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Music Education in Charter Schools: Informing Conversations with Research

Prior to pursuing my PhD, I was the founding music teacher at KIPP San Francisco College Prep, a free open-enrollment public charter school where I spent six years teaching. Upon entering higher education, I wanted to know more about charter schools, a complicated, controversial, and ever-evolving slice of the U.S. educational landscape, and I conducted a literature review to synthesize research regarding music education in charter schools (see DeAngelis, 2025).

Becoming aware of both challenges and opportunities presented by charter schools can help the music education community better support musical experiences of students and teachers in these schools, especially in New York State (NYS) where 351 charter schools serve approximately 180,000 students (New York State Education Department, 2025).

Additionally, because charter school students are more likely to be from racially minoritized groups, live in urban areas, and/or attend a school classified as “high poverty” (U.S. Department of Education, 2023), I believe it is important to consider charter school music programs when examining issues related to access, equity, and diversity in music education.

In this article, I will build on my literature review by highlighting findings specific to New York State and offering a research-based perspective to guide music teachers in navigating conversations and professional opportunities regarding charter schools.

Charter schools in New York State

In New York State, charter schools are “independent and autonomous public schools ... organized as not-for-profit education corporations and are subject to the terms of a contractual agreement, or charter, between the school and the chartering entity that approved the school’s application for a charter. Charter schools are non-sectarian, tuition-free [and] open to all students residing in New York State” (New York State Education Department, 2018, p. 1).

Prior to 2010, local boards of education could act as charter school authorizers; since then, new charter school applications must be approved by either the New York Board of Regents or State University of New York Board of Trustees.

Charter schools are often aligned with a pedagogical focus such as college preparatory, back-to-basics, or arts-based (Elpus, 2012; Aprile, 2019). Arts-based charter schools may use auditions in their admissions (Dell’Erba, 2019), whereas other types of charter schools determine enrollment by a randomized lottery. Charter schools may be independent entities or affiliated with a management organization. Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) are non-profit

organizations (e.g., KIPP, Achievement First) and Educational Management Organizations (EMOs) are for-profit organizations (e.g., K12 Inc., National Heritage Academies).

As of 2017, 51% of New York State’s charter schools were independent entities, 40% were managed by CMOs, and 9% were managed by EMOs (David, 2017). Of the approximately 180,000 students attending charter schools in the state, 142,000 are in New York City (NYC), 13,000 are in Buffalo, 8,000 are in Rochester, 6,000 are in Long Island, 6,000 are in Central New York, and 5,000 are in the Capital Region/Hudson Valley. In terms of demographics, 94% of students attending charter schools in New York are students of color, 51% are from low-income families, 17% are students with disabilities, and 9% are English-language learners (New York Charter School Association, 2025).

Music education in charter schools

Earlier this year, findings from my Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) Scoping review were published (see DeAngelis, 2025). A PRISMA Scoping review provides a systematic and transparent process for identifying, screening, and assessing articles for inclusion in a literature review.

The purpose of that study was to synthesize current research and identify gaps in the literature regarding music education in charter schools. I analyzed 27 research studies that met inclusion criteria and organized findings around the following themes:

- student experiences.
- teacher perspectives.
- curricular availability.
- pedagogy.
- equity-related issues.

In this section, I provide a brief overview of main themes, while highlighting findings specific to New York State.

Student experiences: Of the few studies that included student experiences in their findings, most were conducted at individual schools in which researchers explored innovative pedagogical approaches to music education, such as employing drum circles to foster community (Camilleri, 2002) and teaching cultural geography by integrating literacy and world music (Khalil, 2010).

Vasil (2013) focused exclusively on student perspectives within a charter school music program; however, research questions did not address experiences as they related to attending a charter school. These limited findings present an opportunity for future research to center perspectives of students in charter school music programs.

Teacher perspectives: Regarding teachers, researchers have examined licensure, demographics, experience, education, and teacher

effectiveness ratings. Martin and Browning (2023) surveyed 113 charter school music teachers, finding that 67% were licensed in music, 19% were licensed in subjects outside of music, and 13% were not licensed. In New York City, 75% of full-time music teachers at the 38 charter schools surveyed were fully certified and had degrees in music (Elpus, 2012).

Alternate routes to licensure also emerged as a common path to employment among charter school music educators (e.g., Dye, 2018; Martin, 2018), and charter school music teachers highlighted curricular autonomy, flexibility, and alignment with a school's mission as reasons to work in a charter school (Martin & Browning, 2023; Matthews & Koner, 2022). However, they also cautioned against potential drawbacks, noting feelings of isolation and fears over job security (Martin & Browning, 2023).

Curricular availability: More specific to New York State in terms of curricular availability, three studies examined charter school music education in New York City (Aprile, 2019; Aprile 2021; Elpus, 2012). Looking at elementary schools in the city, Aprile (2019) reported that 70% of charter schools offered curricular music programs.

Elpus's (2012) survey of 38 NYC charter schools, found that 76% reported offering curricular music. Aprile (2021) also found that in New York City the higher the poverty level of the charter school, the more likely the charter school was to offer music education. However, findings for the city stand in contrast to the availability of music courses at charter schools nationwide where 27% of charter schools in the U.S. reported offering at least one music course (Elpus, 2022).

Pedagogy and equity-related issues: Although Aprile (2019) and Elpus (2012) explored pedagogical foci of charter schools in New York City, they did not investigate pedagogy (how music is taught) within these classrooms, focusing instead on curricular availability and course offerings. Further, curricular availability of music in charter schools is connected to equity-related issues in music education broadly, as disparities in music education between charter schools and traditional public schools are intertwined with factors of race, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity (e.g. Aprile, 2021; Elpus, 2012, 2022).

Implications for music NYS educators

Because charter school policies differ across states and school districts, the data presented above only represents

a small piece of a much larger puzzle. Creating a state-level profile describing the curricular availability of music courses that mirrors the work done in Ohio (Shaw, 2021) and Michigan (Shaw & Auletto, 2022) would help music educators better understand the state of music education in New York State charter schools. At the district level, Kelley and Demorest (2016) offer a blueprint when exploring the specifics of charter school music programs outside of New York City.

My research leads me to believe that few researchers have examined the experiences of students in charter school music programs. This gap presents an opportunity to explore student perspectives in future research. More work needs to be done from the ground up, which could start through partnerships between charter school teachers and researchers, potentially supported by action research grants available through New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA, n.d.). I welcome the opportunity to learn directly from and with teachers, including those with experience or currently teaching in charter schools.

Finally, I recommend that teachers ask two questions when entering a charter school. First, determine whether the school is operated by a CMO (non-profit) or EMO (for-profit), as these distinctions will impact its management. Second, inquire whether the charter school has a curricular or pedagogical focus (such as arts-based), as this may impact its enrollment and admissions policies.

In this often deeply divisive, controversial, and combative topic (Mullen & Bartlett, 2022), situating charter schools within these attributes can help contextualize music teaching and learning at these schools. I hope that teachers are empowered by the research presented above to engage in meaningful and informed conversations, advocacy, and decision-making efforts regarding the role of charter schools in their communities.

By fostering collaboration, research, and dialogue, music educators can better support one another, ultimately ensuring that all students, regardless of school type, have access to meaningful and high-quality musical experiences. ||

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