



POLICY BRIEF

An Option for Learning *An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools*

by Liv Finne
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An Option for Learning

An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools

Key Findings

1. Charter public schools are popular with parents; 365,000 students are on waiting lists to attend a charter public school.
2. Across the nation, over 1.7 million children now attend 5,453 charter public schools. This number increased by 9% in 2010 alone.
3. Well-run charter public schools perform significantly better than traditional public schools.
4. Charter public school students are no different in academic background and motivation than students attending traditional public schools.
5. Charter public schools in Massachusetts and elsewhere have closed the achievement gap between minority and white students.

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Introduction

Since the 1930s, traditional public schools have been centrally run from the top down by state legislatures, school district administrators and, starting in the late 1960s, by collective bargaining agreements negotiated by powerful unions. In addition, administrators in traditional public schools have never been held directly accountable for student performance. Public schools that fail to educate students adequately often remain open and unchanged year after year.

In the early 1990s, education leaders in some states took a different approach by authorizing independent charter public schools. Principals at charter public schools are allowed to control their budgets, teaching staff and educational programs with little or no central bureaucratic control. States with well-designed charter schools hold administrators accountable for student performance, by following through on their commitment to parents and the public that children living in the state will have access to a quality education. Charter public schools that consistently fail to educate students can be closed or placed under new management.

Minnesota lawmakers enacted the first charter public school bill in 1991. Since then the idea has spread rapidly, with forty states and the District of Columbia passing charter public school legislation. Across the nation, over 1.7 million children now attend 5,453 charter public schools. This number increased by 9 percent in 2010 alone.¹

Charter public schools are popular. An estimated 365,000 students are on waiting lists, enough to fill more than 1,000 additional charter schools.² New evidence from states with five or more years of experience shows that well-run charter schools perform significantly better than traditional schools.

Washington's Charter School Ban

Washington is one of the few states that do not allow charter public schools to open within their borders. Charter school legislation was last seriously considered in Washington in 2004, when members of both parties passed HB 2295, the Washington Charter Schools Act. Democratic Governor Gary Locke signed the bill on March 18, 2004.³

¹ "Number of U.S. Charter Schools Grows by 9 Percent in 2010; 5,453 charter schools around the U.S. educate more than 1.7 million students," Center for Education Reform, November 9, 2010.

² "Caps on Charter Schools," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, at www.publiccharters.org/node/45.

³ "Authorizing Charter Schools," Engrossed Second Substitute House Bill 2295, Washington State Legislature, 2004 Session, passed March 10, 2004, signed by Governor Locke March 18, 2004, at <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/documents/billdocs/2003-04/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Law%202004/2295-S2.SL.pdf>.

Charter public schools are popular. An estimated 365,000 students are on waiting lists across the nation.

New evidence shows that well-run charter schools perform significantly better than traditional public schools.

Leaders of Washington’s powerful teachers union, the Washington Education Association (WEA), strongly oppose charter public schools, primarily because charter school teachers would not be required to join their union as a condition of employment. The WEA launched a repeal effort in the form of Referendum 55. The Referendum passed and HB 2295 was prevented from going into effect.⁴ As a result, it is currently illegal to operate a charter public school in Washington state.

At the same time, many Washington children attend underperforming traditional public schools. The state Board of Education reports 74,000 students are assigned to “struggling” schools, 523,000 students attend “fair” schools, 314,000 students attend “good” schools, and only 93,150 students, out of nearly one million students, have access to a “very good” or “exemplary” public school.⁵

The Board of Education rankings show that by limiting student learning opportunities to traditional public schools, the state is failing to fulfill its paramount constitutional duty to educate every child residing within its borders.

This Policy Brief collects the data on the performance of charter public schools since Washington voters last considered charter schools in 2004. The study contains case studies examining Commonwealth Charters, KIPP Academies, Green Dot Schools, Rocketship Schools, New Orleans schools, and the SABIS International Charter School. These examples were chosen based on defined research criteria. Specifically, these schools:

1. Are authorized under an existing state charter school law
2. Serve student populations representative of the surrounding geographic area
3. Are independent of central district control
4. Meet or exceed state academic standards
5. Require administrators to be accountable for student learning
6. Protect student civil rights and maintain student safety
7. Are open to all students

The case studies include examples of charter school systems operating in several states, schools that serve high poverty areas, that have high proportions of minority and hard-to-teach students and, in the case of New Orleans, have an entire education system devastated by natural disaster.

