

OVERVIEW

Should Charter Schools Be More Different Than Alike?

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Over the last three years, *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* has provided new evidence and analysis about what is going on in charter schools, how well they are doing, where they need to improve, and what can be learned from the research on these types of public schools. Past volumes have outlined how achievement studies should be conducted and interpreted, suggested how to achieve more effective public oversight of charter schools and how to eliminate barriers to growth, and presented nationwide trends in the number of charters opened and closed and the characteristics of these schools.

In this year's edition, the National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) brings new evidence to some of these past questions and turns to some new ones. The essays in this volume provide:

- An update on how charter school students are performing academically (chapter 1);
- New data about how charter schools approach teaching and learning (chapter 2);
- Analysis of what college-prep charter schools offer inner-city students (chapter 3);
- An overview of how charter schools tackle special education (chapter 4); and
- An argument for mapping the demand side of charter schooling as a growth strategy (chapter 5).

What is striking throughout these essays is that charter schools are more different than alike, not only in terms of the populations they serve, the academic missions they pursue, and the results they produce, but also in their response to local need and capacity.

The essays in this volume show, for example, that:

NATIONAL CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT IS PROMISING OVERALL, BUT HIGHLY VARIED

A single generalization, like “on average, charter schools are at best slightly more effective than the schools their students would otherwise have attended,” can hide as much as it reveals. We learn a great deal more by asking how and why charter school effectiveness varies. In chapter 1, Julian Betts and Y. Emily Tang show us that there is strong evidence that charter schools are outperforming other public schools in many ways. But their analysis of existing charter school outcome studies also indicates that:

- Charter school studies are highly varied in quality. The maxim *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) applies here: only about a third of all charter studies can be trusted to give a fair picture of whether students are better off in a charter school or not.
- High-quality studies are more likely than weaker studies to find positive charter school results on student learning, in both reading and math.
- Even high-quality studies show tremendous variability in results. Charter schools perform much better in some localities than in others. Elementary charter schools, in general, appear to outperform charter middle and high schools.

Variation in charter school results has been a source of criticism in the past, with some observers lamenting “mixed” results. Betts and Tang argue, however, that a high degree of variation in achievement outcomes is an entirely predictable and possibly even a desirable short-term product of charter schooling. Since innovation and experimentation rely on diverse strategies and some risk taking, both failures and successes are to be expected. Local variation, again with different results, is also a factor that needs to be taken into account. Some localities and local charter schools have a very good grip on what they’re trying to accomplish; others are hoping for the best.

In the long run, the success of the charter movement will depend on whether it is able to build on successes and abandon failures. To reinforce success and eliminate failure, we need to understand what explains these variations. A second generation of achievement research in these areas is urgently needed. What are the attributes of highly productive versus unproductive charter schools? What are more successful states and cities doing that others might replicate? What explains the apparent low performance of charter high schools and what can be done about it?

CHARTER SCHOOLS DISTINGUISH THEMSELVES FROM TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN THEIR EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES AND OFFERINGS

In chapter 2, Betheny Gross and Kirsten Martens Pochop present national data showing how charter schools approach teaching and learning. From this analysis, the charter sector appears to be using its autonomy to specialize. Charter schools are differentiating themselves compared to traditional public schools. Charter schools are more likely than other public schools to focus their educational designs on specific missions and populations; adapt their school day and year to meet the needs of their students; customize their programs to help struggling students; and bring college-prep courses to inner-city students. Even within the charter sector, there is great diversity in approach and specialization. As with the achievement results described above, charter schools are proving themselves more different than alike.

COLLEGE-PREP CHARTERS ARE AN IMPORTANT NEW DEVELOPMENT FOR INNER-CITY STUDENTS

By providing access to proven college-prep models (and suburban school performance expectations), charter schools appear to be offering something not otherwise available in many communities. In chapter 3, Paul Hill explains this important trend in charter high schools. A number of schools and nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) are offering inner-city, disadvantaged students access to a college-prep education normally seen only in competitive magnet schools and Catholic and suburban public schools. These schools are relentlessly focused and specialized, with demanding intellectual climates and curricula, longer school days, frequent assessments, and an intense school-wide teaching culture that continually reinforces the belief that all students will go on to college and be successful there.

