

March 20, 2012

LOGIN | REGISTER | SUBSCRIBE

Get 2-Week FREE Trial >>

Sign Up for FREE E-Newsletters

Browse archived issues

Current Issue

TOPICS | BLOGS | REPORTS & DATA | EVENTS | DISCUSSIONS | OPINION | MULTIMEDIA

See how we're saving other districts time and money. **Blackboard collaborate.** DOWNLOAD THE WHITEPAPER

Subscribe to **Education Week** Risk-Free

Published Online: March 5, 2012
 Published in Print: March 7, 2012, as **Charters: Good, Bad, Old, and New**
 Updated: March 7, 2012



Accelerating INNOVATION >

Complete Coverage >

Studies Find Charters Vary in Quality, Creativity

By Jackie Zubrzycki

Twenty-one years after Minnesota passed the nation's first charter school law, researchers still disagree on whether such independent public schools are any more effective than regular public schools.

Premium article access courtesy of Edweek.org. Read more FREE content!

There is one point on which critics and proponents can all agree: There are plenty of good charter schools out there, and plenty of bad ones.

Printer-Friendly | Email Article | Reprints | Comments | Tweet 23 | Like

Much less is known, however, about how innovative charter schools turned out to be.

Now serving more than 2 million students in 41 states and the District of Columbia, charter schools were conceived to be incubators of innovation. The idea was that this new breed of public school could foster fresh thinking on schooling by freeing educators from many of the regulations that govern—and, some would say, hamstring—regular schools. The quid pro quo was that charters would have to yield student-achievement results as good as or better than those of regular public schools.

"There certainly are innovative charter schools," said Kevin G. Welner, the director of the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, "but there are others that are not. What takes place in the classroom at a charter school can look the same as any other classroom—and usually does."

Large-scale studies released since 2009 from Mathematica Policy Research, the National Charter School Research Project, and the Center for Research on Education Outcomes, or CREDO, at Stanford University indicate that charters' performance varies widely by operator, by geography, and by school philosophy.

"The variation within the sector is much larger than whatever the difference is between it and other sectors," said Brian P. Gill, a researcher with Mathematica, a research group in Princeton, N.J. "I don't think we really know yet what the average effect is."

Accelerating Innovation

- The Pace of Educational Change Quickens
- Startups Seek to Master the Education Market
- Houston Schools Take a Page From Best Charters
- Studies Find Charters Vary in Quality, Creativity
- Variety of Models Fuels Hybrid Charter Growth
- Companies Target Hybrid-Charter Market
- States Loosening 'Seat Time' Requirements
- Innovation Offices Pop Up in State Education Agencies
- Feds Aim to Spark Fresh Thinking on Schooling
- Q&A: Khan Academy Creator Talks About K-12 Innovation
- Q&A: Start! Co-Founder Outlines Strategies for Startups
- Q&A: Ed. Dept. Innovation Chief Articulates Federal Role
- Web Extras
- Digital Edition (Read the interactive

EDUCATION WEEK EVENTS

- The District Goes Digital: Leveraging Online Learning for Broader Student Achievement**
SPONSOR WEBINAR MARCH 20, 2:00 P.M. EASTERN
 REGISTER NOW.
 Content Provided by: K12 Inc.
- Learning to Identify and Understand K-12 Innovation**
CHAT MARCH 23, 3:00 P.M. EASTERN
 SIGN UP FOR E-MAIL REMINDER.
 Sponsored by: Blackboard K-12
- Bringing the Community to Schools**
WEBINAR MARCH 27, 2:00 P.M. EASTERN
 REGISTER NOW.
- Beyond Seat-Time Requirements**
WEBINAR MARCH 29, 2:00 P.M. EASTERN
 REGISTER NOW.
- The Accountability Push in Virtual Learning**
CHAT APRIL 9, 2:00 P.M. EASTERN
 SIGN UP FOR E-MAIL REMINDER.
 Sponsored by: SAS
- How Districts Can Use Data to Drive Proactive Decisions**
SPONSOR WEBINAR APRIL 11, 3:00 P.M. EASTERN
 REGISTER NOW.
 Content Provided by: SAS

MOST POPULAR STORIES

- Viewed | Emailed | Recommended | Commented
- Living in Dialogue Blog: A Million T...
 - Blended Learning Sports Variety of...
 - Districts Gear Up for Shift to Infor...
 - Six Keys to Successful Collaboration...
 - Inside School Research Blog: Study...

SPONSORED WHITEPAPERS

- Integrating Science and Reading to Build

In 2009, CREDO released an overview of findings from its research on charters in 16 states. The center found that 17 percent of charters were performing better than local public schools, while 37

percent were performing worse. The CREDO researchers also found that students in poverty and English-language learners at charter schools had higher test scores compared with statistically matched students in local public schools.

State-level analysis like that in the CREDO study is important, said Robin Lake, the director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, or CRPE, at the University of Washington, Bothell, because "each state has taken [charter schools] on very differently."