The purpose of this study is to summarize the measurable academic results of a variety of charter schools, describe how these schools serve students in the most difficult learning environments, and assess the benefits that would be available to students in Washington state if lawmakers lifted the ban on charter public schools.

⁴ Results for Referendum 55, November 4, 2004, “History of Referendum Measures through 2009,” Elections and Voting, Washington Secretary of State, at www.sos.wa.gov/elections/initiatives/statistics_referendummeasures.aspx.

⁵ “State Accountability Index, Final Report to the State Board of Education,” by Pete Bylsma, February 16, 2010, at www.sbe.wa.gov/documents/Accountability%20System%20-%20February%202010%20long%20paper%20final.pdf.

Case Study: Commonwealth Charters

In 1993, lawmakers in Massachusetts passed a charter school law allowing administrators at local schools, called Commonwealth Charters, more control over budgets, staff hiring and curricula. In 1995, Boston Public Schools and Boston Teachers Union joined to create Pilot Schools, their own version of the autonomous schools allowed under state law. Since then, enrollment has grown rapidly in both types of autonomous schools.⁶ Charter schools are a popular option for many Boston families. About 17 percent of 10th graders and 21 percent of 7th graders in Boston attend charter public schools.⁷

Massachusetts law allows three types of public schools. These are:

Traditional schools – School principals at traditional public schools do not control their budgets, do not hire or fire teachers and staff, and do not control the school schedule. Instead, school superintendents, school board members, state regulators, and mandatory collective bargaining agreements determine these various elements of running a school. Teachers are paid according to a set pay scale rather than on merit.

Commonwealth Charters – Commonwealth Charters are public schools managed by a board of trustees and operated independently of local school boards under five-year charters granted by the State Board of Education. Administrators at Commonwealth Charters set the school's core mission, choose curriculum and teaching methods, manage their own budget, and oversee teacher and staff hiring. A Commonwealth Charter is not assigned students automatically by the central district. It must attract students on a voluntary basis and produce positive academic results within five years, or its charter will not be renewed.⁸

Commonwealth Charters are permitted to hire teachers who do not have formal state-mandated credentials, but applicants must be qualified in their subject area and pass the Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure (MTEL).⁹

Commonwealth Charter administrators are held accountable for student learning. In Boston, of 75 charters granted over 15 years, eight (or about 10 percent) have been revoked.¹⁰ Massachusetts currently has 56 Commonwealth Charter schools.

Pilot Schools – Pilot Schools are public schools whose principals have flexibility in setting their own budget, curricula and scheduling, and in hiring some staff, but administratively they remain part of the local school district. While Pilot Schools are generally free of the most restrictive work-rule provisions, they are

⁶ "Informing the Debate, Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools," by Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Duke University, Josh Angrist, MIT and National Bureau of Economic Research, Sarah Cohodes, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Susan Dynarski, University of Michigan School of Education and Ford School of Public Policy and National Bureau of Economic Research, Jon Fullerton, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Thomas Kane, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Parg Pathak, MIT and National Bureau of Economic Research, The Boston Foundation, January 2009, page 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Massachusetts Charter School Fact Sheet," Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, at www.doe.mass.edu/charter/about.html.

⁹ "Additional Resources, Questions and Answers, Massachusetts Charter Schools," Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, accessible at www.doe.mass.edu/charter/about.html, page 11.

¹⁰ "Informing the Debate, Comparing Boston's Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools," by Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Duke University, Josh Angrist, MIT and National Bureau of Economic Research, Sarah Cohodes, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Susan Dynarski, University of Michigan School of Education and Ford School of Public Policy and National Bureau of Economic Research, Jon Fullerton, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Thomas Kane, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Parg Pathak, MIT and National Bureau of Economic Research, The Boston Foundation, January 2009, page 7.

Charter schools are a popular option for many Boston families. About 17% of 10th graders and 21% of 7th graders in Boston attend charter public schools.

subject to pay scales and seniority requirements imposed by mandatory collective bargaining agreements.

