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Charter Schools

By Nancy Protheroe

Since their start in 1992, charter schools have moved to a central place in conversations about public education and about education policy. Discussions are likely to increase due to the recent federal emphasis on charter schools as a potential lever for broad-scale school improvement. According to The National Charter School Research Project:

With the Race to the Top program encouraging the expansion of charter schools as part of the effort to reform the nation's lowest-performing district schools, charters are getting a new look—particularly in states that now ban or severely limit them. In response, many states are considering legislation to expand the number of charter schools allowed. (The National Charter School Research Project, 2010, para. 4)

However, as the following results from the annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools indicated, confusion about charter schools remains even as public interest in them has increased:

During the last five years, Americans' approval of charter schools has increased by 15%, as almost two out of three Americans now say they favor the idea of charter schools. At the same time, Americans still don't understand charter schools. They're evenly split on whether charter schools are in fact public schools (they are) or if they can teach religion (they can't). The majority continue to believe that charter schools can charge tuition (they can't), and almost three out of four Americans believe charter schools can select the

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Just the Facts

- "With the Race to the Top program encouraging the expansion of charter schools as part of the effort to reform the nation's lowest-performing district schools, charters are getting a new look.... Many states are considering legislation to expand the number of charter schools allowed." (National Charter School Research Project, 2010, para. 4)
- "It is virtually impossible to describe the 'typical' charter high school. While many charter high schools are almost indistinguishable from a traditional public high school, others look very different." (Yatsko, Gross, & Christensen, 2009, p. 5)
- "Charter middle and high schools produce test-score achievement gains that are, on average, similar to those of traditional public schools." (Zimmer, et al., 2009, p. 1)

students who attend [on the basis of ability] (they can't). (Bushaw & McNee, 2009, p. 13)

Zimmer et al. (2009) characterized the discussion about charter schools as sometimes contentious, with arguments presented both in support of and against the existence of charter schools:

Proponents contend that charter schools expand educational choices for students, increase innovation, improve student achievement, and promote healthy competition with traditional public schools. Opponents argue that charter schools lead to increased racial or ethnic stratification of students, skim the best students from traditional public schools, reduce resources for such schools, and provide no real improvement in student outcomes. (p. 1)

What Does the Charter School Universe Look Like?

By examining charter schools, their history, and their current status in terms of numbers and students served, Zimmer et al. (2009) found that:

Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate outside the direct control of local school districts, under a publicly issued charter that gives them greater autonomy than other public schools have over curriculum, instruction, and operations. Their students, or the students' parents, choose the school rather than being assigned based on residential location. The first U.S. charter school opened in 1992. (p. 1)

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2009b) provided additional profile and trend data on charter schools and the students who attend them:

- More than 1.4 million students attend over 4,600 public charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia
- 62% of public charter school students are

non-white and 48% qualify for free and reduced price lunch (compared with 45% non-white and 45% free and reduced price lunch in all public schools)

- While 56% of students attend charter schools in large cities, a growing percentage of students are enrolled in charter schools in rural areas (14% compared with 11% five years ago)
- Nearly 30% of students attend charter schools with non-traditional grade configurations, such as Kindergarten through 12th grade (compared with less than 10% of non-charter school students)
- Nationally, the average public charter school has been open 5.9 years. (p. 3)

“As charter schools play an increasingly central role in education reform agendas across the United States, it becomes more important to have current and comprehensible analysis about how well they do educating their students.” (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009b, p. 1)

Studies on Charter School Performance

Comparing charter school performance with that of traditional public schools is complex from several perspectives. One reason is that “it is virtually impossible to describe the ‘typical’ charter high school” (Yatsko, Gross, & Christensen, 2009, p. 5). Researchers Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2010) discussed other problems associated with conducting research that compares charters with traditional public schools:

Broad discrepancies in state charter laws, achievement tests and metrics make large-scale analyses or comparisons of outcomes difficult.... A second issue in the achievement literature emerges due to selection bias, or the concern that students who

self-select into charter or choice programs are not a random sample of all public school students. In other words, charter school attendees are not comparable to their public school peers in a basic but difficult-to-measure way. (p. 13)

The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2009a) also discussed the problem of achievement “outliers” within the charter school population:

It is important to note that there are a small but impressive number of public charter schools and networks of charter schools that are dramatically exceeding academic expectations. At the same time, there are a small but depressing number of public charter schools performing at the bottom of the heap. Any study that looks at state-wide or city-wide average student performance will not adequately capture these outliers. (p. 2)

Research Findings on Student Achievement

A study by Stanford University’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), with the cooperation of 15 states and the District of Columbia, used longitudinal student achievement data to create “a national pooled analysis of the impact of charter schooling on student learning gains” (2009b, p. 1) and determined that