These schools are also vividly described in David Whitman's recent book *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism*.¹ The performance results are often astounding. Significant momentum toward further replication of these models in the charter sector is developing, but Hill points out that their existence does not make everyone happy. By no means do these models fit traditional notions held by school boards and administrators, nor union expectations about teacher workloads and pay schedules.

CHARTER SCHOOLS DELIVER NEW MODELS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

Due to the special vulnerability of their children and the due process rights built into special education statutes, parents of special-needs children are extreme choosers. They seek, and have the power of law behind them, the precise fit for their children's unique, and often highly complex, needs. By increasing the number and type of options available, charter schools represent an important addition to the public education landscape for these parents. Some charters have used their autonomy to create especially effective programs, which deserve to be viewed as promising new models for public education writ large.

NCSRPN has developed a number of useful papers in the area of special education, currently in preparation for separate publication. In chapter 4, Joanne Jacobs and I provide an overview of this emerging field. The studies sponsored by NCSRPN show that charter schools offer options for a large number of families with special-needs students. In fact, some charter schools have developed informal reputations as havens for these students. In many cases, particularly for those students with less severe disabilities, the variety of instructional approaches offered by charter schools can serve as beneficial interventions. Effective inclusion for students with less severe needs seems to be a particular strength of many charter schools, although the success of these efforts has not been widely discussed or even recognized.

Educating children with special needs can be an expensive and legally complex endeavor, one that not all small, stand-alone charter schools can handle effectively. To ensure that charter schools add overall benefit to the special-needs community, funders and policymakers should explore a variety of policy, research, and investment opportunities in charter schools and special education. These include:

- exploring the definition of "least restrictive environment" in a school choice context;
- assessing academic growth of children with disabilities in charter schools;
- identifying new approaches to special education;
- incubating national, state, and regional technical assistance networks; and
- seeding special education financial risk pools for charter schools.

A MORE SOPHISTICATED UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIVERSE CONSTITUENT DEMAND IS NEEDED TO EFFECTIVELY GROW THE CHARTER SECTOR

In chapter 5, Rick Hess and Bruno Manno make a compelling case that, by focusing on creating a strong supply of new schools, charter school funders, policymakers, and advocates have largely ignored the different needs of the various constituencies on the “demand side” of charter schooling. Understanding what various types of students, parents, teachers, principals, school districts, and others want and need could allow greater targeting of charter schools and would also give focus to philanthropic investments and policy changes. In the long run, the authors argue, greater effort to match schools to expressed needs could pay off in increased student achievement.

Though charter schools are already highly diverse, Hess and Manno suggest that meeting the requirements of parents and other constituencies could make them more so by “mapping and unbundling choice.” They argue that because providers are encouraged (and routinely seek) to develop “whole-school” solutions, they wind up replicating the traditional services and structure of existing schools. While there is a demand for unbundled products that focus on discrete units—for example, human capital improvements; organizational, pedagogical, operational, and technological issues—the current charter movement is unable to encourage demand for these services because it is “expected to solve the entire problem of K–5 or 6–8 or 9–12 schooling.” Lowering this “high and unrealistic bar,” argue Hess and Manno, would permit many new, entrepreneurial problem-solvers to take their place at the table.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

What does all this add up to? Despite some promising overall findings presented in these essays, charter school performance and practices continue to be very difficult to summarize. Chartering turns out to be less of a cohesive movement than a collection of distinct local efforts with vastly diverse approaches and results. The policy question at hand is whether that diversity is a problem to be solved or an opportunity to be embraced. If viewed as a problem to be solved, the charter movement may be in danger of repeating the very same mistakes, with regard to whole-school solutions and top-down fixes, that it set out to correct in the traditional education system.

The reality is that the charter movement is now caught up in the larger dynamics of accountability-based reform. In NCSR studies of charter authorizers, many of the

biggest and most prominent, such as Central Michigan University (CMU), take a very top-down approach to oversight and are willing to impose a specific idea of good instruction and replace board members for the schools they oversee, even if that means all schools end up with similar approaches. Nobody knows whether such centralized approaches to charter oversight produce better results than the more arms-length relationships promoted by authorizers such as the State University of New York (SUNY), but the resemblance to conventional school district oversight is striking.

