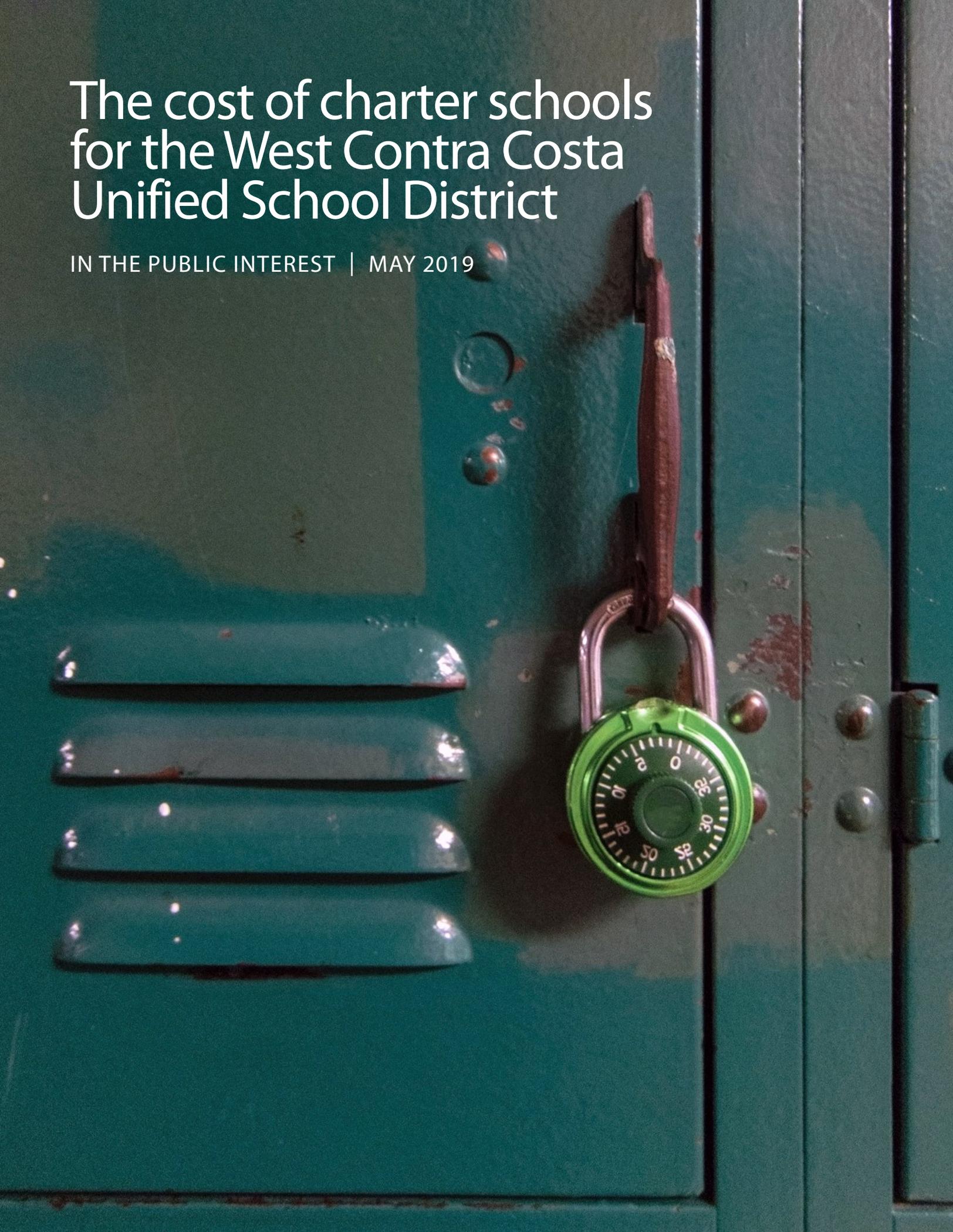


# The cost of charter schools for the West Contra Costa Unified School District

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*We would also like to thank Terry Lutz for designing this report.*

*Any errors or omissions in this report are the sole responsibility of In the Public Interest.*

## The cost of charter schools for the West Contra Costa Unified School District

Public school students in California's West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD) are paying dearly for privately managed charter schools they don't attend. Unchecked charter school expansion in recent years has added to the cost of educating students who attend traditional public schools. This has increased pressure on the district to cut spending on academic tutoring, services for English learners, and more.

