



What We're Learning

Early Findings from the Charter School Research Collaborative

July 2026

The MIT Charter School Research Collaborative promotes rigorous, high-quality, and actionable research on the charter school sector. We have distributed \$3.8 million in funding to 30 projects and launched seven in-house MIT Blueprint Labs research projects across more than 20 geographies. This memo contextualizes and summarizes early findings from selected work supported by the Collaborative.

Key Takeaways

1. Charter schools improve K-12 test scores, particularly in urban contexts.
2. Test scores may not tell the full story of charter impacts.
3. Charter effectiveness is not static.
4. Charter school competition can boost traditional public school performance.

Charter schools improve students' K-12 test scores, particularly in urban contexts, and these findings replicate in Indiana and Tennessee.

Lottery-based studies across many locations - including Boston,¹ New York

City,^{2,3} New Orleans,⁴ Denver,⁵ and Chicago⁶ - find that charter school attendance boosts students' K-12 test scores.^{7,8} The Collaborative aims to expand this evidence base by funding research in understudied geographies such as Indiana, Georgia, and Tennessee. [Recent Collaborative-supported work](#) in Tennessee and Indiana finds that charter schools outpace traditional public schools in post-pandemic academic growth.^{9,10}

Why it matters: The Collaborative is extending rigorous evidence into new, understudied geographies with consistent results.

Test scores may not tell the full story of charter impacts: Massachusetts non-urban charter schools improve college outcomes despite not affecting K-12 test scores.

While K-12 test score gains are strongly correlated with long-term success,^{11,12,13,14} emerging evidence shows exceptions. Recent work in Massachusetts finds that non-urban charter schools increase college enrollment and graduation rates despite not affecting test scores.¹⁵ The Collaborative is funding further research to understand how charter attendance shapes students' college trajectories beyond what test scores capture.¹⁶



Why it matters: Accountability systems built on test scores alone may miss long-run impacts for students.

Charter effectiveness is not static: charter performance dipped and is partially recovering.

Charter school performance has varied over time. In Collaborative-supported research, Kocks (2026) documents that Massachusetts charter effectiveness declined for cohorts entering between 2015 and 2019, despite positive test score effects in prior years.^{1,13,17} These declines coincide with greater leadership turnover and declines in the share of teachers with backgrounds in relevant subject areas. However, charter schools have recovered somewhat post-pandemic: in Massachusetts,¹⁷ Indiana,¹⁰ and Tennessee,⁹ charter impacts have rebounded relative to traditional public schools. Ludwig and Magnaricotte (2026, in progress) suggest that high-dosage tutoring could further accelerate charter recovery.¹⁸

Why it matters: Leadership, teacher stability, and high-dosage tutoring are potential levers that stakeholders can act on to maintain school quality.

Traditional public schools often improve as a result of charter school competition, despite negative financial and enrollment impacts.

Charter schools indirectly affect traditional public school student achievement,^{19,20} finances,^{20,21} and teacher composition.²² Charter presence reduces district funding, even as charter competition tends to lift traditional public school student achievement.²³ The Collaborative supports research exploring charter schools'

spillover effects on traditional public schools in new contexts. Crema and Singleton (in progress) report early evidence that charter school openings in Texas reduce enrollment but increase test scores in nearby traditional public schools.²⁴ The Collaborative also supports a national study of charter impacts on public school finances. This research finds negative but statistically insignificant spillover effects on per-pupil spending at traditional public schools.²⁵

Why it matters: State and local decision-makers should consider the full picture of both costs and benefits that charter school expansion has on the greater community.

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