

Clearing the Air

An Analysis of the Federal Charter Schools Program

Recommendations for the Federal Charter Schools Program

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What is the CSP?

The federal Charter Schools Program (CSP) is a discretionary grant program authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act and run by the U.S. Department of Education. It provides federal resources to create, replicate, and support high-quality public charter schools. In Fiscal Year 2020, the CSP invested nearly \$440 million into the charter sector.

Since its creation nearly 25 years ago, the CSP has been critical to the creation and growth of charter schools across the country, and it has evolved to meet the changing needs of charter schools and the families they serve. As the program enters a new decade, the CSP must continue to evolve. There are several opportunities to improve how the program can meet the needs of the charter sector.

This brief offers federal policymakers several recommendations to improve the CSP and ensure that it continues to be a high-impact program for students and communities in the coming years. To learn more about the CSP and its impact, visit Bellwether's [website](#).



To view the accompanying full-length report, visit [Bellwether's website](#).

How can policymakers strengthen the CSP?

The CSP has had a significant impact on students and families. It has evolved with the charter sector, focused resources on high-need students, shored up its oversight of federal dollars, and incentivized state policy changes. Nonetheless, as policymakers look to the future of the CSP, there are several opportunities for them to ensure it maintains and expands its ability to support the growth of charter schools and the families and communities those schools serve:

1 Continue to support charter schools' access to facilities, with an emphasis on incentivizing per-pupil or other facilities allocations at the state level. Access to facilities continues to be a pressing area of concern for charter schools. Policymakers should:

- Increase the annual appropriation to the Credit Enhancement and State Charter School Facilities Incentive Grant (SFIG) programs
- Incentivize Credit Enhancement grantees to invest in new-start, independent, and rural charter schools
- Revise the SFIG program by broadening eligibility to a wider variety of state-level facilities policies and by making funds available to states immediately upon adoption of a qualifying state policy

2 Continue to support charter school models that serve high-need student populations. The CSP already supports some of the nation's highest-need students. To expand its ability to do so, policymakers should:

- Retain the CSP's focus on low-income students and communities as well as newer priorities around serving rural and Native American students
- Encourage charter schools to implement programs to support special student populations, by creating absolute or competitive priorities for schools serving students with disabilities or those who are experiencing homelessness or are in foster care
- Run a National Dissemination grant competition to learn from schools that are effectively serving students with disabilities, or those who are experiencing homelessness or are in foster care

3 Find new ways to address barriers to equitable access, including enrollment processes and transportation. The CSP can be a lever to incentivize state policymakers and support charter schools to address barriers to access, such as enrollment processes and transportation. Policymakers should:

- Run a National Dissemination grant competition to help identify, disseminate, and implement best practices related to equitable enrollment and transportation
- Update the competitive priorities for the State Entities program to incentivize state policymakers to better address one or both of these challenges in state law

4 Assert and protect innovation as a central goal of the CSP. Policymakers must consider whether fostering innovation is truly a central aim of the CSP and, if it is, make a compelling case for why. Policymakers should:

- Ensure innovation informs the design of each of the CSP’s subprograms
- Use the National Dissemination program to support research and evaluation of promising innovative practices and disseminate lessons learned
- Make the case for innovation to CSP stakeholders

5 Better measure, capture, and communicate the CSP’s impact. CSP grantees are held to the same, or in some cases higher, expectations for reporting, data collection, and monitoring as grantees of other Department of Education programs. Even so, the Department of Education lacks the data it needs to put forward a compelling case for its vision of the CSP, and the CSP’s impact on students and families. Policymakers should:

- Codify the vision for the CSP and quantify the impact it hopes to have on schools and students
- Identify the data necessary to help assess that impact (and the data that are unnecessary) and implement processes to collect, analyze, and report those data so that policymakers, researchers, and other stakeholders can more readily and accurately assess its success

Continued investment in the CSP, alongside improving its approach to eliminating barriers and presenting a strong and clearly articulated vision, will ensure charter schools have the resources they need to provide families and communities across the country with high-quality public school options.