To become a Pilot School, two-thirds of the faculty at a traditional public school must vote in favor of making the change. A committee of district officials and union executives decides whether or not to grant a school Pilot status. If granted, a governing board for the Pilot School defines the mission of the school, approves the “election-to-work” form each teacher must sign, and approves the school budget.¹¹

Pilot Schools are regarded as a “middle-ground” between Commonwealth Charters and traditional public schools, because union executives retain control over many day-to-day operating decisions.

Learning Outcomes at Massachusetts Charter Schools

With 17 years of experience, Massachusetts provides ample evidence that Commonwealth Charters consistently outperform traditional public schools in helping students learn. Test results from the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) show that six of the seven highest-performing public high schools in the state are Commonwealth Charters, and that seven of the ten highest-performing middle schools are Commonwealth Charters.¹²

Charter schools in Massachusetts are popular with parents. More than 20,000 parents have placed their children on waiting lists for Commonwealth Charters and Pilot Schools.¹³

Do Commonwealth Charters “Skim off” the Best Students?

Critics of charter public schools often argue that these independent schools take only high-performing, better motivated students, and leave traditional public schools with the hardest-to-teach students. To examine this claim, the Boston Foundation funded a study by statisticians and professors at five universities, including Harvard and MIT. This study, “Informing the Debate,” used two separate statistical methods to isolate the ability of schools to educate from prior student academic ability and motivation.¹⁴

Researchers found that students attending Commonwealth Charters perform markedly better than their peers attending pilot and traditional schools in Boston:

“Positive effects of charter schools on student achievement were found at both the middle and high school levels and across subjects. The impact on middle school math was particularly dramatic; the effect here amounts to half of a standard deviation, an effect large enough to move a student from the 50th to the 69th percentile in student performance in one year. In fact, the effect of a single year spent in a charter school was equivalent to half of the black-white achievement gap. At the high school level, charter students

¹¹ “Weighted Student Formula Yearbook 2009, Boston Pilot Schools,” by Lisa Snell, *Reason Foundation*, 2009, page 30.

¹² Based on 2009 MCAS test results, Massachusetts Charter Public School Association website, at www.masscharterschools.org/schools/index.html.

¹³ “Usable Knowledge; Charter, pilot, and traditional schools in Boston: Facts to refocus the debate,” by Deborah Blagg, June 2009, at www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/uk/2009/06/charter-pilot-and-traditional-schools-in-boston-facts-to-refocus-the-debate.html.

¹⁴ “New Study of Boston Charter and Pilot Schools Finds Charter Schools Have Positive Effects on Student Achievement,” News Features and Releases, Harvard Graduate School of Education, January 6, 2009, at www.gse.harvard.edu/blog/news_features_releases/2009/01/new-study-of-boston-charter-and-pilot-schools-finds-charter-schools-have-positive-effects-on-student.html.

Six of the seven highest-performing public high schools in Massachusetts are Commonwealth Charters.

Seven of the ten highest-performing middle schools in Massachusetts are Commonwealth Charters.

showed stronger performance scores in English Language Arts, math, writing topic development, and writing competition.”¹⁵

After only a single academic year attending a Commonwealth Charter, half the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students was erased. Students who entered a Commonwealth Charter public school in the fourth grade improved their test scores from Boston’s average to Brookline’s average by the eighth grade (Brookline is one of Massachusetts’ wealthiest school districts).¹⁶ Four years of attending a Commonwealth Charter public school erased the black-white achievement gap.

The “Informing the Debate” study also showed that Pilot Schools do not perform as well as Commonwealth Charters in educating students, and that Pilot Schools perform no better than traditional schools in middle and high school grades. The independence over budgeting and teacher hiring afforded Commonwealth Charters by Massachusetts’ charter school law appears to be essential to improving student learning for poor and minority students.

In sum, the evidence shows that Commonwealth Charters in Boston routinely outperform both Pilot Schools and traditional public schools, that charters do not “skim off” the best students, and that Commonwealth Charters are effective at dramatically narrowing or eliminating the achievement gaps between white and minority children.

Case Study: SABIS International Charter School¹⁷

Ralph Bistany is the founder of SABIS International Charter School in Massachusetts, which today enrolls 1,576 students in kindergarten through twelfth grade and has the longest waiting list of any Massachusetts Commonwealth Charter.¹⁸ This school has successfully closed the achievement gap among students based on race, ethnicity and income level. Low-income and African American tenth graders at this school outperform average student performance on the state assessment, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS).

