From 2000 to 2009, the number of children in public charter schools tripled from 340,000 to 1.4 million students. ¹ Charter schools are fast becoming an alternative to traditional public schools for many children in the U.S. Gaining access to a charter school is often highly sought after, especially for families living in areas where the traditional public schools are not desirable. For these families, public charter schools are seen as the best option for a better future for their child. A result of this is that many charter schools have to hold a lottery for entrance to their schools and they still have lengthy waiting lists. While on the surface, charter schools appear to be the solution to many problems in the traditional public school system, data shows that charter schools are actually not performing as well as many would like to believe. In reality, charter schools are creating more problems and corruption in the public education system in America and as such are not serving their initial goals.

The initial idea for charter public schools came about in the late 1980’s by Ray Budde and Albert Shanker.² Albert Shanker believed that public education in America needed to be reformed and that one way to do so was to create choice when it came to public education. His answer to this was to create charter schools, which were a part of the public education system and therefore would remain free of cost to American families. The initial ideas surrounding charter schools were that they would be autonomous from federal, state, and local regulations and therefore could exercise more freedom about how to run the school and the curriculum. Also, these charter schools

¹ The National Center for Education Statistics (nces.ed.gov) compiles information on public education in America and specifically has data related to public charter schools. ² Ray Budde was a professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and Albert Shanker was the President of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974-1997. http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/myth-charter-schools/?pagination=false&printpage=true.
would be held accountable for student and teacher performance and as such, if the
schools were not meeting their own standards, then the school would close.

Charter schools can and are created by almost anyone who wants to open up a
school. To open a charter school, those wishing to do so must submit a proposal stating
the core aspects of the school, the financial plan, the academic standards, and how it will
measure these standards. From this proposal, an authorizing body will determine if it will
“charter” the school. The authorizing body not only oversees the financial aspects of the
school but it also holds the school accountable to its academic standards and has the
power to close the school if these standards are not met. The authorizing body for
issuing charters varies from state to state. In some states, local universities or school
boards are authorizers, while in other states, for-profit companies are allowed to authorize
charters and oversee charter schools. As a result of this authorizing process and the
involvement of many for-profit companies, Albert Shanker turned against the charter
school idea in 1993. While he initially embraced the charter school movement, by 1993
he saw that this process was quickly becoming inundated with individuals looking to
make a profit off of public education in America.

Imagine Schools Inc. illustrates how for-profit companies have benefited and
made massive amounts of money off of the charter school movement. Specifically,

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3 Background information on the creation of public charter schools is outlined in Chapter
One of *Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program: Final Report*, which was
conducted for the U.S. Department of Education in 2004.

4 Diane Ravitch author of “The Myth of Charter Schools” writes about how public charter
schools came about through Mr. Shanker but that even the man who initiated the idea
eventually abandoned it due to issues with privatization.

http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/11/myth-charter-
schools/?pagination=false&printpage=true
looking at this company’s involvement in the St. Louis charter school community shows how often times these companies do not work for the best interest of the students.

Imagine Schools Inc. is the nation’s largest charter school operator and it operates six charter schools in St. Louis.\(^5\) This company, headquartered in Arlington, Virginia has made money off of opening charter schools through an elaborate scheme of real estate deals. In St. Louis, Imagine Schools Inc, purchases buildings for their schools, then sells that property to another company who then leases the building back to Imagine Schools Inc. But when the company leases the building back to Imagine, it does so at a much higher rate.\(^6\) This creates a situation, where Imagine Schools Inc., is both making money off the sale of the building and then ultimately using public funds, granted to them by their status as a charter school, to pay the excessively high rents on the school buildings.

What is even more upsetting is the test results for students who attend Imagine Schools. Imagine charter schools purport to be a better option than the traditional public schools for children in the St. Louis area. Unlike other charter schools, Imagine charter schools open big; meaning that when a school opens, every grade is filled with full

\(^5\) The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* featured a story on Imagine Schools Inc. on October 30, 2011. The article was entitled “Imagine Schools Real Estate Deal Fuels Company Growth” and was written by Elisa Croutch (http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/article_dbf9b959-0c73-586c-97e7-6fca3a729b39.html).

\(^6\) Ms. Croutch’s article in the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* goes into great detail as to how Imagine Schools Inc. goes about creating subsidiary companies that initially buy the land for the schools. Specifically in St. Louis, Imagine Schools Inc. has created a deal with a corporate real estate developer Samuel Glasser. Imagine Schools Inc. and Samuel Glasser work together to make money off of these real estate transactions that are completely unnecessary outside of creating profits for both companies. In the end, the people who end up paying are the taxpayers, as it is their money that goes to the charter schools funds to pay the arbitrarily high rent. According to this article, Imagine charter schools in St. Louis are paying a higher percentage of their budgets toward rent or mortgages than any other charter schools in the city.
classes. Most charter schools open with only a few grades and then grow over the years.