Charter schools add \$27.9 million a year to WCCUSD's costs of running its own schools, this study finds. That's a net loss, after accounting for all savings realized by no longer educating the charter school students. As a result, the district has \$978 less in funding for each traditional public school student it serves.

This previously unmeasured cost is a conservative estimate. The district faces additional fiscal pressures due to charter schools that are too difficult to measure, such as the inequitable proportion of state funding it receives for educating high-needs students.

This report follows a 2018 study by In the Public Interest revealing the cost of charter schools for three other California districts.<sup>1</sup> It was produced by In the Public Interest and WCCUSD staff using a template created by Dr. Gordon Lafer and In the Public Interest based on the methodology described in *Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts* (page 23).

Like that study, this report's aim is not to debate the value of charter schools as educational policy or review all fiscal pressures facing districts but to document a cost that has previously gone unmeasured and ignored in California educational planning.

### California's charter school boom

California now has over 1,300 charter schools serving 653,000 students, or 10.6 percent of the state's K-12 students.<sup>2</sup> Many districts are facing budget deficits and spending cuts, but there is no easy way to calculate the statewide economic impact of charter schools because budgeting and local funding sources vary from district to district.

As of 2016-17, the school year for which the costs in this report were calculated, 28,518 students attended WCCUSD's traditional public schools, while 4,606 students—

14 percent of the total student population—were enrolled in 12 charter schools within the district’s physical boundaries. More recent data indicate an explosion in charter school enrollment. The proportion of WCCUSD students attending charter schools has more than doubled in four years, from 8 percent of the district total in the 2014-15 school year to 17 percent this year.

## The costs of charter schools

When students transfer to charter schools, funding for their education follows—but costs remain. Because charter schools pull students from multiple schools and grade levels, it’s rare that individual traditional public schools can reduce expenses enough to make up for the lost revenue. While WCCUSD schools have 14 percent fewer students to serve, a school cannot adjust expenses by, for example, cutting 14 percent of its principal, heating bill, parking lot paving, internet service, or building maintenance. The district also cannot proportionately cut administrative tasks such as bus route planning, teacher training, grant writing, and budget development. Because these central costs cannot be cut, districts are forced to cut services provided to traditional public school students.

Even if such cuts were possible, districts are legally responsible for serving all students in the community and must maintain adequate facilities to reabsorb students when inherently risky charter schools fail. During the 2016-17 school year alone, 51 California charter schools either closed or were converted into traditional public schools.<sup>3</sup>

To measure the cost of charter schools, we compared current finances with a hypothetical scenario in which current charter students had instead remained enrolled in traditional public schools. We determined how much additional revenue this would provide the district by calculating how much state and federal funding would be apportioned based on the demographic profile of the charter students who live within district boundaries.<sup>4</sup> We then calculated what expenses the district would have to add to accommodate the additional students—how many more books, supplies, teachers, and other staff would be needed.<sup>5</sup>

In essence, we calculated the revenue the district lost and the savings it realized by educating fewer students. The difference between those two amounts is the net annual cost of charter schools for WCCUSD: \$27.9 million.

This loss meant the budget for educating 28,518 traditional public school students in 2016-17 was reduced by \$978 per student.