These students outperform their peers in the surrounding Springfield district schools by 45 percentage points on the English MCAS (92 percent versus 46 percent proficient or advanced), and 50 percentage points in math (83 percent versus 33 percent proficient or advanced). College admittance by SABIS students is 100 percent; for the past seven years every SABIS Springfield high school graduate has been admitted to an institution of higher learning.¹⁹

This school employs a mix of traditional classroom instruction with online lessons. Teachers use sophisticated, proprietary computer software systems to teach students. These interactive programs allow teachers to identify whether or not students are grasping essential concepts. Students in SABIS are not placed in grades by age, but by skill level.

Steven F. Wilson points out that the SABIS model is a far more rational way of organizing schools to produce high levels of achievement than reducing class size, and estimates that a district of 29,500 students could save \$16.2 million

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Massachusetts Charter Public School Association website, at www.masscharterschools.org/schools/index.html.

¹⁷ SABIS is a global education management organization operating in 15 countries that educates 60,000 students based on a college preparatory academic system.

¹⁸ “The Efficient Use of Teachers,” by Steven F. Wilson, *Stretching the School Dollar; How Schools and District Can Save Money While Serving Students Best*, Edited by Frederick M. Hess and Eric Osberg (Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2010), pp. 133-136.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Commonwealth Charters do not “skim off” the best students.

The SABIS charter model allocates one-quarter of instruction time to online learning, saving money while eliminating the achievement gap.

by allocating one quarter of instructional time to independent learning with instructional online technology.²⁰

Case Study: KIPP Academies

KIPP, the Knowledge Is Power Program, began in 1994 when Dave Levin and Marc Feinberg completed their training with Teach for America and opened a school for fifth-graders in inner-city Houston.²¹ Texas' charter school law allowed them to experiment with the structure of their schools and to tailor their academic programs to the particular needs of Houston's inner-city children.

Feinberg developed the school into KIPP Academy Houston and Levin went on to establish KIPP academies in the South Bronx in New York City. They hire high-quality teachers who offer a no-excuses, college-prep program for poor and minority students. The school is kept open longer hours so students can study more on school days and on Saturdays, and the school is made available to students for extra weeks in the summer.

From its start as a single Houston school, the KIPP program has grown into a national network of 99 public schools serving 26,000 students in 20 states and the District of Columbia. Most are established under state charter school laws. The majority, 60, of KIPP schools are middle schools serving students in fifth through eighth grade, 15 are public high schools, and 24 are public elementary schools. KIPP Academies are public schools, funded with public education dollars and open to all students.

These charter public schools achieve remarkable success in educating hard-to-teach students. Over 90 percent of KIPP students are African-American or Hispanic/Latino, and more than 80 percent of students are eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. KIPP schools enroll all interested students, space permitting, regardless of past academic record, behavior problems, ethnicity, immigration status or economic background.

KIPP commissioned Mathematica research group to conduct an in-depth longitudinal analysis of academic achievement at 22 KIPP public schools. The study found:

- No evidence that KIPP middle schools “skim off the best” by systematically enrolling better-performing students than those attending other public schools in the same district
- KIPP public schools often enroll students whose average fourth-grade achievement is lower than the district wide average
- Drop-out rates are not significantly different than those experienced by other public schools
- KIPP public schools do not allow social promotion – students are required to master lesson content before being advanced to the next grade
- KIPP public school students make significant advancements in reading and math scores in all four years of middle school – the learning effect is large enough to reduce the achievement gap between black and white students by

²⁰ Steven F. Wilson is the founder and president of Ascend Learning, a charter school management organization in New York City, and a senior fellow at Education Sector in Washington D.C.

²¹ KIPP: Knowledge is Power Program website, at www.kipp.org/.

