters receive access to a low-cost facility, while the district is able to share the daunting task of offering students a high-quality school option in every corner of the city.

A TEACHER AND LEADER PIPELINE

Resources are not limited to money. Research shows time and again that access to an excellent teacher is the most important resource schools can offer students.⁷⁹ Students who receive instruction from the best teachers consistently demonstrate a year and a half worth of growth in just one academic year. Meanwhile, the impact that effective school leaders have is also an important predictor of student success.⁸⁰ Approximately one-fourth of a school's impact on academic achievement can be attributed to the school leader. The problem facing all schools is that excellent teachers and leaders are often in short supply.

The State of Education Talent in Clark County

Clark County desperately needs more great teachers and leaders. At the beginning of the 2015–16 school year, CCSD had managed to fill only two-thirds of the teacher positions left vacant at the end of the previous school year.⁸¹ As a result, nearly 800 teacher positions were still empty⁸² despite a range of marketing and recruitment efforts that included red capes for “superhero” teachers and the district superintendent zip-lining down Fremont Street, in the heart of Las Vegas’ casino corridor.⁸³

Several factors contribute to the shortage. The 2008 recession led to multiple years of teacher layoffs even as student enrollment continued to increase; the recession also led to school board decisions that froze teacher salaries for more than eight years.⁸⁴ The recession also led to budget cuts within the Nevada university system and the elimination or scaling back of many higher education teacher and principal programs, producing fewer teachers. Over time, teacher layoffs and salary freezes also caused many would-be teachers to think twice about entering the profession. The culminating effect of these events has created a teacher shortage so severe that it led Governor Sandoval to declare an emergency measure allowing schools with vacancies to hire out-of-state teachers who have not yet attained a local license.⁸⁵

However, the state’s prospects for increasing its teacher supply are improving. A \$10 million state “Great Teaching and Leading Fund” established in 2011 by the Nevada legislature will allow Teach for America and TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project), national teacher training programs, to each prepare 100 teachers to work in Clark County schools.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, the Teach Nevada Scholarship program, also established in 2015 legislation, will fund students pursuing teaching degrees or alternative licensure at state colleges or universities and boost base pay by up to \$5,000 for new teachers who teach at a Title I or 1- or 2-star school under the state’s school performance framework.⁸⁷



Efforts to improve the school leader supply are also underway. In addition to training that the Public Education Foundation has provided to leaders since 1991, new programs will add capacity and create diversity in leadership development options. Beginning in spring 2015, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas restarted an educational leadership master's program to prepare future principals to work in urban schools and communities.⁸⁸ BES has also committed to developing leaders who can start 21 new schools in Nevada by 2025.

Overcoming the Talent Obstacle

Clark County's teacher shortage has inspired various efforts to recruit and train teachers, many of which are immediately helpful. However, all of the measures described thus far fail to systematically change the way schools reward and use education talent to ensure that students have access to great teachers and leaders year after year. The following two strategies can ensure a strong return on investment in teacher recruitment and training efforts by enticing excellent teachers to stay in the profession and fully using the talents of the great educators schools already have or are able to recruit. Unlike the other recommendations in this report, however, much of this work must happen at the school level. But state government, harbor masters, and philanthropists should use their resources to encourage schools to extend the reach of their best teachers and leaders and provide them with meaningful career opportunities.

Strategy 6. Give Teachers an Opportunity to Grow and Reward Them for It

One way for Clark County to close, or at least lessen, its teacher shortage is to improve recruitment and retention, especially of the most effective teachers. According to cross-sector research, competitive pay, promotions and opportunities for advancement, and flexible and challenging work roles are all key strategies to get and keep high performers.⁸⁹ Yet we see relatively little of them in education.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Project L.I.F.T.—a public-private partnership operating as one of five learning communities (or feeder zones) in the school district—is bucking the norm by recruiting teachers for new, more demanding roles, and offering those teachers substantially and sustainably increased pay. These schools serve primarily low-income students and had been labeled “hard to staff.” However, when they offered excellent teachers supplements of at least 20 percent (about \$9,000 and rising to \$20,000) to extend their reach, they received more than 700 applications for 26 positions.⁹⁰

But this “Opportunity Culture” initiative in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and other districts across six states has demonstrated that pay is just one element that draws teachers to these schools. Teacher surveys and interviews reinforce decades of research: Great teachers—and teachers aspiring to be great—want opportunities for career advancement, genuine development opportunities, and openings to have a greater impact. Schools everywhere would benefit if they could offer those conditions.⁹¹