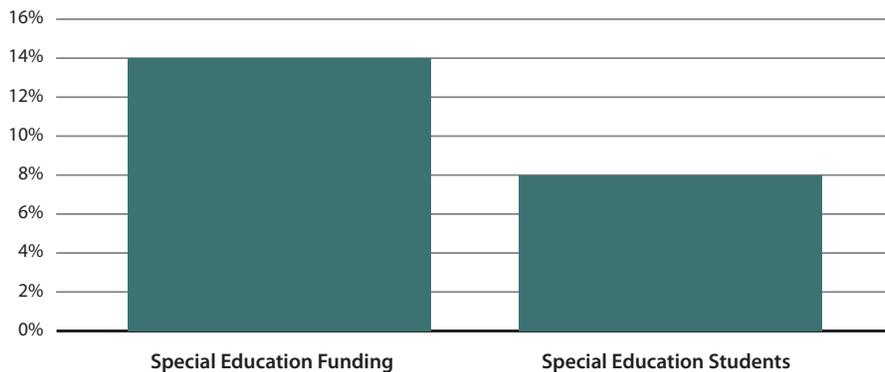
<b>Current net loss to WCCUSD</b>	<b>\$27,891,514</b>
Net loss per charter student	\$6,233.62
Net loss per current district student	\$978.03

## Special education and newcomer students

Our calculation—that charter schools impose a net cost on WCCUSD of \$27.9 million per year—is actually a conservative estimate. This is so partly because some of the costs created by charter school expansion are too difficult to measure. This includes the ways in which the charter school system may result in a sorting of students—with the neediest and most expensive to serve students in traditional public schools, but without the resources to serve them. For instance, while charter schools are required by law to accept any student who applies, they often serve fewer special needs students than do traditional public schools. California distributes special education funding to schools according to total attendance, regardless of the number of students with disabilities, yet charter schools in WCCUSD enroll a smaller proportion of special education students than the district’s traditional public schools. This leads to charter schools being relatively overpaid for those services. Traditional public schools end up with the highest-need students but without an equitable proportion of funding to serve them. While charter schools in WCCUSD served only 8 percent of the students with disabilities in the district, they received 14 percent of the special education funding.

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### Charter school share of special education funding and students



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The district also is required by law to accept refugee and other newly arrived children at any point in the school year, and must maintain space and staff for them, often without funding, beginning the first day of school. Charter schools aren’t required to accept refugee children in the middle of the year. WCCUSD’s traditional public schools now have 1,839 students considered “newcomers,” defined as students who were born outside the United States, have been enrolled in U.S. schools less than three years, and are English learners. The district receives no funding for 304 of those students because they arrived in October or later.<sup>6</sup> The district provides specialized classes, translation in eight languages, and other services that are required for newcomer students in elementary, middle, and high schools at a cost largely unrecognized in state funding formulas and borne entirely by the district.

## Impacts on students in West Contra Costa traditional public schools

Faced with a budget deficit, the WCCUSD Board of Education approved \$12.5 million in budget cuts in December 2018 eliminating 82 positions, closing an academic tutoring program, and cutting services for English learners.<sup>7</sup> The board continues to debate cutting the number and/or pay rate of police officers who serve as school resource officers.<sup>8</sup>

The cost of charter schools exacerbates the district's budgetary dilemma and amounts to millions of dollars of lost potential for WCCUSD students. If the district weren't losing \$27.9 million per year, it could have improved the education of students in many ways. School Board Member Consuelo Lara shared that the district could restore "the things that we've had to cut which include graduate tutors, counselors, nurses, and intervention programs for students. But what we need most of all are services for our most needy students such as those experiencing homelessness, in foster care, and suffering from trauma, and the full-service community schools programs that would outreach to parents and provide services they need for their children to be successful, including parenting classes, help with housing or food banks or employment training, and other ways we could reach out to the community with home visits. We do have a challenging population, but we know how to help and serve them when we have all our resources. And, of course we would make sure our teachers are well compensated, hire the most qualified, and provide needed professional development."<sup>9</sup>

## Policy recommendations

California law prevents school boards from considering budgetary or other impacts on the district when evaluating new charter school applications.<sup>10</sup> Based on this report, which was designed to produce conservative cost estimates, we strongly recommend reforming the law so that decisions to authorize charter schools include analysis of real financial impacts. The California Charter School Act must be amended to empower elected officials at the district, county, and state levels to balance the potential value of charter schools against the needs of traditional public school students.

