



Charter Schools: Impact on Student Achievement January 2012

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

- The highly politically charged charter school movement has resulted in a disarray of research findings, resulting in no clear evidence that charter schools have a significant impact on student achievement.
- The growth of the charter school movement has significantly outpaced the research and evidence to support its impact on student achievement.

Major findings: General

- Findings from the first national evaluation of charter schools (examining approximately 70% of the nation's charter schools) showed that charter schools performed no better, and often worse, than traditional public schools. A second national evaluation conducted in 2011 yielded a similar finding.
- Data from the "nation's report card", NAEP, suggests that students in charter schools trail behind comparable students in public schools. Charter schools scored significantly lower on average than public schools.

Major findings: Diverse Populations

- A recent comprehensive analysis conducted by The Civil Rights Project at UCLA examined data from 40 states, the District of Columbia, and dozens of metropolitan areas with large charter school systems and found that "charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation."
- A Massachusetts study of charter schools showed that charter schools did not serve the neediest student. Students with disabilities and Limited English Proficient students are under-represented in charter schools. New Orleans, predominantly charter schools post-Katrina, is currently facing a lawsuit for denying access of public education to students with disabilities.
- African American students in charter schools do not differ in achievement from comparable African American students in public schools.

Charter Schools: Summary, Issues and Challenges

- There is no conclusive evidence that charter schools have a significant impact on student achievement, and in fact, research shows that students who attend charter schools perform no better or sometimes even worse than if they had attended public schools.
- Lack of accountability coupled with a for-profit philosophy has resulted in charter schools offering fewer services for students and lower wages for employees when compared to public schools.
- Charter schools negatively affect financial resources of public schools since students choosing to attend charter schools take with them a portion of the local school district's budget.

Introduction

The beginning of the charter school movement can be traced back to the reform ideas of alternative schools, magnet schools, site-based management, privatization, and public school choice (Public School Review, 2008). In 1994, a federal charter school grant program was passed to encourage other states to develop charter programs. By the 2006-2007 school year, forty states had passed charter school legislation, resulting in the founding of 3,940 charter schools serving over 1.16 million students nationwide (Consoletti & Allen, 2007). It should be noted that more than one-third of all reported charter schools have been in existence for less than three years. During the same period of growth, over 400 or 11% of charter schools have closed. Reasons for closure include academic, financial, or managerial problems (Consoletti & Allen, 2007; National Education Association, 2008). The introduction of charter school legislation across the nation has led to a political battle between those in favor of continued charter school growth and those in favor of restricted growth and more state and local education regulation (Kirst 2006).

The objective of this literature review was to review research work concerning the background, nature, and effectiveness of charter schools. The primary finding is that the growth of the charter school movement has significantly outpaced the research and evidence to support its impact on student achievement. The highly politically charged charter school movement has resulted in a disarray of research findings, resulting in no clear evidence that charter schools have a significant impact on student achievement. The only widely agreed finding about charter schools is that charter schools widely vary in their impact on student achievement.

Studies of charter school versus public school performance are often limited in their interpretation due to different accountability systems and differences in targeted population. The most comprehensive assessments of charter schools to date were conducted by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO, 2009) and by Mathematica in partnership with the Center for Reinventing Public Education (2011). The CREDO study assessed more than 70% of the national's charter schools and found that students in charter schools are not faring any better than students in traditional public schools. The CREDO study found major problems with charter schools, including a wide variance in quality and a large pool of low-performing charter schools. Similar to the CREDO study, a recent study by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010) found no significant differences in achievement, behavior or student progress between students who attended charter schools and students who attended public schools. In the Mathematica study, students enrolled in charter schools from 40 different charter management organizations (CMO), 292 schools, and 14 states were examined for achievement in reading and math. Results showed that charter school students showed no statistically significant difference in achievement when compared to their public school counterparts.

Education researchers often view the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) as one of the most objective metrics by which to measure student achievement. Thus far, NAEP data suggests that students in charter schools trail behind comparable students in public

schools. Charter schools that were not affiliated with a public school district scored significantly lower on average than public non-charter schools.

Like many other structural reforms, charter schools are not a silver bullet for addressing the needs of struggling students. A national watchdog of the commercialization of schools notes that “charter schools have become the statutory vehicles by which the for-profit education sector has expanded” and thus charter schools will “inevitably be forced, sooner or later, to sacrifice the interests of students in order to meet their obligations to maximize profits for shareholders” (Molnar, 2004).