Some high-quality CMOs have incorporated teacher career pathways into their school models as well. For example, Achievement First has its teachers systematically progress through five career stages (intern, new teacher, teacher, distinguished teacher, and master teacher) with increasing compensation, recognition, and professional growth opportunities at each stage commensurate with teachers' increasing effectiveness, measured by student outcomes and teacher inputs.⁹²





Strategy 7. Invest in Strategies that Fully Use Existing Talent

Most schools, district and charter, use the same basic school model. One teacher teaches one class regardless of whether that teacher is the best teacher in the school or the worst. As a result, school leaders are constantly trying to find a great teacher to lead every classroom. And the same pattern holds true for districts or charter networks in search of excellent school leaders.

Given the demand, we will likely never be able to place a great teacher in every classroom in this country, nor a great leader at every school, if we stick with traditional staffing models. Certainly, policymakers ought to focus educator training programs toward that goal. But in the short term, they will need to accept that demand will always outstrip supply. That does not mean giving up on the goal of giving every student access to a great education, however. Rather, the education sector needs to implement creative solutions to more effectively use its available talent.

The Opportunity Culture model provides one example of the creative thinking necessary to ensure that an excellent teacher reaches every classroom. At Opportunity Culture schools, the best teachers fill new roles that allow them to reach more students (without requiring class-size increases). For example, a multi-classroom leader continues to teach while working collaboratively with a team of developing and solid teachers, both coaching them and taking formal accountability for the learning of all students on the team. Rather than reaching just one “class” of students, the multi-classroom leader reaches all of the students her team teaches. Equally important is the fact that the stipends these multi-classroom leaders receive—as much as \$20,000 in one district so far—do not require additional funding. Instead, school teams redesign the way they use people, time, and resources to free up and redirect available funds.

Other innovations offer solutions to the educator pipeline shortage as well. Since discovering that most charter schools follow traditional school models despite having great autonomy, The Mind Trust has worked to facilitate the development of new ideas that will revolutionize school design and help address educator supply and other challenges.⁹³ In 2016, The Mind Trust will launch the Charter School Design Challenge with the goal of identifying the nation’s most innovative social entrepreneurs and encouraging them to design transformational new charter school models that have never before been tried.⁹⁴

A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

All of the strategies outlined above target the same goal—granting excellent charter operators access to key resources so they will come to and thrive in Clark County. Although they may read like a menu of options, they actually represent three very different approaches.

Some—such as offering more competitive per-pupil funding and providing facilities funding—build on recent investments state legislators have already made, continuing the state’s momentum and offering the most immediate results. Including charters in the siting process for new CCSD buildings reflects another approach that would knit charters into a larger public school infrastructure. Examples from cities such as Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and Cleveland, where charters enroll at least a third of public school students, demonstrate the need for charters and districts to coordinate their efforts to ensure that all students are well served, something that is much easier to do proactively when the charter sector is still relatively small, rather than retrofitting a solution later.⁹⁵ Another




group of strategies, including developing new school models that better use existing teaching talent and offering career pathways to teachers, represent investments in innovations. The payoff for these innovations can be substantial, but will likely take time as education leaders and policymakers learn what works and refine implementation.

None of these approaches—building on recent investments, knitting charters into a larger public school infrastructure, or investing in innovation—is likely to achieve optimal results on its own. Rather, Clark County’s education leaders would be well advised to pursue all three, as some are best suited to address immediate needs, while others address the root of the challenge over time. As a diversified investment portfolio yields steady and strong returns, the best education outcomes for Clark County students will likely come from pursuing a diverse set of strategies and thinking about what will best serve the county tomorrow, as well as 50 years from tomorrow.

Creating the Will

The need for more and better resources in education is completely predictable. It exists not only in Clark County, but in cities, counties, and states across the country. Why? Because resources are limited, so funding new strategies requires policymakers either to reallocate existing resources, creating winners and losers, or raise taxes, which is seldom popular. In either scenario, strong political will for change is a key ingredient, but often in short supply.

