



Different Paths to College Success:

The Impact of Massachusetts' Charter Schools on College Trajectories

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Summary

Existing lottery-based charter school research may lead some to believe that urban charters are more effective than nonurban charters. Most of this literature focuses on charters in large urban centers, primarily finding that they raise standardized test scores. In contrast, the limited rigorous research on rural and suburban charters suggests that they reduce or do not affect test scores. However, this evidence is limited—little lottery-based research has examined nonurban charters' effects on postsecondary outcomes, and almost no work has examined the impacts of charters in *any* setting on college graduation.

A new working paper by Blueprint Affiliate and Charter Collaborative grantee Sarah Cohodes and her co-author Astrid Pineda fills this crucial gap, examining the effects of urban and nonurban charter schools on students' postsecondary outcomes. They estimate Massachusetts charter schools'

causal effects by comparing students who won charter admissions lotteries to those who did not.

Looking to the long-term paints a more nuanced picture—both urban and nonurban charters improve some outcomes. Nonurban charters boost college enrollment and graduation, despite not increasing test scores. Urban charters also improve college enrollment and graduation, in line with prior test score findings. This research shows that varied charter school models can improve student outcomes and that using test scores as proxies for long-term student achievement may have some limitations.

Technical Paper

Cohodes, S. and A. Pineda (2025): "Different Paths to College Success: The Impact of Massachusetts' Charter Schools on College Trajectories." *Blueprint Labs Working Paper #2024.06*.



Background and Policy Relevance

The majority of charter school research focuses on urban settings. [As of 2023](#), 12 of 19 lottery-based studies in Massachusetts centered on Boston charters. Some previous research, including [a formative study](#) by Blueprint Directors Josh Angrist and Parag Pathak and Affiliate Christopher Walters, has compared urban and nonurban charters' effects on test scores. However, little research has evaluated charter impacts on postsecondary outcomes.

Studies focused on urban charter schools may evaluate limited models and practices. Urban charter schools often use a “high expectations, high support” model, sometimes referred to as “No Excuses.” While many schools have moved away from the “No Excuses” terminology and some associated practices, most of the Massachusetts charters in this sample followed these practices at the time of the study. “No Excuses” practices include longer school days, a culture of high expectations, strict disciplinary practices, and data-driven instruction. On the other hand, the nonurban charters in this study employ a range of educational models, such as themed schools and project-based learning. One of the nonurban sample schools in this study emphasizes individualized learning and civic contributions; another focuses on performing arts. Studies beyond urban settings illuminate the effects of varied charter school models.

Setting and Methods

This study evaluates 15 urban and nine nonurban charter schools in Massachusetts, examining cohorts of students who applied to the charters from 2002 to 2014. The authors examine these charter schools' effects on students' standardized test scores, AP course-taking, college enrollment, and degree attainment.

The authors estimate charters' causal effects on student outcomes by comparing students who win random admissions lotteries to those who do not. Charter schools admit students using a random admissions lottery when they're oversubscribed, with more applicants than available seats. Because lottery winners and losers are similar in observable dimensions (e.g., test scores or race) and unobservable dimensions (e.g., ambition or preparation), this method allows the authors to isolate the effect of the charters. In other words, this randomization allows researchers to make apples-to-apples comparisons between similar students who applied to charters and either attended or were denied admission.

Key Findings

Key Finding #1: Urban charters boost test scores, whereas nonurban charters reduce test scores and have mixed effects on college preparation.

Urban charters boost students' Massachusetts state test scores two years after admission. They also increase students' chances of taking AP courses, the

number of AP courses they take, and their AP scores. Additionally, urban charters raise completion of MassCore, a rigorous college-preparation curriculum, from 42% to 53%. However, urban charters do not boost *all* college preparation outcomes—students who attend urban charters are seven percentage points less likely to graduate high school in four years.

