



Can Charter Schools Fix American Public Schooling?

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Charter schools operate in the public sector and are supported by taxpayers, but like private schools they grant considerable autonomy to principals and teachers and allow parents to make choices not constrained by zip codes or neighborhood boundaries. Boosters often make extravagant claims for charter schools, promising to fix deficits in American education and close achievement gaps between minority and white children and between students from richer and poorer backgrounds. Understandably, such glowing promises capture the imagination of public officials – and, above all, appeal to parents searching for quality schooling who are disillusioned with neighborhood public schools yet unable to afford tuition at Catholic or elite private schools.

But is the hype about charter schools backed up by the evidence? Is there solid research suggesting that charter schools are doing any better for students than traditional neighborhood or magnet schools? So far, the best objective research studies have arrived at mixed results, and there is a strong need to supplement existing approaches with a closer look at the on-the-ground experiences of teachers, principals, parents, and schoolchildren, comparing the daily operation of charter schools with other schools in their areas. Parents and citizens alike need to learn much more about how well charter schools actually are performing.

Evidence from the Most Credible National Studies

Few truly objective studies of charter schools assess the quality of teaching and learning or trends in student performance on standardized tests. Too often, rhetoric replaces evidence. Thankfully there are some investigations I can cite with confidence, including two nationwide studies completed by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes in 2009 and 2013.

- The 2009 study looked at charter schools in 16 states and reported that, in most states, charter schools performed no better in improving reading and math skills – and often fared worse than traditional public schools.
- The 2013 study looked at charter schools in 26 states plus New York City and reached more positive conclusions. Nationwide, it found improvements for charter students, owing in part to the opening of more “high-performing” charters, as well as the closing of less successful charter schools. In a quarter of the states studied, charter schools outperformed comparable public schools at improving reading scores. Yet charter schools in more than half of the states (56%) showed no significant reading gains. In math, charter schools in 29% of the states made gains compared to traditional publics, But there was no real difference in 40% of the states.

Do Academic Gains Come at Social Expense?

Other notable studies of charter schools have probed the data for particular locations and found that academic gains for charter students may come at a larger social cost.

- Studies conducted by researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Minnesota found that even though charter school students in their states experienced some statistically significant gains, the schools replicated national trends in deepening overall social segregation by race and class.
- Similarly, I commissioned a 2009 study of New Orleans schools done by researchers at the Institute for Race and Poverty at the Minnesota Law School. Researchers discovered that the city’s low income students of color are often relegated to a “fallback holding tank” for those who cannot gain admission to highly selective charter schools. Students can fail to gain admissions to selective schools either because they have insufficient academic credentials or because their parents and guardians lack the know-how

and connections to navigate the complicated admissions process. Leftover students are assigned Recovery School District schools, where students in the fourth grade were found to have a 40% lower chance of passing English and math than other New Orleans students.

Toward a Deeper Understanding

To sum up, the credible studies of charter school achievements completed so far offer a mixed picture and raise important questions for further investigation. As research continues, it will be helpful to add in-depth ethnographic studies and interviews to supplement statistical studies using large-scale aggregate data compilations. New Orleans is an ideal place for such in-depth qualitative studies, because – in the wake of Hurricane Katrina – this city has by far the largest percentage of students enrolled in charter schools, more than any other U.S. city. Nine out of ten New Orleans schoolchildren attend charter schools, taking advantage of what proponents call a system of “universal choice” among various kinds of public schools.

Research I have done with colleagues and undergraduate students at Loyola New Orleans offers insights from interviews of teachers and principals working at schools within the city's Recovery School District. Interviewees in these schools told us that they deal with higher student enrollments and enjoy less autonomy for professional decision-making than their peers in other sectors. Concerns about insufficient autonomy were greater for principals and teachers at non-charter schools operating in the Recovery School District than for those working in the District's charter schools. Even so, our team of researchers heard accounts of similar problems for teachers and principals in both charters and other schools. In addition, parental involvement is seen as a challenge. One of our interviewees remarked that at the Recovery District charter schools “you have to have so much parental involvement and a lot of our parents work two jobs and are not able to be involved.” These charter schools, in short, face tougher challenges than other New Orleans charter schools that can more freely pick among applicant families.

Moving forward, policy makers and educators stand to benefit from additional ethnographic studies of charter schools and other kinds of schools located in various states and school districts. Policy makers need a deeper understanding of everyday life for teachers, students, and parents inside of charter schools – which, for better or worse, are steadily gaining ground within American public education.

This brief draws on research and data from “National Charter School Study,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University, 2013; Erica Frankenberg, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, and Gia Wang, “Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards,” The Civil Rights Project, January 2010; and “The State of Public Schools in Post-Katrina New Orleans: The Challenge of Creating Equal Opportunity,” Institute on Race and Poverty, University of Minnesota Law School, May 2010.