

**Reference Desk Response No. 424:
Viability of Charter Schools**

Questions:

1. What is the viability of charter schools?
 2. What is the impact of charter schooling on academic achievement?
-

Report:

Following an established REL-NEI Reference Desk Research Protocol, we conducted a search for research reports as well as descriptive and policy-oriented briefs and articles on charter schools. We conducted a search for rigorous research reports in this area. The sources included federally funded organizations, additional research centers, several educational research databases, and a general internet search using Google and other search engines. We also searched for appropriate organizations that may act as a resource for your concerns. We have not done an evaluation of these organizations ourselves, but offer this list to you for your information only.

The opening of a recent RAND report on charter schools summarizes the debate on charter schools as follows: “Supporters argue that charter schools can improve student achievement and attainment, serve as laboratories for innovation, provide choice to families that have few options, and promote healthy competition with traditional public schools (TPSs). Critics worry that charter schools perform no better (and, too often, worse) than TPSs, that they may exacerbate stratification by race and ability, and that they harm the students left in TPSs by skimming away financial resources and motivated families” (Zimmer, 2009; see resource below). The research reported here includes literature reviews and evaluations of charter schools that touch on both general issues such as parent satisfaction and the transformative nature of charters schools as well as reports that look specifically at the impact of charter schools on student achievement.

Please note: The question of the viability of charter schools as a policy solution overlaps with the question of the impact of charter schools on student achievement in that most reports discuss both issues. The resources listed under Question 1 address a broader range of issues related to charter schools such as their impact on equity or issues with charter schools and teacher unions while also addressing impacts on student achievement. The resources listed under Question 2 are more focused on the issue of student achievement.

To supplement the research findings, in addition to the resources provided below, we have also included a list of relevant organizations on charter schools

Questions:

1. What is the viability of charter schools?

1.1. Hopes, Fears, & Reality: A Balanced Look at American Charter Schools in 2009. *Lake, R.J., Ed.; January 2010; National Charter School Research Project.*

Source: General Internet search using Google

(http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/pub_ncsrp_hfr09_jan10.pdf)

This report is divided into chapters that address different aspects of charter schools as an educational reform. The report summary states: “Can charter schools cross over to the pop charts and play in major state accountability efforts, major urban school reforms, and, finally, in the public consciousness? That is not yet clear. There are a number of critical tests ahead for the charter school sector. This volume of *Hopes, Fears, & Reality* explores these issues.”

The chapters in this report look at both general issues of charter schools as well as specific issues that charter schools face. Chapter 3 ‘High Performing Charter Schools: Serving Two Masters’, considers the research on three charter schools who “achieved the highest scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tenth grade verbal and math tests of any public high school in the state. At the same time, however, these three high schools are achieving less impressive results on college entrance exams, raising questions about whether policymakers and leaders of the charter movement are asking charter schools to serve two masters—high achievement on state basic competency measures and outstanding results on college readiness tests.” (p.28)

1.2. A Review of the Research on Charter Schools; *Bulkley, K., Fidler, J.; June 2002; Consortium for Policy Research on Education Webseries; ERIC # ED477868.*

Source: ERIC

(http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1b/2a/e8.pdf)

From the abstract, “Based on a literature review, this report provides an overview of charter schools. A total of 52 studies of operating charter schools and documents exploring the origins of the charter school concept were reviewed. The report covers the following topics: why and how people create a charter school; charter schools' autonomy compared with public schools' autonomy; governance and management, school organization, and teaching and learning in charter schools; charter schools' accountability to local and state governments and to the market; racial and socioeconomic composition of charter schools; special education in charter schools; admissions and financing in charter schools; and student achievement in charter schools. The report also discusses policy implications and some of the most important questions yet to be clarified and in need of further research, questions about innovation, accountability, equity, and outcomes.”

1.3. Charter Schools in Eight States: Effects on Achievement, Attainment, Integration, and Competition. *Zimmer, R., Gill, B., Booker, K., Lavertu, S., Sass, T., & Witte, T.; 2009; RAND Corporation.*

Source: General internet search using Google

(http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG869.pdf)

Description of report from RAND website: “The first U.S. charter school opened in 1992, and the scale of the charter movement has since grown to 4,000 schools and more than a million students in 40 states plus the District of Columbia. With this growth has also come a contentious debate about the effects of the schools on their own students and on students in nearby traditional public schools (TPSs). In recent years, research has begun to inform this debate, but many of the key outcomes have not been adequately examined, or have been examined in only a few states. Do the conflicting conclusions of different studies reflect real differences in effects driven by variation in charter laws and policies? Or do they reflect differences in research approaches — some of which may be biased? This book examines four primary research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of students transferring to charter schools? (2) What effect do charter schools have on test-score gains for students who transfer between TPSs and charter schools? (3) What is the effect of attending a charter high school on the probability of graduating and of entering college? (4) What effect does the introduction of charter schools have on test scores of students in nearby TPSs?”

1.4. Does Charter School Competition Improve Traditional Public Schools? Civic Report.

Teske, P., Schneider, M. Buckley, J., & Clark, S.; June 2000; The Manhattan Institute; ERIC # ED477868.