Over 90% of KIPP middle-school students go on to attend college-prep high schools, and over 85% of KIPP public school graduates attend college.

half in three years²²

- Over 90 percent of KIPP middle-school students go on to attend college-prep high schools, and over 85 percent of KIPP public school graduates, including students from low-income and minority families, attend college²³

Case Study: Green Dot Schools

Green Dot Schools is a non-profit charter school organization founded in Los Angeles in 1999 by Steve Barr. Today Green Dot operates 19 schools located in the poorest communities of Los Angeles, including Watts and Compton, and in New York City, in the South Bronx neighborhood. Nearly all students attending Green Dot Schools are Hispanic/Latino or black. More than one-third of students arrive at school struggling to speak English and well over 80 percent qualify for tax-subsidized meals.²⁴

While serving a hard-to-teach population, Green Dot students achieve a graduation rate nearly twice that of comparable traditional public schools. Eighty percent of Green Dot public high school students graduate, while the graduation rate for students attending other area public schools is only 41 percent.²⁵ Students at Green Dot high schools learn under California's rigorous A-G curriculum, a course of study designed to prepare students for college. Less than 30 percent of graduates of other public schools meet this standard.²⁶

In 2009-10, students at the first five Green Dot public high schools (opened in 2000, 2002, 2003 and 2004, and 2006) scored 100 points higher on California's Academic Performance Indicator (API) than students attending traditional high schools in the same geographic area in Los Angeles.²⁷ Demographically, Green Dot students are representative of the general student population in their neighborhoods.

The Green Dot teaching philosophy is based on the one used by private college prep schools, which Barr argues should work in any learning environment. The six tenets of this philosophy are:

1. Provide small, safe, personalized schools (about 525 students)
2. Set high learning expectations for all students
3. Insure local control, principals and teachers decide budgets and academics
4. Require parent participation, at least 35 hours per year
5. Maximize funding to the classroom, at least 94 cents of every dollar spent
6. Keep schools open until at least 5pm daily, with after-school programs available

Teachers at Green Dot public schools belong to a different union than the one that operates in other Los Angeles public schools. Green Dot teachers are

²² "Executive Summary, Student Characteristics and Achievement in 22 KIPP Middle Schools," by Christina Clark Tuttle, Bing-ru The, Ira Nichols-Barrer, Brian P. Gill, Philip Gleason, Mathematica Policy Research Inc., June 2010.

²³ "About KIPP," at www.kipp.org/about-kipp.

²⁴ "The Rise of Green Dot Schools, Is it time to call a truce," Scholastic Administrator, Scholastic.com, June 2008, at www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3749586.

²⁵ Ibid, and "School District Graduation Report, Los Angeles Unified School District, Class of 2007," Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, *Education Week*, November 4, 2010.

²⁶ "School Results," Green Dot Public Schools, at www.greendot.org/results/school_results.

²⁷ Ibid.

While serving a hard-to-teach population, Green Dot students achieve a graduation rate nearly twice that of comparable traditional public schools.

Green Dot charter public schools spend only \$7,800 per student per year, less than traditional public schools.

In 2007, one year after their school's founding, students at Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary scored 886 on California's Academic Performance Indicator, seventh highest in the state for low-income elementary schools.

Rocketship charter public schools use online instruction to achieve \$500,000 in savings, which are used to train principals, provide tutoring and raise teachers' salaries.

paid 10 percent to 15 percent more in salary, but do not have automatic job security and can be dismissed for failing to teach students.²⁸ Green Dot public schools spend approximately \$7,800 per student per year,²⁹ compared to about \$10,500 per student spent in other public schools.³⁰

Although Green Dot public schools spend less on a per-student basis, a higher proportion of these education dollars reach the classroom than is typical in comparable traditional public schools. Under California's charter school law, the budget at a local Green Dot public school is relieved of the expense of conforming to district regulation and of having to support a large centralized administration.

Case Study: Rocketship Schools

In 2006, John Danner and Preston Smith founded Rocketship Education, a network of charter public schools designed to eliminate the achievement gap in high-poverty neighborhoods. They started in San Jose, California, and opened two Rocketship elementary schools which together serve about 1,000 students. Ninety percent of these Rocketship students are from low-income families, and 70 percent of them speak English as a second language.

In 2007, one year after their school's founding, students at Rocketship Mateo Sheedy Elementary scored 886 on California's Academic Performance Indicator (API), seventh highest in the state for low-income elementary schools. One year later, they scored 926 API, making them third highest in the state, and outperforming students at the wealthy Palo Alto Unified School District.

Rocketship public schools use advanced technology to reach students. Elementary students spend 25 percent of their time working at a computer, receiving individualized, interactive instruction through high-quality, on-line educational programs. In-class teachers provide the balance of their instruction. Use of on-line instruction saves the school \$500,000 per year.

