

# Jonas Chartock Executive Director, State University of New York Charter Schools Institute

Jonas Chartock, 34, of Albany, has dedicated his young professional life to education – first with the Teach for America program after college, and then by starting his own charter school policy group in Austin, Texas.

The Massachusetts native, whose father, Alan, is a radio host and WAMC/Northeast Public Radio president, has been put in charge of overseeing the charter schools in New York authorized by SUNY.

We asked Chartock about the importance of the charter model – and his belief that it already has been more successful than public school counterparts – and how he wants to elevate the SUNY Charter Schools Institute with more research.

**Q: What is the purpose of the SUNY institute?**

**A:** I would start with the fact that our purpose is defined by the Charter Schools Act of 1998. The law identified two state-wide groups that would be responsible for approving and overseeing charters and those are the SUNY Board of Trustees and the New York state Board of Regents.

Local boards of education can also authorize schools in their districts; that happened in New York City and Buffalo.

The Charter Schools Institute was created by trustees of SUNY to help them carry out their responsibilities of approving new charter schools, maintaining the responsibility for oversight and evaluation, and determining whether or not to renew a charter for another term. So we do that with what are now 49 SUNY charter schools across the state serving over 15,000 students.

Over the next two years, that number will grow to 64 schools serving over 19,000 students.

The institute reviews and makes recommendations regarding school applications, evaluates school performance, and we inform the public of the progress of each charter school through our Web site. Ultimately, we make recommendations to the trustees about whether or not each school should continue operating beyond its charter term – and that's primarily based on student performance data.

The other thing I'd add is that the institute has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as one of the highest quality charter-authorizing organizations in the country. So we're proud of our work to date and are excited to continue that work.

**Q: Some believe charter schools largely haven't accomplished their intended goal – to raise achievement in public schools. What's your response to this?**

**A:** First, I'd emphasize charter schools are public schools. And the reason I bring that up is they're required to take on all comers; they're all tuition-free, and like all public schools they're subject to separation of church and state laws, and they participate in statewide testing systems. And like all traditional districts, they are publicly funded.

As far as their success, the law tasks charters with improving state learning and achievement – particularly for those students at risk of academic failure. The results of the English Language Arts exam for students in grades 3-8 were released (recently) and on average 80 percent of SUNY-authorized charter schools scored at proficiency or above on the exam, and so that's better than the statewide average for all public schools, charter and non-charter, which was 77 percent.

And then there are a couple other interesting facts to note: 86 percent (of charter schools) outperformed their local districts. And the majority of SUNY-authorized charter schools are serving a significant percent of students who are at risk of academic failure.

**Q: You got to the institute last year. Do you have any plans for change in the organization?**

**A:** I definitely want to build on the success of the organization to date – that's always on my mind.

One specific charge from trustees was to expand the institute's research efforts. There is a good mine of information in institute files about what works and what doesn't work in charter schools and that information, well, that information is of value not only to charter school leaders, but more broadly to all educators in the state.

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My priority is to retrieve that data and do strong, honest, objective analysis and probably publish the results.

**Q: Why have there been so few SUNY charter school closures since the institute's creation in 1999?**

**A:** I'd say it's a testament to the rigor of the charter application process that few schools have warranted closure. SUNY has shut seven of the schools it's authorized due to academic under-performance.

The law says the fundamental premise of charter schools is to increase flexibility in exchange for true accountability. That means charter schools can make choices. In exchange, they must demonstrate in their charter terms that they improve achievement or they risk being closed down.

It's a difficult decision we've had to make seven times. We should think about that level of accountability in the context of how often a traditional district school is closed down to academic performance – which is almost never.

**Q: What got you initially interested in working in education?**

**A:** Being the son of two dedicated educators, the importance of education was instilled in me at an early age. Studying labor relations at Cornell, when I was there, I was always most interested in systems that created opportunity for people to empower themselves – whether that meant through education and training or the workplace.

I joined Teach for America, who commit to teach for two years in urban and rural public schools and then become lifelong leaders. That made a tremendous impact on my career goals. Teaching fourth grade in Compton, Calif., was definitely the hardest, most powerful job I'll ever have and it solidified my belief that through strong teachers, principals and schools, every child – no matter where they're born – can and should have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.

**Q: You previously served as CEO of the Charter School Policy Institute in Austin. Considering that city's reputation for great food and music, how does Albany compare?**

**A:** I have to admit, it was very difficult to leave the live music capital of the world – let alone the best Tex-Mex and barbecue in the universe. But Albany has surprised me, more so by its musical offerings than anything else.

Between the local jazz scene, The Linda at WMAC, The Egg, SPAC and playing my guitar on my stoop with neighbors in Center Square, I still get my great fill of music when I have the time.

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