CREDO's most recent report, released last spring, focused on Pennsylvania, and found that performance there varied widely, with urban schools showing better results. Cyber charter schools—whose students account for 30 percent of the state's charter enrollment—fared particularly poorly.

Networks in Focus

Some researchers have also begun to focus more recently on studying networks of charter schools, in part to discover whether consistent practices and an overall management structure might yield different results.

But Mathematica's January 2012 study of 130 charter management organizations, or CMOs, found that "achievement impacts for individual CMOs are more often positive than negative, but vary substantially in both directions," according to Mr. Gill, one of the authors. The CMO study found that charter schools in Florida and Chicago were improving their students' educational attainment, and that schools that showed positive effects in reading and math also tended to do well in science and social studies. Mr. Gill said examining those factors was an important step toward evaluating schools' performance beyond scores on reading and math tests, which are what most studies up to now had focused on.

A meta-analysis of 40 studies on charter schools published last fall as part of the CRPE's National Charter School Research Project found that charters had a small positive impact on scores in elementary school math and reading and in middle school math, but none on high school or middle school reading scores. Urban charter schools saw greater gains than non urban charters.

While conducting the analysis, the researchers found that many of the available studies did not account for factors like student selection into charter schools, and that the available literature only studies a small fraction of all charter schools. That led University of California, San Diego, researcher Julian Betts, one of the study's authors, to partner with Richard Atkinson, a psychologist at the University of California and former president and regent of the University of California system, to recommend more-rigorous research in an article published this January in the journal *Science*. They call for states to release more student-level performance data and for charters to make their admissions-lottery data public.

But some of the same studies have also shown that when charter schools were successful, they tended to be very successful. For instance, a 2010 report on Mathematica's multiyear study of the best-known "no excuses" school, the Knowledge Is Power Program, found that students who attended KIPP schools for three years showed growth equivalent to 1.2 years of extra instruction in math and .9 years in reading. Researcher Brian Gill, one of the report's authors, said that "in a dozen years of studying education policies and intervention, I've never been involved with a study that showed more consistently

digital edition of this special report.)

Webinar: Beyond Seat-Time Requirements

Chat: Learning to Identify and Understand K-12 Innovation

Literacy

- 11 Steps to Optimize District Communications
- The Educational Promise of Social Media
- Broad Knowledge Drives Literacy
- Data Systems That Help Schools Make a Difference
- Can Online Speech Therapy Improve IEP Outcomes?
- How to Launch District Virtual Learning
- Effective Reading Programs for Title I Schools
- Great Books Programs Fit the CCSS
- The Five Dimensions of Differentiated Learning
- NY School District Extends Life Cycle Of PCs
- The Time and Cost of Over-Assessing Our Students

See how we're saving other districts time and money.

DOWNLOAD THE WHITEPAPER

Blackboard collaborate

Classroom Teacher
Teach In Thailand, Thailand

ACSA Teacher Recruitment Fair
Algiers Charter Schools Association, New Orleans, LA

Superintendent
Jersey City Public Schools, Jersey City, NJ

Superintendent
Trenton Public Schools, Trenton, NJ

Executive Leadership Positions
Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools, VA

MORE EDUCATION JOBS >> **POST A JOB >>**

SEE ALSO

Upcoming Chat: Learning to Identify and Understand K-12 Innovation

Everywhere you turn in K-12 education these days, it seems that someone somewhere is trying to do something "innovative." But how much of that work lives up to the word's meaning? Our chat guests will discuss how to understand which new approaches are truly revolutionary, and which aren't.

- Sign up now for an email reminder.



positive achievement effects than what we have seen with KIPP."

A goal for researchers now is to determine what the most successful charter schools and networks might be doing right so that those practices can be disseminated more widely. The Mathematica **study of CMOs**, for instance, found that schools with teacher coaching and clear behavior policies had higher test scores.

Several groups of researchers are calling attention to the "no excuses" practices used by successful charter schools like those in the KIPP network as one such ingredient of success, but there is still a desire for more research on student achievement, school funding, and the replicability of successful charter school practices.

A 2011 **report** from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on Massachusetts charter schools from Joshua D. Angrist, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters found that urban charters outperformed nonurban charters. Like the Mathematica researchers, the MIT scholars attributed some of the urban charters' success to a "no excuses" model—a "strict disciplinary environment, an emphasis on student behavior and comportment, extended time in school, and an intensive focus on traditional reading and math skills."

However, Christopher A. Lubienski, an education professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said some of the difference between nonurban and urban schools has to do with the schools' missions. "[Charter] schools in rural areas are often set up as an alternative for at-risk students," Mr. Lubienski said, whereas many urban charter schools—like those using no excuses models—are founded to serve as alternatives to failing urban districts and attract a wide range of students from public school districts.

A 2011 **study** of New York City charter schools by Harvard University researchers Roland G. Fryer and William Dobbie also connected elements of the no-excuses model to improved academic results.

Some research suggests, though, that the success of a no-excuses exemplar like KIPP could also stem in part from those schools' attrition practices.

