



Guest Column

Charter Schools

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Assessing the Performance of Charter Schools

By Ron Zimmer and Brian Gill

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Few topics in education have garnered as much media attention in recent months as charter schools, which first appeared on the educational landscape in 1992 and now include some 3,000 schools operating in 40 states. Supporters hope that charter schools – publicly supported, autonomously operated schools of choice – will be able to cut through red tape and offer innovative and effective educational programs, provide new options to families, and promote healthy competition for conventional public schools. Opponents argue that charter schools are no more effective than conventional public schools, that they may exacerbate racial segregation, that they create fiscal strains for school districts, and that too many of them are fly-by-night operations.

The critics have grown louder over time, concerned by some prominent scandals (such as the abrupt closure of a large network of charter schools in California, just before the beginning of the current school year) and by the steadily increasing quantity of public resources consumed by the growing charter sector. The stakes also have been raised by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which includes conversion to charter status among the sanctions that states may apply to chronically failing public schools.

The charter controversy has reached fever pitch this fall, fueled by a front-page *New York Times* article headlined “Nation's Charter Schools Lagging Behind, U.S. Test Scores Reveal.” The article cited research from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which used National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores to compare the performance of a nationwide sample of charter schools to a sample of conventional public schools. On average, the AFT found that charter school students had lower NAEP scores than did students in conventional public schools. The AFT analysis also concluded that low-income students and central-city students performed better in conventional public schools than in charter schools. Many critics seized on these results, interpreting them as evidence that charter schools are academically ineffective.

Charter supporters responded quickly and vigorously with scathing criticisms of the AFT study in a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* and press releases from the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, within weeks, Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby produced her own national study of charter schools. Hoxby used the results of state-mandated tests to compare the performance of charter schools to conventional public schools that are physically located near the charter schools. She found that charter students were 3% more likely than non-charter

students in nearby schools to be proficient in reading and 2% more likely to reach proficient levels in mathematics.

This flurry of charges and countercharges has left many wondering what to believe about the academic performance of charter schools. We suggest that neither the AFT study nor the Hoxby study provides adequate evidence for assessing the relative performance of charter schools and conventional public schools. The authors of the studies might well recognize their limitations, but those limitations might not be clear to policymakers and the general public.

The first and most important problem with both studies is they lacked access to the kind of data that is necessary to estimate the added educational value that schools contribute to student learning. At any point in time, student achievement is a reflection of the performance of schools, of the amount of time spent in particular schools, and of various other factors related to families, peers and communities.

To assess school performance, researchers need data that is conducive to methods that can account for the amount of time spent in different schools and factor out the various nonschool forces at work, because different schools serve widely varying populations of students. Dealing with this methodological problem is challenging under any circumstances, and it is especially problematic in evaluating charter schools, where students are likely to differ from those in conventional public schools simply by virtue of the fact they have chosen to attend. Differences between students attending charter schools and conventional public schools may be related to a student's performance in positive or negative ways.

Snapshot comparisons of average achievement levels across schools at a single point in time, such as the comparisons made in both the AFT study and the Hoxby study, are not well suited to account for differences in the background characteristics of students (known among researchers as "selection bias"). In the AFT study, for example, the charter school students whose NAEP scores were lower than national averages may well come from communities where achievement levels are chronically low. Hoxby's study tries to address the community effects by comparing charter schools to public schools that are nearby, but she does not address potential differences within communities. If the students who choose to attend charter schools tend to be higher achieving than students who stay behind, her method will overestimate the effectiveness of charter schools.

In short, neither of these studies provides a comparison group for charter school students that is convincingly similar in background characteristics, and therefore neither provides good information about the academic effectiveness of charter schools.

There are two good ways of dealing with the selection bias problem: randomized experiments and longitudinal analyses. Both methods allow researchers to account for the amount of time a student has spent in a particular school, and both methods address differences among student populations served. Randomized experiments are often considered the "gold standard" in research because, by assigning subjects randomly to the treatment condition or control condition, they ensure differences observed later are the result of treatment rather than the result of background differences between the subject groups.

A few studies – including a study of Chicago charter schools by Hoxby and two national studies recently funded by the U.S. Department of Education – are beginning to examine oversubscribed charter schools that randomly admit students through lotteries. These studies are likely to

produce very good estimates of the academic effectiveness of the particular charter schools included.

For assessing the effects of charter schools on a large scale, longitudinal analyses may be more appropriate than randomized experiments. Charter schools that are not oversubscribed do not conduct lotteries for admissions, so they cannot be assessed by randomized designs. Longitudinal designs minimize the problem of selection bias by examining the academic gains made by individual students over time, factoring out those students' baseline achievement levels. Moreover, they permit "within-student" comparisons of achievement gains, examining changes in the achievement trajectories of individual students who move from conventional public schools to charter schools or vice versa.

Longitudinal, panel data sets for individual students have been used in the best existing state-level studies of charter schools, including studies by Bifulco and Ladd in North Carolina, Gronberg and Jansen, and Hanushek, Kain and Rivkin (separately) in Texas, and RAND in California. These studies, however, have not yet converged to produce a clear and consistent finding about the academic effectiveness of charter schools across the country. Indeed, we should expect to see charter effects varying across the country, because charter laws vary widely in different states (as the AFT study acknowledges, in a section of the report that has been largely ignored in the public debate). Attempting to calculate an average charter school effect for the nation as a whole will provide little useful information to policymakers, who need to know how to write charter laws to make them effective.

Finally, charter schools may have a variety of important effects that are not captured in the test scores of their students, even in the best-designed studies. Policymakers and the public also need to know how charter schools affect the students who remain in conventional public schools – either positively or negatively. These "systemic" effects of charters are a matter of great consequence, given that most students remain in conventional public schools. The evidence on the point is promising but very meager as yet. And beyond test scores, policymakers and the public need to know how charter schools affect long-term outcomes such as high school graduation, college attendance and civic participation. These are critical issues, about which research is only beginning to scratch the surface.

The bottom line is researchers have powerful tools for assessing the effects of charter schools, but they are not in evidence in the two studies that have received the bulk of press attention this fall. Nevertheless, research is proceeding in directions that will ultimately provide much stronger evidence about the effects of charter schools.

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