

WebMemo



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Charter Schools: A Welcome Choice for Parents

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A study published by the Department of Education (DOE) in June, “The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts,” highlights the many benefits of charter schools. The results show unambiguously that parents are substantially more satisfied with charter schools and the academic and social development of their children who attend compared to public school parents.

What Are Charter Schools? Charter schools are a controversial innovation in education policy—controversial in many circles, but not with parents. Typically founded and run by non-profit community organizations, charter schools receive public funding but are allowed to operate without the regulatory burden faced by ordinary public schools.

Charters have more leeway to experiment with different teaching methods, curriculum content, disciplinary procedures, and levels of parental involvement. Often overwhelmed with many more applicants than available places, many charter schools must use an annual lottery to select new students.

What the Study Found. Among the DOE report’s key findings:

- *Parental satisfaction with student development.* Parents of charter students reported substantially greater satisfaction with their children’s academic and social development compared to parents of non-charter students.
- *Parental satisfaction with schools.* Parents of charter students also reported much higher levels of satisfaction with their children’s schools. Charter schools were rated “excellent” by 85 per-

cent of parents, while non-charter schools received the excellent rating by just 37 percent of parents.

- *Test scores.* Attending a charter school caused no statistically significant¹ differences in overall math or reading test scores.

These results should be considered in light of the study’s quality of methodology and consistency with past findings.

Quality of Methodology. Because parents, teachers, or the students themselves must elect to attend charter schools, participants in charter school programs tend to be different from non-participants in terms of ability, motivation, family background, and many other variables. An essential part of any program evaluation is to avoid mistaking these initial differences for the effect of the program itself. To do this, evaluators need a control group that is as similar as possible to the students who participate in the program.

The DOE study used the best possible control group: one constructed from a random lottery. Among 2,330 eligible applicants to a representative sample of charter middle schools throughout the country, 1,400 were randomly offered admission. The evaluation then compared students who

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attended a charter school through the lottery to students who lost the lottery and were denied entrance.²

A lottery is the “gold standard” method of evaluation, which produces results deserving the most attention. If statistically significant differences between participants and non-participants emerge from this strict comparison, policymakers can be sure that the program in question has had an impact.

Without a lottery, the next most desirable evaluation method is careful matching of participants and non-participants on as many background variables as possible. Ideally, these comparisons examine trends over time so that researchers can assess the educational “value added” by the charter school for each student. Since some confounding variables are unobserved, the value-added models are less reliable than the lottery method, but they can still be informative when performed carefully. Recent examples include a study conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes³ and a Florida State University report by Tim Sass.⁴

Less scholarly studies use raw comparisons or insufficient matching of participants and non-participants. These evaluations are rarely informative. One example is a 2004 study published by the

American Federation of Teachers, which compares charter and non-charter students’ national test scores.⁵ The study used very limited controls with no individual student tracking, making the results uninterpretable.

Consistency with Past Findings. Greater parental satisfaction with charter schools is almost always observed when researchers inquire about it. Studies of charter schools in Massachusetts, Michigan, Texas, and Arizona, for example, all find parental satisfaction substantially higher than in competing public schools.⁶ This led the authors of the RAND Corporation’s book-length review of school choice data to conclude: “Parental satisfaction levels are high in virtually all voucher and charter programs studied, indicating that parents are happy with the school choices made available by the programs.”⁷ As the most rigorous evaluation to date, the DOE study is confirmation of the greater parental satisfaction observed in other charter school studies.

On raising test scores, the authors noted small effects among various subgroups of students, but the overall impact of charter school attendance was insignificant. Test scores are notoriously hard to raise through intervention. Increasing funding for public schools—through class size reduction,

1. A “statistically significant” finding is one that is highly unlikely to occur by chance. For example, to be significant at the 99 percent level means that random chance would have produced the same results only 1 percent of the time. The minimum level typically used by statisticians to establish significance—and the one required by Congress for the charter school evaluation—is 95 percent. All of the findings mentioned in this memo meet that requirement, except where noted.
2. Throughout this memo, “charter student” means someone who attended a charter school, and “non-charter student” means a traditional public school student in the lottery not offered entrance. The clarification is important because not everyone offered placement actually attends a charter school. Results for charter *attendees* indicate how much students benefited when they took advantage of the charter school option. Results for students *offered* placement (regardless of whether they actually attended) give a sense of the community-wide impact of charter schools. Deciding which set of results to emphasize is a classic dilemma in program evaluation.
3. Center for Research on Education Outcomes, “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,” 2009, at http://credo.stanford.edu/reports/MULTIPLE_CHOICE_CREDO.pdf (August 30, 2010).
4. Tim R. Sass, “Charter Schools and Student Achievement in Florida,” American Education Finance Association, 2006, at <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/edfp.2006.1.1.91> (August 30, 2010).
5. F. Howard Nelson, Bella Rosenberg, and Nancy Van Meter, “Charter School Achievement on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress,” American Federation of Teachers, August 2004, at <http://www.epicpolicy.org/files/EPRU-0408-63-OWI.pdf> (August 30, 2010).
6. Brian Gill *et al.*, *Rhetoric versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), pp. 148–150, at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/RAND_MR1118-1.pdf (August 30, 2010).
7. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

teacher training, stricter certification requirements, etc.—also rarely results in significant test score improvement.⁸

Policy Implications. The consistent finding of increased parental satisfaction should inform the continuing debates over charter schools. But if scholars and policymakers focus on the negligible test score effects reported by the evaluation, they may overlook the broader benefits of school choice.

Given the higher levels of parental satisfaction produced by charter schools, test scores are clearly only one factor parents consider in evaluating schools. In fact, parents probably understand the limitations of social policy better than most academics and policymakers. Rather than obsessing over elusive test score gains, parents seem to have a more nuanced and

child-specific set of criteria: They want schools that are safe, cultivate a positive attitude about learning, and best fit their children’s abilities and interests. Only school choice programs can satisfy these diverse preferences and expectations.

The Big Picture. In summary, the DOE study uses the gold standard of scholarly rigor and reliability, and its findings corroborate past studies of charter schools. Parents want choice in education, and the overwhelming majority of parents who choose charter schools are happy with that choice. As the DOE’s evaluation makes clear, charter schools can offer real benefits to students and their families.

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8. See Eric A. Hanushek, “The Failure of Input-Based Schooling Policies,” *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 113 (February 2003), pp. F64–F98, at http://web.missouri.edu/~podgurskym/Econ_4345/syl_articles/hanus (July 28, 2010).