For each charter school student, a virtual twin is created based on students who match the charter student’s demographics, English language proficiency and participation in special education or subsidized lunch programs. Virtual twins were developed for 84 percent of all the students in charter schools. The resulting matched longitudinal comparison is used to test whether students who attend charter schools fare better than if they had instead attended traditional public schools in their community. (p. 1)

CREDO’s analysis (2009b) found a “wide variation in performance” among charter schools compared to the traditional public schools:

The study reveals that a decent fraction of charter schools, 17 percent, provide superior education opportunities for their students. Nearly half of the charter schools nationwide have results that are no different from the local public school options and over a third, 37 percent, deliver learning results that are significantly worse than their students would have realized had they remained in traditional public schools. (p. 1)

CREDO also found that geographic patterns existed. In five areas (AR, CO-Denver, IL-Chicago, LA, MO) charter schools produced higher learning gains than traditional schools, in six states (AZ, FL, MN, NM, OH, TX) they had lower than average gains, and in four states (CA, DC, GA, NC) they had mixed results or gains that were similar between the two groups. In addition, CREDO (2009b) found:

Charter students in elementary and middle school grades have significantly higher rates of learning than their peers in traditional public schools, but students in charter high schools and charter multi-level schools have significantly worse results. Charter schools have different impacts on students based on their family backgrounds. For Blacks and Hispanics, their learning gains are significantly worse than that of their traditional school twins. However, charter schools are found to have better academic growth results for students in poverty. English Language Learners realize significantly better learning gains in charter schools. Students in Special Education programs have about the same outcomes. Students do better in charter schools over time. First year charter students on average experience a decline in learning, which may reflect a combination of mobility effects and the experience of a

charter school in its early years. Second and third years in charter schools see a significant reversal to positive gains. (p. 6)

Although a review that was critical of the technical approach CREDO took was issued by Caroline Hoxby, another Stanford researcher, CREDO (2009a) responded with a defense of the statistical approach taken. The federal What Works Clearinghouse (2010) then reviewed the CREDO study and found it to be “consistent with WWC standards with reservations,” stating:

Although the study matched charter school students to traditional public school students based on demographic characteristics and test scores, it is possible that there were other differences between the two groups that were not accounted for in the analysis, and these differences could have influenced achievement growth. (WWC Rating, Cautions)

Hoxby, Murarka, and Kang (2009) studied the impact of charter schools in New York City. They compared the progress of students who entered a lottery to attend a charter school and were selected (lotteried-in) to students who entered a lottery but were not selected (lotteried-out) and instead attended traditional public schools. Hoxby et al. matched students not only on such factors as race and poverty but assumed that “motivation and family’s interest in education” (2009, p. vii) would be similar between the two groups. They concluded that, although the lotteried-out students, as a group, did stay on grade level as they moved from kindergarten through eighth grade,

a student who attended a charter school for all of grades kindergarten through eight would close about 86 percent of the “Scarsdale-Harlem achievement gap” in math and 66 percent of the achievement gap in English. (viii)

However, this report also had detractors. Reardon (2009) recognized that the approach that compared achievement of lotteried-in students to those who were lotteried-out “provides the *opportunity* to observe unbiased estimates of charter school effects” (p. 4). However, he expressed concern that some statistical approaches likely overstated the impact of charter schools and specifically the “Scarsdale-Harlem” conclusion. For example, although the Hoxby et al. analysis discussed students who had been enrolled in charters from kindergarten through eighth grade, this was likely true of a small subset of children, with extrapolation of data used for much of the data set.

An eight-state study by RAND found that “charter middle and high schools produce test-score achievement gains that are, on average, similar to those of traditional public schools” (Zimmer et al., 2009, p. 1). Betts and Tang (2008) reviewed the literature on charter schools and pointed to a “lack of rigorous studies” (p. 1). Using only the 13 studies they identified as rigorous, Betts and Tang reanalyzed data and found mixed results:

Two cases in which charter schools appear quite frequently to outperform traditional public schools are elementary school reading and middle school math, although the effect sizes are small in the latter case. Conversely, charter schools often significantly underperform in high school reading and math. (p.1)

Other Impacts on Student Outcomes

RAND found that “charter high school students had a higher probability of graduating and attending college” (Zimmer et al., 2009, p. 1). Booker, Sass, Gill, and Zimmer (2010) focused their research on charter high schools in Florida and Chicago. Controlling for student demographics, they found that “the estimated impact of attending a charter high school on the probability of obtaining a high school diploma is positive in both Florida and Chicago” (Methods,

RAND found that “charter high school students had a higher probability of graduating and attending college.”

para. 1). In addition, “among the study population of charter 8th graders, students who attended a charter high school in 9th grade are 8 to 10 percentage points more likely to attend college than similar students who attended a traditional public high school” (Results, para. 1).

Additional Perspectives on Charter Schools

Winters (2009) related the “collateral effects” of charters on traditional public schools, and several studies have provided additional information about these. For example, RAND found that

- Charter schools do not generally draw the top students away from traditional public schools.
- [There is] no evidence that charter schools substantially affect achievement in nearby traditional public schools. (Zimmer et al., 2009, p. 1)

However, the RAND study also found variation among states, emphasizing how important it is to conduct more localized studies.