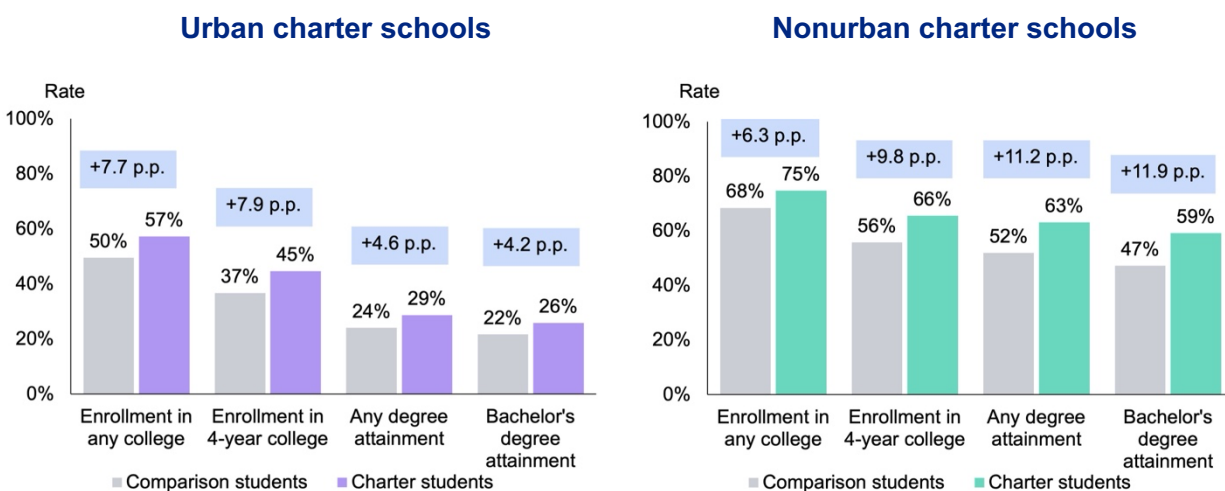
Unlike urban charter attendees, students who attend nonurban charters score lower on standardized tests, take fewer AP courses, and are less likely to take an AP course than their comparable peers. Charters tend to offer fewer AP courses than nearby traditional public schools in nonurban settings, which explains this effect. Nonurban charters' college

preparation effects are mixed, though. Students who attend nonurban charters graduate at the same rate as their peers, and they complete MassCore at higher rates.

Key Finding #2: Urban charter schools boost college enrollment and graduation.

As seen in Figure 1, students who attended urban charter schools are 7.7 percentage points more likely to enroll in any college than their comparable peers who do not receive charter seats and 7.9 percentage points more likely to enroll in a four-year college in particular. Urban charters boost degree attainment by 4.6 percentage points for any degree and 4.2 percentage points for bachelor's degrees.

Figure 1: Effects of attending a charter school on postsecondary outcomes in urban and nonurban settings



How to read this figure: This figure compares students who randomly won a charter school lottery seat to those who did not, in urban settings on the left and nonurban settings on the right. For example, a student who attended an urban charter school is 7.7 percentage points (p.p.) more likely to enroll in any college than a comparable student who lost the charter school lottery. College enrollment is measured two years after expected high school graduation, and degree attainment is measured six years after expected high school graduation.

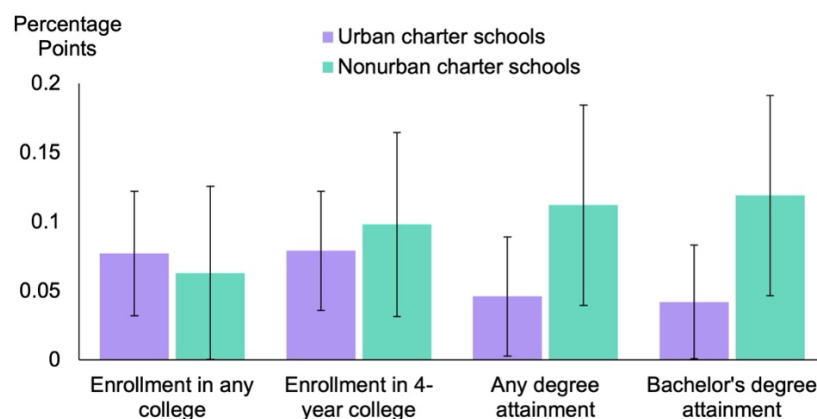
Key Finding #3: Despite null or negative test score effects, nonurban charters improve students' college outcomes substantially.

Nonurban charter schools boost any college enrollment by 6.3 percentage points and four-year college enrollment by 9.8 percentage points. Students who attend a nonurban charter are also 11.2 percentage points more likely to obtain any degree and 11.9 percentage points more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree. All of these effects, aside from enrollment in any college, are greater than those of urban charters in percentage point terms, as demonstrated by Figure 2. Nonurban charters also have a higher baseline—comparison students in nonurban settings are more likely to enroll in and graduate from college than their peers in urban settings.

Policy Implications

These results generate two primary insights for policymakers and researchers. First, multiple charter school models—not just urban “No Excuses” models—can improve students' long-term outcomes. The nonurban schools in this study, which use various models like themed schools and project-based learning, increase college enrollment and degree attainment. Second, a school's effects on test scores, while informative, may not always predict its longer-term impacts. Despite decreasing student test scores, nonurban charters in Massachusetts boosted college outcomes by a large margin. These findings serve as an important reminder to policymakers interested in improving students' long-term outcomes: test scores may not capture the full picture, particularly when students are high-achieving at baseline.

Figure 2: Comparison of urban charter effects and nonurban charter effects



How to read this figure: This figure compares the percentage point (p.p.) effect of attending an urban charter school to the percentage point effect of attending a nonurban charter school. For example, urban charter schools boost students' enrollment in any college by 7.7 p.p., whereas nonurban charter schools boost students' enrollment in any college by 6.3 p.p. The whiskered lines represent a 95% confidence interval, meaning a result is statistically insignificant if the whiskered line straddles zero.