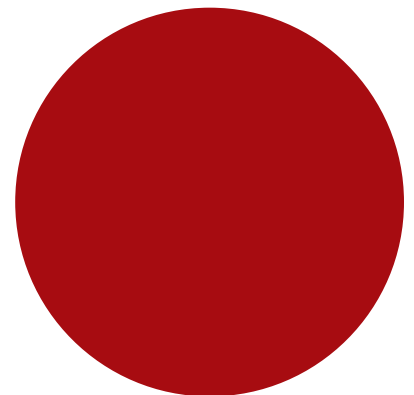
Lessons from other states suggest that charter school growth must be grounded in community demand for better educational options and outcomes.⁹⁶ “Grasstops” support from



state and local elected officials and philanthropic funders generally either heralds or reflects community demand for better school options. But for charter school growth to be sustained and weather the opposition that frequently accompanies an expanding charter sector, community members, including parents, teachers, and students must also lead and encourage continuing and consistent “grassroots” support.

Observers interviewed for this report suggest that conversations about growing the supply of great public schools are largely just starting. Governor Sandoval and state legislators have jumpstarted efforts by demonstrating strong leadership in support of school reform at the state level. The bill creating the ASD requires that the turnaround district consider input from community members before selecting a school into the ASD,⁹⁷ and accordingly, the ASD is developing a community engagement plan. And Clark County’s new harbor-master, Opportunity 180, has identified promoting advocacy for more high-quality education options for Clark County students as one of its four priorities.

Certainly, Clark County has much work to do on community engagement. Prescribing a strategy for it in Clark County is beyond the focus of this report. However, the experiences of other states, including Louisiana, New Jersey, and Tennessee, demonstrate that community engagement and advocacy cannot be an afterthought.⁹⁸ Clark County must be thoughtful and proactive in developing strategies that help create the will for change.





Next Steps for Clark County



No observer of Clark County schools could deny the need for more high-quality school options, especially in its poorest communities. Nevada’s educational outcomes consistently rank among the worst in the nation, and strong schools offer the state and county the best hope for a productive citizenry, strong economy, and optimal quality of life for generations to come.

Excellent charter schools offer one tool for improving education options, and the Silver State has recently taken several steps to make it easier and more attractive for the best charter operators to open shop and grow in Nevada. But much more work remains to ensure that charter schools capable of preparing students for college and successful careers have access to the critical resources they need to grow—namely, competitive per-pupil funding, access to free or low-cost facilities, and a ready supply of excellent teachers and leaders.

Accomplishing those things will demand that all members of the Clark County community take action.

- State and local education agencies need to follow through on policies already in motion by ensuring that new high-quality charters have access to the resources they need to be successful and holding chronically low-performing charters accountable for student outcomes.
- Legislators and other policymakers need to support a mix of initiatives that not only provide immediate relief to the challenges charters face today, but also emphasize sustainability and a role for charters over the long term.
- Education advocates, including teachers, parents, and students, need to engage the public and stoke its will to do the hard work necessary.

- Philanthropy and business leaders need to catalyze both the grassroots and the grass-tops, using their dollars to illuminate critical issues, and amplifying the demand for better education options.

Nevada has taken many of the first difficult steps to a better education system, but has much more to accomplish. Creating more schools that prepare students for a productive future is within Clark County's reach so long as community members build on the momentum that has started.

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11. More specifically, all authorizers must now: use a team of knowledgeable reviewers to evaluate charter applications; use and develop charter contracts and performance frameworks with all of their schools; use a separate renewal application that focuses on past performance; use a default closure provision for persistently failing charter schools; and publish annual reports on the performance of the schools in their portfolios. Authorizers may also be subject to sanctions if they fail to adhere to authorizing standards. As a result of these changes, the National Association of Charter School Authorizers awarded Nevada a perfect score for its charter accountability laws in 2015. Adapted from: NACSA. (2015). *State policy analysis: NV case study in brief*. Chicago, IL: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.qualitycharters.org/research-policies/archive/state-policy-analysis-nv-case-study/>
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16. We used the Nevada School Performance Framework (NSPF) to identify schools. NSPF breaks schools down by grade-level (pre-K–5, 6–8, 9–12). In several cases (usually district schools serving a special population or charter schools), a secondary school serving grades 6–12 was therefore reported as two separate schools. As a result, our school count for Clark County is greater than the actual number of campuses. In addition, all elementary, middle, and high school grades served by a particular charter network count as one school, even if students are enrolled across several campuses.