"On average, kids exit KIPP schools at rates similar to other middle schools' nearby in their districts. A difference is they don't tend to be replaced," said Mr. Gill. He said part of KIPP's positive effect may be due to the peer environment rather than innovative practices.

RELATED BLOG



[Visit this blog.](#)

As charters are increasingly well-studied and the variation in quality becomes clearer, Mr. Miron said, "there's been an interesting change in the discourse. We don't hear as much about innovation or performance. Instead, we hear that charters promote parent choice."

The University of Illinois' Mr. Lubienski concurred.

"Whether charter schools are a better option is now beside the point," he said. "It's the option in and of itself."

Coverage of the education industry and K-12 innovation is supported in part by a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Vol. 31, Issue 23, Pages s7,s8,s9

RELATED STORIES

"Mixed Results Seen for Charter Networks," January 18, 2012.

RELATED OPINION

"What Research Says About School Choice," February 22, 2012.

"Related Research on School Choice," February 22, 2012.

Print Email BOOKMARK

Tweet 23

Like

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

4 comments

Sort by: Oldest to Newest



sek1949

Score: 1

[Report Abuse](#)

12:35 PM on March 5, 2012

Regarding the comment that students from poverty and English-language learners fared better at charter schools, that is not surprising for the simple fact that these students have parents/guardians that in some ways value education enough to put forth the effort to enroll their child in a charter school. Also, they are able to take the time and have the ability to navigate the paper work involved and follow up on their children's work. Therefore, the charters are usually skimming off the top of the poor and ESL children which will inevitably make their stats look better. (We are supposed to think critically, right??)



Brian Preston

Score: 1

[Report Abuse](#)

1:03 PM on March 5, 2012

1:01 PM on March 5, 2012

When talking about KIPP schools, note the passing comment that when kids leave KIPP schools they tend not to be replaced. Who leaves? Those who can't cut it are gone, weeded out (encouraged to reconsider their enrollment might be a less blunt way to say it, but it's the same process), so the cohort of kids moving up gets smaller and smaller, and represents the successful KIPP students--the rest are gone and disappear from the comparisons to public schools, where they now are included in the sample and bring down the comparative scores. Slight of hand, here. The performance increases are, then, most likely artifacts of this self-selection in and out of the schools and not to qualitative difference in what happens academically inside the schools.

I do like the discipline issues: They feel good. They are not being show, with good analysis, to be the reasons for higher scores despite the attractive emotional merit they offer.



Rod Haenke

Score: 0

[Report Abuse](#)

1:14 PM on March 5, 2012

Some charter schools "skim off the top" as you say.....many do not. In fact here in Minnesota, charter schools tend to serve students who did not succeed in the traditional school environment for a variety of reasons which results in the opposite effect. Many of these charter schools serve the population that is hardest to teach and reach. The get punished for doing so because the measure of a "good school"

is based solely on one test given once a year. When students come to your school in fourth grade already 3 grade levels behind, you can do miracles with them in one year but the state test will still say that the student is not proficient. If you serve many of these types of students you will be called a low performing school when in fact you could be doing great things.

We as educators look foolish when we go along with the idea that a school's quality can be measured by such an inadequate and invalid type of method. If you are going to use tests to measure a school - at least use more valid methods - perhaps measuring how much individual students grow in a year or on how they do on weekly curriculum based measures that measure reading levels, mathematics fluency, and critical thinking. We can do better.



suzieh
1:44 PM on March 6, 2012

Score: 0

[Report Abuse](#)

I would like information about the sustainability of quality teachers within the charter school system. My guess is that teachers who choose to work in a charter school are happier and more fulfilled and therefore willing to stay in the profession longer than teachers working in a regular public school.



Ground Rules for Posting

We encourage lively debate, but please be respectful of others. Profanity and personal attacks are prohibited. By commenting, you are agreeing to abide by our user agreement. All comments are public.

[Back to Top ▲](#)

ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

- [Register or Subscribe](#)
- [Online Account](#)
- [Print Subscription](#)
- [Manage E-Newsletters/ Preferences](#)
- [Site Licenses](#)

CONTACT US

- [Help/FAQ](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [Editor Feedback](#)
- [Letters to the Editor](#)

ABOUT US

- [Staff](#)
- [Work@EPE](#)

POLICIES

- [User Agreement](#)
- [Privacy](#)
- [Reprints](#)

ADVERTISE WITH US

- [Display Advertising](#)
- [Recruitment Advertising](#)

CONNECT WITH US

- [RSS Feeds](#)
- [Free E-Newsletters](#)
- [Follow Us on Twitter](#)
- [Join Us on Facebook](#)
- [Join Us on LinkedIn](#)

EDUCATION WEEK PUBLICATIONS

- [Education Week](#)
- [Teacher](#)
- [Digital Directions](#)
- [Teacher PD Sourcebook](#)
- [TopSchoolJobs](#)

© 2012 Editorial Projects in Education

6935 Arlington Road, Bethesda MD 20814 301-280-3100 1-800-346-1834