The six Imagine charter schools in St. Louis performed worse on the Missouri state standardized exams than any other school district in Missouri. Specifically, on the 2011 standardized tests, 5.4 percent of the Imagine school students passed the communication arts section and just 8.5 percent passed the math portion. These statistics are astonishing and quite frankly unacceptable from a school that is supposed to perform better than other public schools. In conjunction with these abysmal test scores, teacher turnover in the Imagine charter schools is a large problem. At one of their schools, Academic Success, just 15 of the 41 teachers from 2010 returned for the 2011 school year. Angela Howard, a former principle at the Imagine charter schools in St. Louis, sums up many of the issues with Imagine. She said, “It was frustration with the whole set up, to me, the red flag should be your test scores and how they’re worse than every other school in the state of Missouri.”

The problem of charter schools is not only in St. Louis; it was recently discussed in an article in the Chicago Tribune. It comes as no surprise that Chicago public schools are fraught with many problems, in particular, high poverty levels, high crime, and failing schools. As such it would seem that charter schools would be the cities answer to these difficult problems. But as this article points out, more than two dozen charter schools in the city of Chicago scored well short of the district averages on key standardized tests.

The charter schools included in this statistic come from some of the city’s most

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7 In 2007, Imagine opened four schools in St. Louis and enrolled 1,663 students from kindergarten through either grade.
8 Another St. Louis charter school that opened in 2007, City Garden Montessori, opened and had only 52 students in grades kindergarten through third grade.
prominent charter networks (UNO, Chicago International Charter Schools, University of Chicago and LEARN). As a result of these failures in charter public schools, two years ago lawmakers in Illinois approved a more thorough system to account for charter school performance. While this law was a step in the right direction to holding charter schools accountable for their performance, it does not solve the problem. It does make charter schools more transparent to the public but as discussed earlier, charter schools are opened and closed by authorizers and in order to close under performing charters, the authorizers must make the final call.

The Imagine charter schools and the article in the *Chicago Tribune* are excellent case studies to illustrate many of the problems that exist nationally in the charter school system. These same problems have been found in studies that were done on a larger scale. In 2009, the Center for Research Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University issued “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States: Executive Summary.” CREDO measured charter school performance by creating virtual twins. This meant that for each charter school student, a virtual twin was created in the traditional public school system. This virtual twin was based on students who match in demographics, English language proficiency and participation in special education or subsidized lunch programs. This study found that charter schools by and large are not outperforming traditional public schools like one would expect. The CREDO study showed that only 17 percent of charter schools provide superior educations to their students.

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10 Under 23 IL ADC 1.30, Illinois law makers proscribed that all charter schools must submit their test scores to the state and as a result will receive a report card which will be made public.

11 The CREDO (http://credo.stanford.edu) study worked with 15 states and the District of Columbia to consolidate longitudinal student-level achievement data for purposes of creating a national analysis of the impact of charter schooling on student learning gains.
students than traditional public schools. Almost half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are indistinguishable from traditional public schools, while a staggering 37 percent produce learning results that are worse than a traditional public school. These percentages are similar when it comes to student scores on tests for both math and reading comprehension.

Similar to the Imagine charter schools, the issues found in the CREDO study extended beyond test scores. This study also looked at the policy implications of charter schools and how they are founded, managed, and held accountable. According to CREDO there is an authorizing crisis currently in the charter public schools. As stated earlier, authorizers are supposed to be the governing units that hold charter schools accountable and ultimately close them down if standards are not met. Yet similar to what was going on with Imagine Schools Inc. in St. Louis, CREDO found that authorizers as a whole are unwilling to close underperforming charter schools. As a result of this, CREDO calls for a system in which the authorizer’s are transparent to the public in the hopes of holding them accountable.

The relationship between authorizers and charter schools is supposed to be similar to that of a diligent parent and a teenage child. The authorizer plays the role of the parent and the charter schools are the teenage child. Authorizers give charter schools autonomy and freedom to operate as individuals (schools) on a day-to-day basis. But the authorizer and the charter school first create expectations, goals, and standards to which the charter school must live up to. So long as the charter schools lives up to those standards and meet the goals, the job of the authorizer is relatively easy. But similar to when a teenager steps out of line, the authorizer is supposed to intervene and punish the charter school when it
does not meet its agreed upon standards. If both parties are doing their job as they are supposed to, the students attending the charter schools thrive and do well. But as discussed earlier, many charter schools are not doing their job and are not meeting the standards and goals that they have set for themselves. Similarly, most authorizers are not doing their job and being the diligent parent who oversees the charter schools.