17. Charter figures include brick-and-mortar charters and virtual charters. Three statewide virtual charter schools—Beacon Academy, Nevada Virtual Academy, and Nevada Connections Academy—enroll students throughout Nevada. Our charter count includes only those students residing in Clark County (per a document the SPCSA shared). Since we do not have student-level data, however, any other data related to these schools (e.g., demographics, performance) use schoolwide averages.

18. Overall, Clark County students were demographically similar to students statewide, though CCSD tended to serve slightly higher percentages of high-need students. See the table below for details.

	White	Hispanic	Black	FRL	ELL	IEP
Nevada	36.0%	40.6%	9.9%	53.0%	15.0%	11.5%
Clark County	29.8%	42.9%	12.7%	55.3%	15.7%	10.9%

19. The high school framework also combines status and growth into a single indicator.

20. For example, schools routinely earned five stars even though less than 70 percent of students were proficient in either or both math and reading because the school performed strongly on other metrics (e.g. growth, gap closure)

21. The state took a “pause” from this process in 2014–15 to allow schools to adjust to the state’s new standardized tests, hence our focus on 2013–14 ratings. In 2013–14, 44 schools did not receive a rating. In nearly all of these instances, the school in question served a special population (e.g. over-age students, students residing in a detention facility, etc.). In instances where the same school campus served multiple grade levels (elementary, middle, and/or high), the NDE awarded a star rating for each of the grade levels served. In effect, then, the state awarded some schools with just one campus (e.g. Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy) multiple ratings. At the same time, the NDE awarded just one-star rating for all campuses in a charter network serving the same grade levels. For example, data on all five Somerset Academy campuses are combined and reported only as elementary, middle, and high.

22. The distribution of star ratings in Clark County looked similar to the distribution for schools statewide. See the table below for details.

	1 Star	2 Stars	3 Stars	4 Stars	5 Stars
Nevada	4.4%	20.5%	44.4%	15.0%	15.6%
Clark County	4.1%	23.5%	40.5%	14.9%	17.0%

23. Of the 10 virtual charter schools included in the state accountability system (operated by four virtual charter providers), four schools received two stars, five received three stars, and one received four stars. On average, virtual charter schools received 2.64 stars, compared with the 3.19 star average of all brick-and-mortar charter schools. However, virtual schools performed slightly better than CCSD brick-and-mortar charter schools, which received 2.50 stars on average. These data are consistent with the conclusion that student poverty is highly correlated with school performance.

24. The one exception was graduation, where district schools outperformed charters—72 percent vs. 54 percent.

25. These are zip codes 89169, 89124, and 89046.
26. CCSD reserves up to 25 percent of seats in magnet schools for neighborhood students. To qualify for this neighborhood preference, students must live in the school's geographic preference area as established by the CCSD Demographics and Zoning Department and indicate that on the application. If too many neighborhood students request enrollment in a nearby magnet school, the district randomly selects among qualifying students to fill those seats. Email communication with Office of Magnet Schools and Career Technical Academies, CCSD, June 15, 2016.
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51. Nevada law requires the incorporation of performance frameworks into charter contracts (NRS 386.527(1)(a)) and state review of charter authorizers at least once every three years (NRS 386.540). In addition, amendments in 2015 refined the automatic closure requirements enacted in 2013. Nevada law now requires automatic revocation of a charter or termination of a charter contract of schools that receive the state's lowest accountability rating for three of five years (beginning with 2015-16 ratings) but gives authorizers new authority to reconstitute or replace a failing school's governing board, and to recruit another charter school to replace or take over a failing or closed school. Nevada Senate Bill 509. (2015). Retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/NV/text/SB509/2015>. Notably, before January 2016, no Nevada charter authorizer had ever closed a school or revoked a charter. The SPCSA ordered its first charter school closure in January 2016: Silver State Charter School is to close by the end of the school year due to fiscal mismanagement. See: Dornan, G. (2016, January 5). State orders Carson City's Silver State Charter School to close at end of school year. *Nevada Appeal*. Retrieved from <http://www.nevadaappeal.com/news/19990862-113/state-orders-carson-citys-silver-state-charter-school#>.

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60. Nevada Senate Bill 515 (2015) (retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/NV/research/SB515/2015>) allocated funding for expansion of free kindergarten to all public schools.
61. Nevada Senate Bill 391 (2015) (retrieved from <https://legiscan.com/NV/research/SB391/2015>) requires schools to develop a literacy plan, hire a reading specialist, and, by the 2019 school year, retain students after third grade if they are not reading at grade level.
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