



Two Decades of Massachusetts Charter School Effects

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Summary

Eighteen rigorous causal [studies](#) have shown that charter schools in Massachusetts, [particularly in urban areas](#), markedly improve [student outcomes](#). However, the most recent evaluations extend only to student cohorts that applied by 2014.

In a new [working paper](#), Blueprint Labs Research Affiliate Geoffrey Kocks examines the effects of attending a Massachusetts charter school through 2022, focusing on the evolution of charter effects since 2010. The study also explores potential drivers of performance, including factors that coincide with declines in performance from 2015 to 2019 and post-pandemic improvements.

On average, Massachusetts charter schools improved student outcomes from 2002 to 2022. However, charter school effectiveness has varied over time. Consistent with prior findings, this study shows that Massachusetts charter schools increased test scores and college-going before 2014.

Charter school performance then declined from 2015 to 2019 before rebounding.

Several factors may contribute to variation in charter school performance. The decline coincided with rising leadership turnover; the rebound coincided with a greater emphasis on formative assessments.

Technical Paper

Kocks, Geoffrey (2026): "Two Decades of Massachusetts Charter School Effects." *Blueprint Labs Working Paper #2026.09*.

Background and Policy Relevance

Existing research consistently shows that attending a Massachusetts charter school boosts students' [test scores and college-going](#). These impacts are largest for [low-income students](#), [students of color](#), and students receiving special education services. Charter schools in urban areas like Boston have the strongest results.



These evaluations consider cohorts applying as late as 2014, but the charter landscape has shifted in recent years. The charter sector has expanded, the populations of students who apply and enroll have changed, schools have altered their practices and organizational structures, and in 2020, COVID-19 disrupted the entire education sector.

Given the changes to the charter school landscape since the latest studies, it is critical to extend the research through recent years. New research can provide insights into whether charter school effectiveness has changed over time and what factors may explain why.

Setting and Methods

This study evaluates the academic outcomes of students who applied to 32 Massachusetts charter middle schools and high schools from 2002 to 2022. The study relies on charter school admissions data and Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education administrative data on enrollment, test scores, and college enrollment outcomes.

Kocks measures schools' causal effects on students' outcomes by comparing students who were randomly offered a charter school seat by lottery to those who were not. Because students who receive seats and those who do not are comparable on background, prior achievement, and unobserved characteristics, this method creates an apples-to-apples comparison akin to a randomized controlled trial in medicine.

Kocks also surveyed administrators from 29 charter schools to determine the schools' practices and philosophies. This study measures the correlation between factors reported in the survey (e.g., classroom practices) and changes in charter school effectiveness. While this analysis doesn't measure the causal effect of these factors on charter school effectiveness, it provides insight into which factors may be related to changes in charter school performance.

Key Takeaways

Key Takeaway #1: Overall, Massachusetts charter schools improved student achievement from 2002 to 2022.

Massachusetts charter schools improved students' state test scores by 6 percentile points in math and 3 percentile points in English Language Arts (ELA) per year of charter school enrollment on average. Black and Hispanic students, as well as students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, experienced particularly large gains, ranging from 8 to 11 percentile points in math and 5 to 6 percentile points in ELA. Charter attendance also boosted SAT scores by 11.5 points and college-going by 1.3 percentage points.

Key Takeaway #2: Charter effects varied over time and have rebounded since the pandemic.

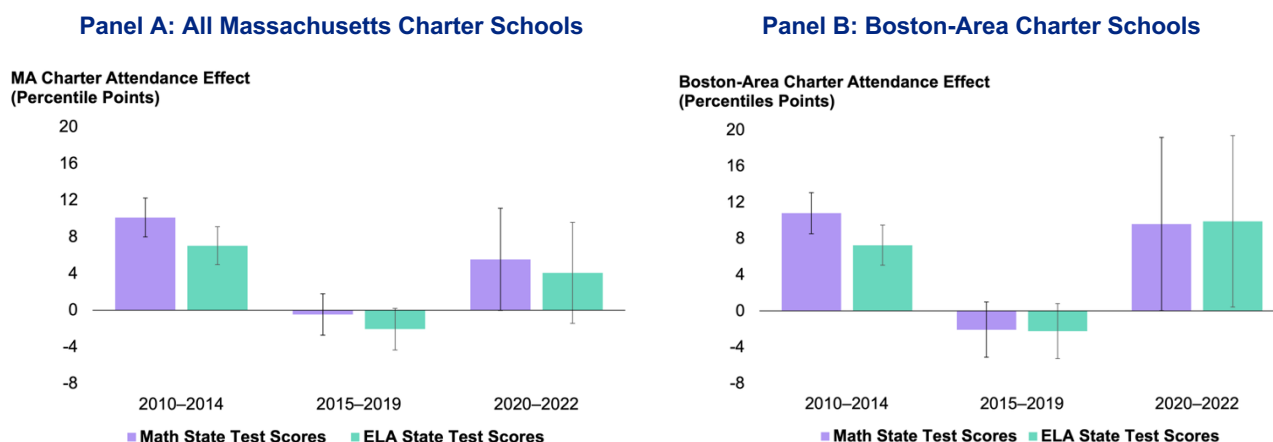
As seen in Panel A of Figure 1, Massachusetts charter schools boosted students' state test scores by 10 percentile points in math and 7 percentile points in ELA from 2010 to 2014. However, in the second half of the decade, charter schools had little effect compared to traditional public schools. After 2019, charter

school effects rebounded, increasing student scores by about 6 percentile points in math and 4 in ELA.

