

POLICY NOTE

State tests show Washington's public charter schools are outperforming traditional schools

By Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education
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Key Findings:

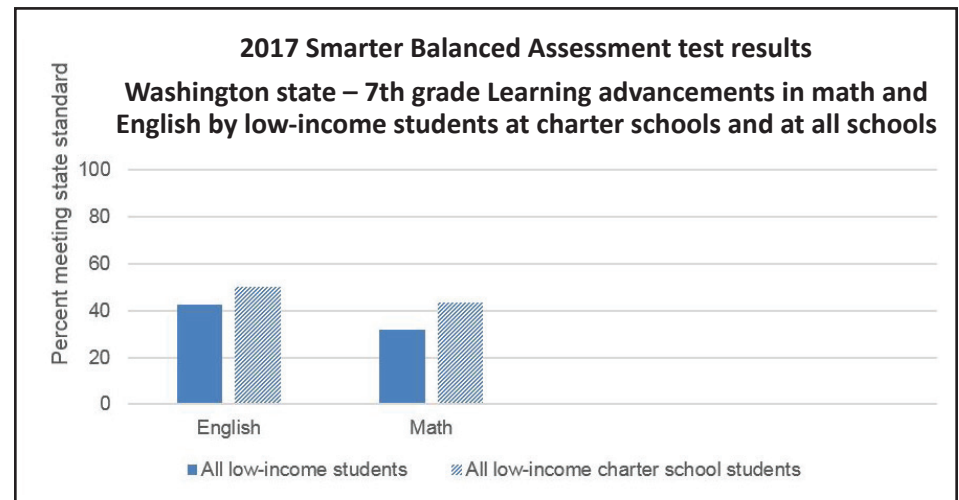
1. State test results show Washington's charter schools are delivering on their promise to help students catch up in school.
2. On average charter schools are more effective at teaching math and English to low-income students than traditional public schools.
3. Charter schools are popular with parents because they provide access to a better public education.
4. Defenders of the status quo fear charter schools because they see them as a threat to traditional public schools.
5. Charter schools take no money out of public education, because they are part of the public education system.
6. Despite these challenges, Washington's public charter schools are helping students acquire the skills and knowledge they need to learn.
7. Demand is so strong that most charter schools are oversubscribed and must conduct lotteries to decide which children can attend.

Introduction

As Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, the leading champion of allowing family choice in education, advances reform at the federal level, a new report shows how well public charter students perform on Washington state tests. The Washington State Charter School Association recently released results of last spring's state tests in reading and math.¹ These results show Washington's charter schools are delivering on their promise to help students catch up in school.

Effective at teaching math and English

Here are the numbers. The findings show that on average charter schools are more effective at teaching math and English to low-income students than traditional public schools.



Low-income students at charter public schools achieved increased gains in math and English learning compared to low-income students at traditional public schools

This is good news for charter school families in Washington state.

These results are especially good given the many political attacks made on these new schools. Charter schools opened in Washington state in August 2015, and within weeks, a lawsuit filed by the WEA teacher

¹ "Promising gains for Washington's charter public school students," by Maggie Meyers, Washington State Charter Schools Association, press release, September 13, 2017, at www.wacharters.org/smarterbalancedresults2017/.

union sought to cut off their funding. In 2016 the legislature, passed a bi-partisan bill to protect the state and federal funding of charter schools. Still, charters are denied the same local levy and capital funding that traditional schools receive.

Charter schools are popular with parents

Charter schools are popular with parents because they provide access to a better public education. This is especially true of parents whose children are trapped in failing inner-city schools, where children are blindly assigned to schools based on zip code.

Charter public schools are now common across the country. Today, some 3.1 million students in 43 states attend 6,700 charter schools. In addition, about one million children are on waiting lists. In Washington state, nearly every charter school has a waiting list, and demand is so great schools must hold lotteries to fill each entering class.

Defenders of the status quo fear charter schools because they see them as a threat to traditional public schools, even ones that fail to educate students. Actually, charter schools take no money out of public education, because charter schools are part of the public education system. Charter schools do, however, offer a new choice for parents, one that many of them enthusiastically embrace.

Parents in a charter school have a real voice in their local school. They can talk directly to the school principal and to the members of the charter school board. These local school leaders know they must educate students in order to attract families, or face financial pressures if families decide to go elsewhere.

Helping students catch up

Many charter school students arrive at their new schools one or more years behind in reading and math. In one shocking example, 29 percent of incoming sixth-graders at Green Dot Destiny Middle Charter School in Tacoma had not acquired the basic phonics and reading skills they should have learned in kindergarten and first grade. This charter school must first teach these students how to read, before its teachers can even start teaching the 6th-grade curriculum.

It is no mystery why incoming charter school students cannot read. In 2017, the State Board of Education's School Achievement Index identifies 365 failing public schools, where up to 50 percent of students drop out.² School officials routinely assign students to these schools. Failing public schools are located mostly in urban communities, and have a disproportionate impact on low-income and minority children.

Despite these challenges, Washington's public charter schools are helping students acquire the skills and knowledge they need to learn. At one charter school, Spokane International School, 85 percent and 71 percent of low-income 7th grade

2 "State School Achievement Index," Washington State Board of Education and Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Educational Service District and School District results for 2015-16, at <https://eds.ospi.k12.wa.us/wai/indexreport>.



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students passed the state test in English and math, respectively.³ These numbers exceed the state average for all students, which means that Spokane International has eliminated the academic achievement gap.

Conclusion

Clearly, parents are telling each other about charter schools. These popular choice schools have doubled their enrollment since last year, now at 2,400 students. Two new charter schools opened in Seattle this fall. Demand is so strong that most charter schools are oversubscribed and must conduct lotteries to decide which children can attend.

The powerful WEA teachers union is continuing its selfish and mean-spirited attacks on charter school families, but even this powerful union is no match for caring parents determined to give their children a better chance in life.

3 “Washington State Report Card,” Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC), Spokane International Academy, 2014-15, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington state, at www.reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/TemplateDetail.aspx?domain=SBAC&groupLevel=District&schoolId=7934&reportLevel=District&yrs=2016-17&year=2016-17&gradeLevelId=7&waslCategory=18&chartType=1.