Empirical Data on Charter Schools

Research studies on the effectiveness of charters schools are often difficult to interpret because of the highly political nature of the charter school movement. Data are often reported by advocates or opponents of charter schools and not independent evaluators. For example, a recent highly media-touted study conducted on New York City charter schools found that charter schools were outperforming the city’s public schools (Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). However, closer scrutiny by education researchers, including the Think Tank Review, found that the study was grounded in unsound analysis and included key methodological problems that rendered the findings unreliable.

The most detailed national assessment of charter schools was released by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO, 2009). This study examined student achievement growth longitudinally on state achievement tests in both reading and math and assessed how students who attend charter schools would have fared if they would have attended a public school. The study found that 46% of charter schools were performing no better than public schools, 37% performed worse than public schools, and 17% performed better. Thus, the aggregated data suggests that charter schools are doing no better than public schools. This study is congruent with the general findings of the vast number of studies regarding charter schools vs. public schools.

A recent study conducted by Mathematica and the Center for Reinventing Public Education (2011) examined students that attended charter schools operating under 40 different CMOs across 14 states. Major conclusions from the study included that 1) they found no statistically significant difference in student achievement between students who attended charter schools for 1, 2, or 3 years and a matched comparison group, and 2) achievement at the charter schools varied widely in both the negative and positive direction.

A GAO report comparing a sample of 14 privately managed schools and 28 traditional schools in 6 cities “concluded that privately managed schools in some cities performed better than their public counterparts, and in other cities worse” (Molnar, 2004). A comprehensive study by Miron, Coryn, and Mackety (2007) concluded charter schools in the Great Lakes region were performing worse on state assessments than demographically similar public schools. Another

study by Betts and Tang (2011) found in some cases charter schools outperforming public schools, but in some cases “performing similar or worse.”

Another definitive empirical dataset on charter schools versus public schools is NAEP, commonly known as the nation’s report card. NAEP data are based on a nationally representative sample of 4th and 8th graders’ performance on math and reading tests. In-depth analyses of NAEP data have recently been investigated by two separate groups of researchers, and both groups reached the same conclusion (Braun et al, 2006; Nelson, et al., 2004). The 2003 NAEP data shows fourth graders attending charter schools perform about half a year behind students in other public schools in both reading and math. Only about 25 percent of the fourth graders attending charters were proficient in reading and math, against 30 percent who were proficient in reading, and 32 percent in math, at traditional public schools (Schemo, 1994). *The difference between students who attend charter schools and public schools held true regardless of race, ethnicity, and income.*

Debunking Myths Regarding Charter Schools

1. MYTH: *Charter schools will be beneficial to students most at-risk for academic problems.*
 - Charter schools often turn away the neediest students. For example, in Long Island, New York, state investigators charged that the Edison-managed Riverhead Charter School in Calverton failed to provide special education students with legally mandated small classes and other required services (Molnar, 2004). A recent comprehensive study conducted by Bethke, Harvie, and Mazur (2007) of Massachusetts charter schools found that charter schools significantly showed a strong bias against the enrollment of students with special needs and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students when compared to public schools.
 - There is also evidence that minority students in charter schools are attending racially imbalanced charter schools. A recent study conducted by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA found that 7 out of 10 African American students are in charter schools that are racially segregated (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2009). Furthermore, an UCLA education professor, Gary Orfield, warns that “racially segregated schools tend to face more problems than integrated schools in teacher retention, graduation rates and other areas.”
 - A recent analysis of 40 states, the District of Columbia, and dozens of metropolitan areas with large charter school systems found that “charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation” (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010).
 - Based on the AFT report of NAEP data, “when you compare the African Americans in charter schools to those in public schools, you don't see any difference.” (Rosenberg, AFT, 2004).

- A large study of California charter schools found that charter schools are selective in the type of students they serve, and often they do not enforce racial/ethnic and diversity guidelines (Wells, 1998).
- “Since charter schools are widely known to exercise dubious and at times illegal measures to exclude students requiring special services, the per pupil support costs are not only lower than in traditional public schools, but they would in the long run greatly increase costs in traditional public schools as these schools became the sole provider of education to disabled and otherwise challenged students (Glass, 2006).”
- The Institute on Race and Poverty conducted a study on the New Orleans metropolitan area in 2009. After Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans’ public school system dramatically increased the number of charter schools, and thus is sometimes referred to as the “national laboratory system of the charter school movement”. The report found that the charterized public school system has undermined the access of African-American students to higher quality schools with white students attending the better performing schools and low-income students of color attending the lower-performing schools (Institute on Race and Poverty, 2010). The Institute attributes the admission requirements and practices of the charter schools to recruit a more selective student body. In addition, the public school district of New Orleans and the Louisiana Department of Education have recently been sued for discrimination against students with disabilities. Specifically, the suit alleges that students with disabilities were denied educational opportunities in the charter schools because of their abilities. Since the inception of the charter school movement in New Orleans (after Hurricane Katrina), the graduation rate for students with disabilities stands at 6.4%, compared to 19.4% for students with disabilities in the state of Louisiana (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010).
- Civil rights groups, including the NAACP and the National Urban League, recently released a new framework for public education stating their reservation on the ability of charter schools to turnaround low-performing schools. Their report reiterated the finding that there is no *systematic* evidence that charter schools are effective in creating better student outcomes, and that there is much evidence that charter schools are less likely to serve students with the highest needs (2010).
- All in all, charter schools have not served the students most at-risk for academic problems. Data show they are less likely to enroll students with special needs and LEP students, and academic performance of African-American students do not show any difference whether they attend charter or public schools.