Concerns About Segregation

Some opponents of charters schools, as well as some researchers, expressed concern that charter schools may be increasing racial or economic segregation in both the charters themselves and the traditional public schools from which they draw students. A study conducted by The Civil Rights Project at UCLA addressed this issue. Frankenberg et al. (2010) analyzed federal data on charter school enrollment from 40 states, the District of Columbia, and several metropolitan areas and found that:

Charter schools are more racially isolated than traditional public schools in virtually every state and large metropolitan area in the nation. While there are examples of charter schools with vibrant diversity, this report shows these schools to be the exception. (p. 80)

Frankenberg et al. identified additional themes from their analysis:

Charter schools attract a higher percentage of black students than traditional public schools, in part because they tend to be located in urban areas.... While segregation for blacks among all public schools has been increasing for nearly two decades, black students in charter schools are far more likely than their traditional public school counterparts to be educated in intensely segregated settings....

Charter school trends vary substantially across different regions of the country. Latinos are under-enrolled in charter schools in some Western states where they comprise the largest share of students. At the same time, a dozen states (including those with high concentrations of Latino students like Arizona and Texas) report that a majority of Latino charter students attend intensely segregated minority schools. Patterns in the West and in a few areas in the South, the two most racially diverse regions of the country, also suggest that charters serve as havens for white flight from public schools. Finally, in the industrial Midwest, more students enroll in charter schools compared to other regions, and midwestern charter programs display high concentrations of black students. (pp. 4–5)

Frankenberg et al. also expressed concern that “major gaps in multiple federal data sources make it difficult to answer basic, fundamental questions about the extent to which charter schools enroll and concentrate low-income students and English Language Learners (ELLs)” (p. 5).

What Can Be Learned From Charter Schools?

In a study of charter schools in Indiana, Plucker (2008) discussed the potential for flexibility and innovation in charter schools:

Although innovative programs are seen in some charter schools (such as Montessori curriculum or project-based schools),

it is important to note that similar innovations can be seen in some traditional public schools. Charter schools do utilize flexibility in staffing, class size, curriculum, and teaching materials decisions and in the length of school days and school years. Charter schools are able [to] be somewhat more flexible in adapting and changing curriculum (although all school corporations may request waivers to do the same). Several charter schools have changed their school calendar or their instructional programs—often utilizing calendars and schedules that lengthen the school day or add instructional time to the day itself. (p. 13)

How do parents view charter schools? More than a decade ago, when charter schools were just beginning to receive attention at the national level, researchers surveyed parents and teachers affiliated with charter schools and asked why charters were attractive to them. Parents indicated factors such as school size, a school philosophy closer to their own, increased opportunity for parent involvement, and the perception that teachers and curriculum in the charter would be better were all important to their decision to enroll their students in charters. Key reasons for teachers included the school's educational philosophy, the opportunity to work with like-minded teachers and administrators, and small school size (Vanourek, Manno, Finn, & Bierlein, 1997).

A more recent study by Yatsko et al. (2009) focused on the characteristics of charter schools and highlighted the reasons why they are attractive to students, their families, or staff members. Charter schools

- Often have more focused and strategic missions, serving either a specific subgroup of students or focusing on a specific type of instruction
- Are more likely to tailor instructional approaches and curriculum to individual student needs, for example, by having a cultural focus or by providing special supports for struggling students

- Are more likely to focus on college preparation even in schools serving heavily minority, low-income student populations
- Have a tendency to actively seek out teachers with the ability to connect with students; with schools able to “take advantage of the flexibility they had in certification and job description to look beyond the traditional pool of certified education school graduates” (p. 11)
- Aggressively structure conditions of employment, for example, by “experimenting with compensation and contractual arrangements that value performance over tenure” (p. 13) and also by “capitalizing on teachers’ outside interests” (p. 13)
- Use small and relationship-based schools to build community
- Experiment with unusual grade and administrative configurations, such as high schools that expand the grades served downward and “flattening out of the administrative team by distributing key leadership tasks and decisions to interested and capable teachers” (p. 16).

However, there are clearly elements of some charter schools that might be difficult for traditional public schools to put in place. For example, Education Sector (2009) points to the extra instructional time provided to students in the KIPP program as compared to traditional public schools—as much as 60% more time each year.

In Summary

Charter schools are likely to become an increasing strong presence in educating young people. Research indicates that—just as within traditional public schools—their success with educating students to high standards is mixed. Some of them do better, some worse, and some just as well as traditional public schools. As the research shows, it is difficult to measure and compare the performance of traditional public schools and charter schools with regard to student achievement. But all public schools must be held accountable when they are not high-performing, and recognized for their success when they are. [PRR](#)

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