These savings are devoted to principal training, teacher salaries and extra tutoring for struggling students. Each Rocketship school hires an Academic Dean to provide ongoing teacher training and additional help to students performing below grade level. The ability of the local school to shift money to higher salaries and extra tutoring is made possible by California's charter school law, which allows charter school administrators to allocate resources where they are needed most.

Case Study: New Orleans Charter Schools

After the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, Louisiana state officials took over all but 16 public schools in New Orleans and placed them in a state-run Recovery School District (RSD).³¹

²⁸ Statement by Steve Barr, Founder, Green Dot Schools, panel discussion "What Works: Changing Our Schools," Museum of History and Industry, Education Revolution Speaker Series, sponsored by the League of Education Voters and the City of Seattle, Seattle, Washington, October 25, 2010.

²⁹ "Is Zuckerberg spending his \$100 million wisely?" by Matt Miller, Post Partisan blog, *Washington Post*, September 24, 2010, at voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2010/09/is_zuckerberg_spending_his_100.html.

³⁰ This is an estimate based on budgeted expenditures of \$7.11 billion. See "Superintendent's 2010-11 Revised Final Budget, Unconsolidated Summary of Expenditures by Fund," Los Angeles Unified School District website, page ll-4, at www.notebook.lausd.net/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/CA_LAUSD/LAUSDNET/OFFICES/CFO_HOME/SUPERINTENDENT%202010-11%20REVISED%20FINAL%20BUDGET%2010-05-2010.PDF, and student enrollment figures of 678,000 from "LAUSD Fingertip Facts 2010-11," at www.notebook.lausd.net/pls/ptl/docs/PAGE/CA_LAUSD/LAUSDNET/OFFICES/COMMUNICATIONS/10-11FINGERTIPFACTS_FINAL.PDF.

³¹ "After the Deluge, A New Education System; Today close to 70% of New Orleans students attend charter schools," Leslie Jacobs, *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2010.

Since New Orleans was disrupted by a natural disaster, and nearly all the city's schools re-opened as charters, there was little opportunity for a few charter schools to "skim the best" students from the general population.

Seventy percent of New Orleans students attend public charters and their academic achievement is up dramatically.

The RSD program had been established in 2003 to allow students at failing public schools to leave the control of centralized school districts and make a new start. Instead of establishing a conventional, top-down school district to manage these new schools, Louisiana officials decided to allow New Orleans students to attend newly-founded charter public schools, then hold administrators at each school accountable for student learning.

All charter school applications were subjected to a rigorous screening process. Applications had to include a defined curriculum, multi-year operating plans, a clear and accountable leadership structure, and specific learning standards for students. New Orleans schools that fail to meet these standards have their charters revoked.

The initiative is a success. Today nearly 70 percent of New Orleans students attend charter public schools. These independent schools formulate and control their own budgets, hire their own teaching staff and design their own educational programs. Parent involvement is strongly encouraged. Parents choose their child's school, and no student is required to attend a geographically-based school over the parents' objections.

Academic results have been dramatic. The number of 4th graders passing state tests rose by nearly a third – from 49 percent in 2007 to 65 percent in 2010. The number of 8th graders passing state tests rose from 44 percent in 2007 to 58 percent in 2010.

In New Orleans high schools the transformation has been even more impressive. Since 2007, the percentage of students passing the High School Graduation Exit Exam in English rose 44 percent, from 36 percent passing in 2007, to 52 percent passing in 2010. Student scores in math rose over 40 percent, from 42 percent of students passing in 2007, to a 60 percent pass rate in 2010.³²

New Orleans presents a unique case study for education researchers. Since the entire city was disrupted by a natural disaster, and nearly all the city's schools re-opened as charters, there was little opportunity for a few charter schools to "skim the best" students from the general population. In fact, New Orleans public schools have achieved this dramatic improvement in learning while serving a *higher* percentage of low-income students – now 84 percent – than they did before the hurricane. In addition to coming from a poor background, many of these students had already missed months or even a whole year of learning before entering a charter public school.³³

Academic Studies of Student Learning in Charter Public Schools

Several large-scale studies show that charter public schools routinely perform better at educating hard-to-teach students than traditional schools. Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University, Sonali Murarka of the University of Pennsylvania and Jenny Kang of the National Bureau of Economic Research conducted a randomized study that compared students who win a lottery to attend a charter public school with students who applied but were not given a seat.