2. MYTH: A “free market” will increase efficiency and leverage increased quality in public education.

- Charter schools often have the discretion to select students. As Bracey (2005) notes, charter schools have the “ability to require parent contracts, or a certain number of hours of parent involvement, their ability to select students and limit enrollments, their greater autonomy from regulations and their less paperwork meant to the public school people that the playing field was not level. Charter schools did not have to accept children after the school year started, giving them more stable enrollments. Not having to adjust class activities to the arrival of new students or attend to the needs of new students gave them a considerable advantage” (p. 19). Therefore, though proponents of charter schools believe it will lead to a “free-market” system where parents will have many choices, in practice, many families are turned away and charter school systems often have evolved into a highly selective system that does not serve the needs of all students.
- Charter schools are often applauded for having a lower cost per pupil, however Glass (2006) notes that they are able to operate at a lower cost per pupil because the school’s offer fewer services and pay employees lower amounts than public schools. Therefore, the lower costs associated with charter schools do not support the case for a more “efficient” education system as their lower costs are due to fewer services and lower wages for teachers.
- Management organizations that run charter schools are often for-profit, and inevitably will be forced, sooner or later, to sacrifice the interests of students in order to meet their obligations to maximize profits for shareholders. “That theoretical concern raised its head in reality in Philadelphia, where Victory Schools eliminated librarians in the five public schools the for-profit management company was hired to run. The company has similarly eliminated librarians in four other schools it operates in New York and Baltimore” (Molnar, 2004).
- A recent study of charter school staffing by Stuit and Smith (2009) revealed a troubling finding on teacher retention. The study examined how teacher turnover differed between charter and traditional public schools and found that charter schools had a 25% teacher turnover rate compared to 14% of teacher turnover in traditional public schools.
- Therefore, there has been no conclusive evidence that adding a charter school system results in a level of competition that increases efficiency (lowering costs) or improves the overall quality of education services. The evidence supports the threat of incorporating a for-profit system that cuts services to students in order to increase profits.

3. MYTH: *Charter schools are more successful than public schools.*

- In addition to the CREDO and Mathematica studies, another large comprehensive study was recently released by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010). IES examined 36 charter

middle schools across 15 states and compared the outcomes of “lottery winners” (randomly admitted students to charter schools) with the outcomes of “lottery losers” (students who applied but did not get into the charter schools). The report found no significant differences in achievement, behavior or student progress between the groups. Furthermore, similar to the CREDO study, the IES study found that more charter school sites did worse than better when compared to their public school counterparts.

- As noted above, the most comprehensive studies on the charter school vs. public school debate has found no evidence that supports charters schools are more successful than public schools (Braun et al, 2006; CREDO, 2009; Nelson, et al., 2004). A recent longitudinal study by CREDO of Pennsylvania charter schools was “sobering” finding that across all ages and races/ethnicities, students in charter schools performed worse in student achievement than the students in public schools (2011).
- One of the continued problems with charter schools is accountability. Often the focus of charter school accountability is financial, not student achievement results. As noted earlier, over the past decade over 400 or 11% of charter schools have closed, and the primary reasons for a charter school closing are financial or managerial problems (Consoletti & Allen, 2007; National Education Association, 2008).
- The U.S. Department of Education found that “many charter school authorizers lack the capacity to adequately oversee charter school operations, often lack authority to implement formal sanctions, and rarely invoke the authority they do have to revoke or not renew a charter. Where charters have been revoked or not renewed, the decision has been linked more to noncompliance with state and federal regulations and financial problems than with academic performance” (National Education Association, 2008)
- In states that have large charter school systems, the results have best been mixed and in many cases, charter schools have not lived up to the expectations.
- In North Carolina, a study by Bifulco and Ladd (2006) found that students in charter schools actually made considerably smaller achievement gains in charter schools than they would have in traditional public schools. They concluded that North Carolina introduction of charter schools in 1996 into their education system “has increased racial segregation, been detrimental on average to student achievement, and has widened the black-white test score gap.”
- A recent study of Massachusetts’ charter schools (2011) found some benefits for students in urban charter schools but non-urban charter schools were “uniformly ineffective.” Furthermore, urban charter schools still showed wide variability in their impact on student achievement with the successes that were found attributed to pedagogical features such as longer school days.
- Ohio’s charter school system expanded rapidly in the past decade after a period of wide-open authorization and increased financial support from the state

