



CHARTER SCHOOL AUTHORIZERS AND STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF OHIO

Overview

The importance of effective charter school authorizers (the agencies that approve and oversee charter schools) is now commonly recognized—there even exists a National Association of Charter School Authorizers that seeks to improve authorizer practices. A new working paper commissioned by the Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) aims to use the variation in charter school performance in one state to assess one of the key levers of charter school policy: the decision about which types of organizations may authorize charter schools. While some states only allow districts to authorize charter schools, others allow a range of authorizers, including the state, districts, nonprofit organizations, counties, and higher educational institutions. In *Charter School Authorizers and Student Achievement*, authors Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill, and Kaitlin Obenauf use individual student-level data from Ohio—a state that allows a wide range of agencies, including nonprofit organizations, local school boards, education service centers, and state universities, to be authorizers—to examine the effectiveness of various authorizer types.¹

Findings

Authorizer type is only one of many factors contributing to the variation in performance among charter schools; it is surely not the most important factor. High performers and low performers exist among schools overseen by each type of authorizer, and variation in school performance is likely to be greater *within* each authorizer type than it is *between* different authorizer types. Nonetheless, this analysis suggests that authorizer type can make a difference in performance. Nonprofit authorizers in Ohio are, on average, producing achievement gains (both in math and reading) that lag behind the gains of students in other charter schools. This result will probably come as no surprise to many observers of the Ohio charter scene; lax oversight by some Ohio authorizers has been pointed out before.

Implications

Even if the difference in charter school achievement among authorizer type is not large, it is perhaps more readily susceptible to policy intervention than are many other factors determining school performance. There may be a tension, however, between the goal of producing highly effective charter schools and the goal of producing a large number of charter options. In the absence of nonprofit authorizers, Ohio would almost certainly have a lot fewer charter schools. Virtually all of the growth in the state's charter sector between 2004 and 2008 was attributable to nonprofit authorizers. Another complicating factor in interpreting these results is that Ohio state law allows charter schools to switch authorizers. It is possible that low-performing charter schools are more likely to shift to nonprofit organizations than to other authorizer types.

What does this mean for policymakers seeking to promote the growth of the charter sector while simultaneously ensuring high quality? This analysis suggests that, at least in Ohio, they may do better to promote high-quality authorizing practices rather than focusing on authorizer type.

Charter School Authorizers and Student Achievement, by Ron Zimmer, Brian Gill, and Kaitlin Obenauf, is available at http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/379.

1. In Ohio, charter schools are called community schools. To be consistent with the general literature, we refer to these schools as charter schools.