This methodology addresses the concern of critics that charter public schools "skim off the best" students in the neighborhood where the charter school is located. All students in the study had applied to attend a charter school. Local

³² "Student performance continues to rise!," by Leslie Jacobs, Recovery School District New Orleans, Eructate Now!, 2010 Test Scores, May 26, 2010, at <http://educatenow.net/2010/05/26/recovery-school-district-new-orleans-2010-spring-test-results-analysis/>.

³³ "After the Deluge, A New Education System; Today close to 70% of New Orleans students attend charter schools," Leslie Jacobs, *Wall Street Journal*, August 30, 2010.

officials then randomly approved some of these students to actually attend a charter public school, while the remainder were assigned to a traditional public school. The researchers then compared the academic levels achieved by the two groups.³⁴

Hoxby, Murarka and Kang found that lottery winners scored considerably higher on standardized math and reading tests than charter school applicants who were required to attend a traditional public school.³⁵ Students attending charter public schools scored 31 points higher in math and 23 points higher in English than similar students who attended traditional public schools.³⁶

In Massachusetts, The Boston Foundation and state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education “Informing the Debate” study found that:

“...Charter Schools – at both the middle and high school levels – have a very positive impact on student achievement. The results in math achievement for middle-school students are nothing short of remarkable.”³⁷

The study further notes that charter public schools are “popular with families” and that parents report these schools “...create the kinds of learning environments that benefit students.”

The study concludes, “Charter Schools in Boston are making real progress in breaking the persistent connection between poverty and poor [academic] results.”³⁸

To address the question of whether charter public schools “skim off the best” students, researchers used state data to compare students who had similar academic achievement and other traits *before* they attended a Commonwealth Charter or Pilot school.³⁹ Researchers also used randomized lottery results to make fair comparisons among students of similar backgrounds and levels of academic achievement.

Researchers found that Boston students who attended a charter public school, even those from poor backgrounds, received a consistently better education than their peers who remained in traditional schools. The numbers indicate “large positive effects...at both the middle school and high school levels” in math and English Language Arts for each year a student attends a charter public school.⁴⁰

A study by the RAND Corporation of charter public schools in eight states found that charters do not selectively accept the best students in a given area, leaving traditional public schools with lower-achieving students:

“We find no systematic evidence to support the fear that charter schools are skimming off the highest-achieving students. The prior test scores of students transferring into charter schools were near or below local (district

Researchers found that students who were able to attend a charter school by winning a lottery scored considerably higher on standardized math and reading tests than charter school applicants who were required to attend a traditional public school.

³⁴ “How New York City’s Charters Affect Achievement,” Caroline M. Hoxby, Sonali Murarka, Jenny Kang, principal investigators, The New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009, at www.nber.org/~schools/charterschoolseval/how_NYC_charter_schools_affect_achievement_sept2009.pdf.

³⁵ “Let the Charters Bloom, Why failing schools should be allowed to fail – and better schools to sprout in their place,” by Paul E. Peterson, Hoover Digest, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, July 2, 2010, at www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/35686.

³⁶ “The Charter Barter,” by Dana Goldstein, *The American Prospect*, October 13, 2009, at www.prospect.org/cs/articles?article=the_charter_barter.

³⁷ “Informing the Debate, Comparing Boston’s Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools,” by Atila Abdulkadiroglu (Duke University) et al., The Boston Foundation, January 2009, at www.tbf.org/uploadedFiles/tbforg/Utility_Navigation/Multimedia_Library/Reports/InformingTheDebate_Final.pdf.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, page 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, page 9.

wide or statewide) averages in every geographic location included in the study.”⁴¹

RAND researchers also found that opening a charter school does not drain resources away from other public schools in the area:

“There is no evidence in any of the locations that charter schools are negatively affecting the achievement of students in nearby TPSs [Traditional Public Schools].⁴²

After debunking two of the most persistent myths about charter public schools, RAND researchers found that charters can have significant positive effects on student learning. Students who attended a charter middle school and went on to a charter high school were seven to 15 percentage points more likely to graduate than those who attended a traditional public high school. In addition, students who attended a charter high school were 8 to 10 percentage points more likely to go on to college than graduates of a traditional public high school.⁴³

CREDO Study Methodology Not Reliable

As noted, teacher union executives strongly oppose charter public schools. Such opposition is understandable from their point of view; charter public school teachers are often not required to join a union as a condition of employment, or to have union dues automatically deducted from their monthly salary.