More broadly, many charter schools complain of an ever-increasing set of state-level rules and regulations with which they must comply. Certainly federal adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements make it harder for charters to develop unique approaches to standards, assessment, and accountability. And rules about “highly qualified teachers” have likely meant charter schools must rely more heavily on traditional hiring pools than they might otherwise choose to do.

These various layers of re-regulation make some wonder whether the charter movement is simply re-creating the district structure that it was supposed to help schools escape. To be sure, these are largely well-intentioned efforts among government agencies and private funders to promote more consistent quality in public schools in general and sometimes in charter schools specifically. It is an open question, however, whether the level of regulation and centralization we see in chartering today is *too much too soon* and imposes too many potential costs without commensurate benefits. Chartering actually needs state standards and responsible government performance oversight to fulfill its promise. But too much rigidity and not enough tolerance for risk in that oversight is a recipe for mediocrity.

As a general rule, centralized strategies are appropriate and most effective when the answers to problems are evident and can be applied consistently with reasonable likelihood of good results.² It is arguable that this is not the case in public education today. We do not know for certain what kinds of instructional approaches and organizational strategies work for all different types of students.

With pressure to quickly move back toward the conventional regulatory processes, staffing and curriculum approaches, and risk-averse strategies of conventional school districts, the charter community may be a bit more likely to achieve somewhat higher test scores, but in the process it may begin to drive away the entrepreneurial principals,

teachers, and niche educational services that are responsible for creating and sustaining some of the highest-performing and most innovative charter schools.

COULD GREATER DIVERSITY PRODUCE MORE CONSISTENT RESULTS?

Would an alternative approach conceivably produce consistently high-quality results with less potential cost? It may be, for instance, that an emphasis on research and development would do more to support breakthrough results in chartering than greater standardization. Research and development focuses on continuous improvement by investing resources in high-potential experiments, deep analysis and assessment, and actions that promote more effective practices and eliminate ineffective ones.

This could easily be the path of the future for charters. Based on the essays in this report, examples of potentially productive R&D strategies include:

- greater investment in research to uncover the reasons for variation in quality;
- exploration of policy actions to get states and cities to copy the regulatory and policy frameworks employed by successful peers;
- incentives for charter founders to experiment with promising new technologies;
- increased policy pressure for authorizers to close low-performing schools and help establish an ongoing pipeline of new schools to replace them; and
- mapping family, teacher, and government demands that could more effectively be met by targeted niche providers than by creating more new schools.

An R&D strategy will most certainly fail, however, if it fails to exploit the potential advantage of the charter sector's decentralized nature. Rather than responding to uneven quality in charter schools with centralized solutions, policymakers and funders must think creatively about new regulatory strategies that are appropriate to decentralized systems. For example, second-generation state charter evaluation systems would promote outcome measures that go beyond AYP while still holding schools strictly accountable for results. Exemptions from AYP requirements to allow measurement of multiple outcomes and value-added, for example, might be appropriate for charter schools overseen by the country's most sophisticated authorizers. Smarter state and federal regulatory systems would consider the cost of every new reporting or compliance requirement against the likely payoff. Investments in charter school growth would pur-

sue unbundled supply strategies and choice policies would allow parents more flexibility to choose a la carte services from charters.

People correctly argue that public education is a special case when it comes to experimentation and tolerance for risk. Parents do not (and should not) want risky public schooling programs. But it is also true that charter schools need not be recklessly experimental in order to produce dramatically better results. In future efforts to increase overall quality in the charter school movement, responsible variation in approach and even in results should be welcome and encouraged as long as there is continuous system-wide improvement in student learning and achievement.

NOTES

1. David Whitman, *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism* (Washington, DC: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2008).
2. F.A. Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *American Economic Review* 35 (September 1945): 519-30; and Rhys Andrews et al., "Centralization, Organizational Strategy, and Public Service Performance," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (February 2008).