The U.S. Department of Education conducted a study and created a final report on many aspects of the charter school system. Besides looking at the schools, it also looked at the authorizers and complied information regarding their role in this whole process. As this study noted more than half of authorizers reported difficulty in closing a school that was having performance problems. While authorizers have the ability to place sanctions on the school and ultimately close it, few have done so according to this study. Only 4 percent of authorizers had not renewed a school’s charter and 6 percent had ever revoked a school’s charter. In terms of formal and informal sanctions, most authorizers reported using this method only when the school had failed to meet issues with school finances. Furthermore, only one third of the authorizers reported having an office or staff that was devoted to overseeing the charter school activities and to provide support. These statistics are startling when put into context that authorizer’s main role is to oversee charter schools. Yet they themselves do not have the infrastructure to do so properly. Also, even when there is glaring evidence that these schools are underperforming and not meeting standards, authorizers are not enforcing the sanctions or closing the schools.

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12 The data in this study was collected on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education and the study in entitled “Evaluation of Public Charter Schools Program: Final Report.” The data was collected between 1999 and 2002.
Two recent documentaries featured charter schools and portrayed them as the solution to many problems in the traditional public school system. Davis Guggenheim’s *Waiting for “Superman”* and Madeleine Sackler’s *The Lottery*, both follow children living in New York City who are hoping to gain entry to a charter school through a lottery. Both of these films give statistics about how poorly traditional public schools perform in New York City and other urban settings and compare them to various charter schools. In New York City, the charter school of focus is the Harlem Success Academy, located in Harlem. There are multiple critiques of these films as they attempt to portray charter schools as the solution.

First, the name of Ms. Sackler’s film illustrates one of many problems with the charter public school system, as it currently exists; that it is a lottery. By law charter schools are required to hold a lottery when they have more applicants for spots available\(^\text{13}\). This lottery does not have to be public, but Harlem Success Academies, does so at a massive indoor track in New York, complete with balloons, exciting music, food, and refreshments. Hopeful parents and their young children file into this building desperately wanting to hear their names read off. Those names that are read attend Harlem Success Academies and those names that are not read, will remain on the waiting list and will attend traditional public schools. Not only is this lottery heartbreaking to watch, it is equally disturbing. Access to any form of an education should never be based on a lottery system where sheer luck determines the fate of a young innocent child.

\(^{13}\) Eva Moskowitz runs the Harlem Success Academies and in *The Lottery*, is featured often. She discusses that the lotteries for entrance to her schools are mandated by law but they do not have to be held publically. She goes on to say that Harlem Success Academies do a public lottery to show how many people want to attend their schools.
Sitting through this lottery is emotionally taxing on the movie-watcher, let alone the parents and children whose futures hang on the outcome of the reading.

Second, both of these films illustrate what the introduction of the charter school does to neighborhoods. The introduction of charter schools has led to a deep divide amongst those people living in the community. *The Lottery* films a local school board meeting, where the board is deciding whether to close a local school, PS194, and give the building over to Harlem Success 2. Supporters of both traditional public schools and charter schools are allowed to address the board as well as those people in attendance. Both sides are extremely passionate and obviously want their school to win out in the end. But what is interesting is that, despite appearing to be opposed, both sides passions start from the same premise and that is that they want their children to have access to a quality education. Every parent who spoke, regardless of their affiliation to charter or traditional public schools, wanted their child to receive the best education that they could. This notion was central and the most important throughout the meeting. Proponents of the charter school allege that all charter schools do are create a “choice” for parents and present another option for educating their children. If this were true, then all of the parents, even those parents who were opposing Harlem Success 2 gaining access to the building, would have chosen to have the best education for their child. But as *The Lottery* illustrates, charter schools do not present a “choice” for parents, they present a chance and a chance that is based upon pure luck. Since entrance to the better schools are based on a chance, those who do not get that chance become opposed to the charter schools merely because they were not lucky. In communities, like Harlem, where there are so many other issues dividing people, education should not be one of them.
Obviously, not all charter schools are underperforming and there are many charter schools that do an excellent job educating young children. For example, the Noble Street charter network here in Chicago does very well and educates many children coming from impoverished families. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, the Noble Street charter schools did score on par with state averages on the PSAE.\(^\text{14}\) Yet by and large charter schools are not fulfilling their role in the public school system that they were originally intended to. Charter public schools are not performing as well as they should be and are not outperforming traditional public schools on a mass level. Charter schools are creating divisions in communities that do not need to be divided but need to be brought together. Furthermore, the lack of accountability from authorizers and those overseeing and running the charter schools causes unnecessary corruption and privatization within the public school system.

In order to create true education reform in America, many changes need to be made to the current system. There are good aspects of both charter schools and traditional public schools that should be used and incorporated under this reform. But it is imperative that charter schools, in their current form, are not seen as the sole solution to education problems in America. There are far too many issues surrounding charter schools in their current state to allow them to be the only chance that a child in the public schools system has at attaining a quality education.