department. Yet, the recent state's school report card gave more than half of Ohio's 328 charter schools a D or an F (Dillon, 2007).

- Florida established charter schools 12 years ago, and currently there are 350+ charter schools in the state. Accountability of Florida charter schools has continued to be a significant problem (Shanklin & Deslatte, 2008). Last year, 43 percent of the state's charter schools went ungraded. Ungraded charters often have avoided sanctions intended to boost their performance.
- California's largest charter schools closed campuses in 2004 after state auditors found financial problems that included the charter school not spending enough money on teachers and books (Coleman, 2004). A study of California's charter school system found "little evidence" that charter schools are productive competition and in fact, found that charter schools are not producing any meaningful innovations, except in the area of school finance (Wells, 1998).
- Therefore, the data on charter schools in states with established charter school systems suggests that charter schools have not outperformed public schools, and in fact, much of the accountability of charter schools have focused on managerial oversight and finances, not student learning.

Conclusion

Although charter schools are expanding their presence across the nation, there is limited research supporting their impact on student learning. Similar to examining public school research, the charter school literature shows that success with student achievement varies widely (Protheroe, 2011). The finding of this literature review is that there is no conclusive evidence that charter schools have a significant impact on student achievement. In fact, research using NAEP data showed that students from charter schools lag behind students from public schools, and the largest national study of charter schools show the majority of charter schools are performing no different or worse than public schools. Regardless of differences in race and income, charter school students scored significantly lower than public school students (Braun et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004). These results are particularly striking when we take into consideration that charter schools exercise more autonomy in their students' selection mechanisms, something that does not happen with public schools (see Bracey, 2005).

At a deeper level, is the concern that charter schools are potentially driven by for-profit philosophies that do not necessarily match the interest of the student population (Molnar, 2004). In fact, this redistribution of financial resources negatively impacts the budgets for public schools, potentially affecting the quality of education and services that can be provided to the remaining students. Students choosing to attend charter schools take with them a portion of the local school district's budget (Bethke, Harvie, & Mazur, 2007). One California study found negative implications for equity in that charter schools often needed to raise private funds and their ability to do so could be influenced by the social class of their students (Wells, 1998). The author questioned the argument that charter schools,

freed from bureaucratic constraints, will be more efficient and require less funding. In general, charter schools are located in predominantly middle- and upper-middle-class communities (those generally serving a higher proportion of White students) and tended to have easier access to financial and in-kind resources due to their connections (Wells, 1998).

From an equity perspective, charter schools appear to disproportionately enroll certain types of students, as compared with the school districts the charter school serves. In particular, students with disabilities and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students do not have equal opportunities to enroll and are underrepresented in the charter school system (Bethke, Harvie, & Mazur, 2007). Charter schools can further stratify schools along racial and socioeconomic lines (Cobb & Glass, 1999) and forms of social sorting (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999) which is against the spirit of public education. The Arizona study, for example, found that a substantial number of charter schools differed from their neighboring public schools, often because they had a significantly higher proportion of White students (Cobb & Glass, 1999). In turn, this disproportionately low enrollment of students with disabilities and LEP students in charter school populations has implications in key areas including school district finances and student achievement. Due to the challenges of disability and language, students with disability and LEP students, on average, typically score lower than regular students served in public schools and giving the false impression that charter schools outperform the public education counterparts when we are not comparing similar populations.

In summary, the preliminary evidence on student achievement in charter schools is limited and far from definitive. A recent review of student achievement in charter schools by RAND researchers concluded that the evidence on the academic effectiveness of charter schools is mixed (Gill et al., 2001). In fact, data from the “nation’s report card”, NAEP, suggests that students in charter schools trail behind comparable students in public schools. Charter schools scored significantly lower on average than public schools (Braun et al., 2006; Nelson et al., 2004). African American students in charter schools do not differ in achievement from comparable African American students in public schools (Rosenberg, AFT, 2004). It appears from these studies that charter schools will not be an effective strategy to enhance student performance or advance reform.

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