Teachers union executives often cast doubt on charter public schools and cite the work of researchers who did not collect data using randomized and objective methods. One such study was released in 2009 by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University. This study of charter public schools in 16 states includes these findings:⁴⁴

- Just 17 percent of charter public schools in these states provide students a superior education compared to traditional public schools
- Nearly half of charter public schools in these states provide educations that are not substantially different than traditional public schools
- 37 percent of charter public schools deliver results that are significantly worse than traditional public schools

These conclusions are not reliable, however, because the CREDO study suffers from serious methodological weaknesses. The authors compared the academic scores of real charter school students to hypothetical public school students.

The study did not use the best methodology for evaluating charter public school effects on student achievement; the authors did not use data from charter school lotteries.⁴⁵ Only randomized lottery data on large numbers of students allow researchers to examine objectively a school’s ability to raise student learning. This is the best way to address the question of whether charter public schools

⁴¹ “Charter Schools in Eight States, Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition,” by Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill, Kevin Booker, Stephanie Lavertu, Tim R. Sass, and John Witte, The RAND Corporation, Spring 2009, page xii, at www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG869.pdf Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, page xv.

⁴³ Ibid, page xv.

⁴⁴ “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, June 2009.

⁴⁵ “A Statistical Mistake in the CREDO Study of Charter Schools,” by Caroline Hoxby, Stanford University and the National Bureau of Economic Research, August 2009.

A RAND corporation study found that charter public schools have significant positive effects on student learning and do not skim off the best students.

“skim the best” students from the surrounding population. Through lotteries education officials impartially select students – all have chosen to go to a charter public school, but only a subset of applicants actually attend.

A further limitation is the CREDO study analysis is based on large numbers of students who were only in their first year at a charter public schools, too short a time to measure academic effects, and that a large number of the charter public schools in the study sample had only been open for a year or less.⁴⁶ In both cases, the data sets did not include enough depth of experience to provide useful conclusions about student performance in a charter school setting, as compared to the learning environment at a traditional public school.

Conclusion

It is the paramount duty of the state to provide for the education of all children residing within its borders. The experience of other states consistently shows that charter public schools can play a role in fulfilling this duty, especially since they regularly outperform traditional public schools in educating children.

In the 40 states where they are legal, charter public schools are popular with parents and the public. The artificial limits state lawmakers have placed on the number of charter schools, however, force school officials to use arbitrary means to distribute classroom slots. School-age families exhibit intense anxiety when their children are involved in a charter school lottery. The children who are chosen are overjoyed; children whose numbers are not selected are devastated. These high emotions indicate the strong feelings parents and children experience in their effort to get into a good public school. The waiting lists and lotteries indicate parents believe charter public schools can provide a high-quality education and a better life for their children.

Washington state lawmakers currently deny students access to charter public schools.

Yet since the 1990s, Washington’s traditional public schools have stagnated, with a drop-out rate of nearly 30 percent and academic test scores that remain disappointingly flat.

The research shows charter public schools provide a better, decentralized model for providing public education than traditional public schools. Some charter public schools have eliminated the achievement gap between black and white students. Charter public schools commonly achieve these remarkable academic results for less money than traditional public schools. Given this new evidence, policymakers should lift the ban on charter public schools in Washington state, and allow all students access to this proven option for learning.

In the 40 states where they are legal, charter public schools are popular with parents and the public. The waiting lists and lotteries indicate parents believe charter public schools can provide a high-quality education and a better life for their children.

⁴⁶ “Let the Charters Bloom,” by Paul E. Peterson, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, July 2, 2010, at www.hoover.org/publications/hoover-digest/article/35686.

About the Author

Liv Finne is Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of numerous studies on education reform, including “Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: Eight Practical Ways to Reverse the Decline of Public Schools,” “An Overview of Public School Funding in Washington,” “Early Learning Proposals in Washington State,” and “Reviewing the Research on Universal Preschool and All-Day Kindergarten.” Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as the business partner for Finne Architects, a small business she owns with her husband.



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