Additionally, every district should produce an annual report assessing the economic impacts of charter school expansion in its community. This data and analysis will be crucial for effective stewardship of education budgets for all students.

## Methodology

To measure the fiscal impact of charter schools on West Contra Costa Unified School District (WCCUSD), district staff—with support from In the Public Interest—used a template created by Dr. Gordon Lafer and In the Public Interest based on the methodology described in detail in *Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts* (page 23).

The template tool is pre-loaded with all charter schools located in the district—whether they are authorized by the district or Contra Costa County—along with enrollment data both for those charter schools and for traditional public schools within the district. In addition, the template also uses Local Control Funding Formula data, together with data reported in charter schools' own financial reports, to determine how much revenue currently goes to charter schools that would otherwise be available to the district. All this information is provided automatically in the template, not by the district.

To complete the calculation using the template, district staff entered overall enrollment, and special education enrollment, for WCCUSD traditional and charter schools; the percent of charter students at each school who live within the boundaries of WCCUSD; current staffing levels and compensation of employee classifications which would—under current district practices—require increased staffing in order to serve additional students (specifically: Teachers, Assistant Principals, Counselors, Library Classified Staff, Campus Security Officers, Special Education Teachers, Special Education Instructional Assistants, Psychologists, Speech Therapists, and Occupational Therapists); and costs for books and supplies.

After district staff input this data, the template calculated how much additional revenue the increased enrollment of existing charter students into district schools would bring to the district, and how much it would cost to educate these additional students in traditional public schools. The difference between the revenue and cost is the net fiscal impact of charter schools on the district.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Lafer, Gordon, "Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts," May 2018. [https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI\\_Breaking\\_Point\\_May2018FINAL.pdf](https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI_Breaking_Point_May2018FINAL.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> California Department of Education, 2018-19 Enrollment Multi-Year Summary for Charter and Non-Charter Schools, <https://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/dqcensus/EnrCharterYears.aspx?cds=00&aggllevel=state&year=2018-19>.
- <sup>3</sup> California Department of Education, Charter School Closures, Fiscal Year 2016-17, <https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/ch/chclosures1617.asp>.
- <sup>4</sup> Charters may draw students from multiple districts. We used the charter schools' own reports of student residence to ensure our cost calculations were based only on those who would otherwise be the responsibility of WCCUSD.
- <sup>5</sup> Detailed methodology is provided in "Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts," by Dr. Gordon Lafer for In the Public Interest, May 2018. [https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI\\_Breaking\\_Point\\_May2018FINAL.pdf](https://www.inthepublicinterest.org/wp-content/uploads/ITPI_Breaking_Point_May2018FINAL.pdf)
- <sup>6</sup> Data provided by Nina Hochman, WCCUSD Multilingual and Multicultural Services/RAP Center.
- <sup>7</sup> "WCCUSD board approves \$12.5M in cuts," *The Richmond Standard*, December 14, 2018. <https://richmondstandard.com/richmond/2018/12/14/wccusd-board-approves-12-5m-in-cuts/>
- <sup>8</sup> Edward Booth, Richmond Confidential, *Graduate tutors still threatened by school district budget cuts*, March 22, 2019. <https://richmondconfidential.org/2019/03/22/graduate-tutors-still-threatened-by-school-district-budget-cuts/>
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with WCCUSD Board Member Consuelo Lara
- <sup>10</sup> California School Boards Association, *Charter Schools: A Manual for Governance Teams*, 2009.