Boston-area charter schools drove variation in Massachusetts charter school performance, as shown in Panel B of Figure 1. Students who attended a Boston-area charter school as a result of a lottery offer in the late 2010s performed as well as their counterparts in traditional public schools on state tests, a significant departure from

charter schools' previous positive impacts of around 11 percentile points in math and 7 percentile points in ELA in the early 2010s. Massachusetts charter schools outside Boston, meanwhile, performed about as well from 2015 to 2019 as they did from 2010 to 2014. Similarly, Boston-area charter schools drove post-pandemic improvements, boosting students' math and ELA test scores at rates comparable to their effects from 2010 to 2014.

Figure 1: Impact of Charter School Attendance on State Test Scores

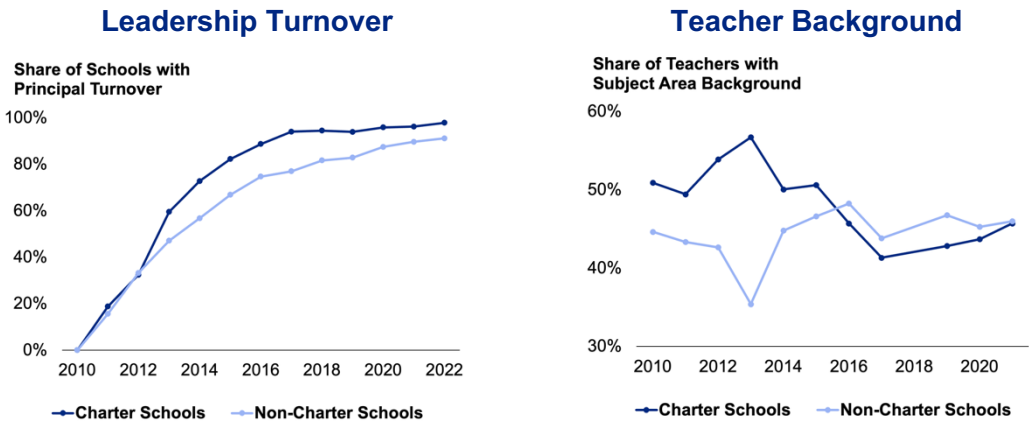


How to read this figure: Panel A shows the effects of one additional year of charter school attendance on students' math and English Language Arts (ELA) scores on the state test, the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), in percentile points. For example, an estimate of 10 indicates that attending a charter school boosted the median student's scores by 10 percentile points. Panel B shows the same results for Boston-area charter schools only. The whiskered lines represent a 95% confidence interval, meaning a result is statistically insignificant if the whiskered line straddles zero.

Key Takeaway #3: Leadership turnover, teacher background, and use of assessments coincide with shifts in charter school effectiveness.

Declines in performance in the late 2010s correlate with leadership turnover and reductions in teacher subject-area background. These patterns are particularly strong in Boston-area charter schools, as shown in Figure 2. Other factors, such as suspension rates, are not correlated with declines in charter school performance.

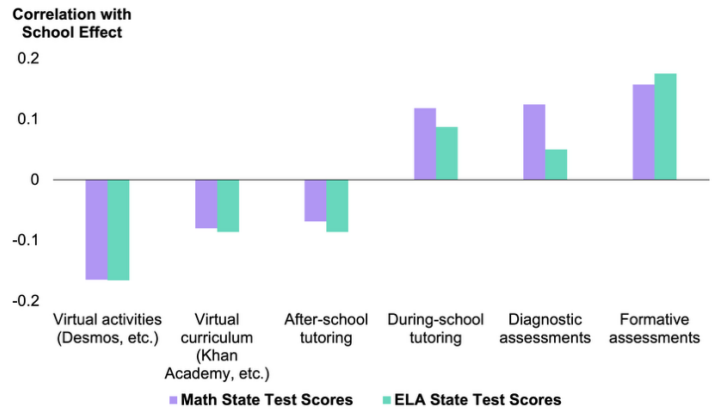
Figure 2: Changes in Boston-Area Charter School Characteristics Over Time



How to read this figure: The figure on the left shows the share of Boston-area charter schools and non-charter schools in the sample that had a different school leader in that year from the first school leader observed in the data. The figure on the right shows the share of teachers with a degree or license in the field they teach at Boston-area charter schools and non-charter schools in that year.

Additionally, the post-pandemic rebound in charter school performance correlates with increased emphasis on formative and diagnostic assessments, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Correlation Between School Effects and Post-Pandemic Practices



How to read this figure: This figure shows the correlation between a school's effect on math and English Language Arts (ELA) scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), and whether the school reported it "Often or Always" used a practice after the pandemic on a survey of charter leaders. Correlations may range from -1.0 to 1.0. A correlation of 0.2 indicates that schools using a practice post-pandemic tended to have larger effects than schools that did not, on average.

Policy Implications

Shifts in Massachusetts charter school effectiveness over time suggest it is not fixed. Instead, effectiveness likely depends on school practices and organizational structure. Charter school leaders and researchers should continue to monitor school performance over time and explore the practices and other factors that drive success.