Source: ERIC

(http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1a/72/ca.pdf)

According to the abstract: "This report presents the findings of a study on how, by competing for students, charter schools affect the traditional public-school system. The study focused on Springfield and Worcester, Massachusetts; Jersey City and Trenton, New Jersey; and the District of Columbia. Data for the study were collected from various newspapers and databases; published and electronic materials prepared by state education departments and school districts; and interviews with district superintendents and other district leaders, school-board leaders, charter-school heads, teachers-union leaders, and school principals. Among the findings of the study are the following: Charter school competition has not induced large changes in districtwide operations; district-level attitudes toward charter schools vary widely; district-level support is not related to market share held by charter schools; school districts have been shielded from the fiscal implications of losing students; population trends may be blunting the impact of charter schools; hostility between the sectors limits the spillover from charter schools to traditional public schools; public-school officials do not believe charter schools actually provide new models or programs; charter schools and traditional public schools differ in the pattern of innovations they adopt; charter schools are more consumer friendly; charter schools may be evolving as substitutes for private schools."

2. What is the impact of charter schooling on academic achievement?

2.1. WWC Quick Review of the Report "Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis." *Toney, A., and Murdock, D.; 2008; California Charter School Association.*

Source: What Works Clearinghouse

(http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/PDF/quickreviews/la_unified_081208.pdf)

"The study examined whether charter schools have higher growth in student achievement than traditional public schools. The study analyzed data on 79 charter schools and 593 traditional public elementary, middle, and high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District from 2005-06 to 2006-07. School-level academic achievement was measured using the Academic Performance Index (API) created by the California Department of Education. The API is a composite measure of how well a school's students perform on standardized tests. The study measured the effect of charter schools by comparing the change in the API from 2005-06 to 2006-07 for charter schools to the change for their matched comparison. The study found that the API in charter schools increased more from 2005-06 to 2006-07 than it did in matched comparison traditional schools (pg. 1 of 1)."

2.2. Value Added and Experimental Studies of the Effect of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: A Literature Review. *Betts, J.R., Tang, Y.E.; December 2008; National Charter School Research Project.*

Source: General internet search using Google

(http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/download/csr_files/pub_ncsrp_bettstang_dec08.pdf)

From the abstract, "We assess the literature that uses either experimental (lottery) methods or student-level growth-based methods to infer the causal impact of attending a charter school on student performance. We focus on the evidence on math and reading scores. We test that none of the effects is positive and, conversely, that none of the effects is negative. We find compelling evidence that charter schools underperform traditional public schools in some locations, grades, and subjects, and outperform them in other locations, grades, and subjects. We examine the distribution of effect sizes suggested by the existing work, using various methods to weight one study relative to another. We find a fairly wide range of estimated effects. Two cases in which charter schools appear quite frequently to outperform traditional public schools are elementary school reading and middle school math, although the effect sizes are small in the latter case. Conversely, charter schools often significantly underperform in high school reading and math. The lack of rigorous studies in many parts of the nation limits the ability to extrapolate." (p.1)

2.2. Charter School Achievement: What We Know 5th Edition. *April 2009; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools.*

Source: General internet search using Google

http://www.publiccharters.org/files/publications/Summary%20of%20Achievement%20Studies%20Fifth%20Edition%202009_Final.pdf

Summary from report: “Over the last year, several outstanding charter school studies were released. The studies use longitudinal student-level data and rigorous research strategies to estimate the impact of attending a public charter school on student performance. From these high-quality studies we learned:

- Students who attend charter schools in Boston make significantly larger gains compared with students who attend traditional public schools (Abdulkadiroglu et al, 2009).
- High school students who attend public charter schools in Chicago and Florida have higher graduation rates and a greater probability of attending college than their peers in traditional public schools (Booker et al, 2007; Booker et al, 2008; Zimmer et al, 2009).
- And students who attend KIPP charter schools in the Bay Area make larger achievement gains than students in the host district, as well as greater gains than would be expected based on national norms (Woodworth et al, 2008).” (p.1)

This report also includes a meta-analysis on the impact of charter schools on student achievement which is the next citation.

2.4. Strengthening Pennsylvania’s Charter School Reform: Findings from the Statewide Evaluation and Discussion of Relevant Policy Issues, Year 5 Report. *Miron, G, Nelson, C., Risley, G., with Sullins, C.; October 2002; The Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University.*

Source: General internet search using Google

http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter/pa_5year/5_year_report_pa_cs_eval.pdf

This study presents a comprehensive report of a study of the charter school reform in Pennsylvania. In regards to achievement, the reports states, “Overall, charter schools are making modest achievement gains against demographically and geographically similar schools. Unfortunately, these gains are not uniform, with some schools experiencing sharp declines and others impressive gains.” (p.179)

Additional Organizations to Consult

- **Center on Reinventing Public Education**

http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/print/csr_docs/home.htm)

According to the website: “The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) was founded in 1993 at the University of Washington. CRPE engages in independent research and policy analysis on a range of K-12 public education reform issues, including choice & charters, finance & productivity, teachers, urban district reform, leadership, and state & federal reform.” The website provides links to reports and resources regarding the National Charter School Research Project. The webpage states that the goals of the project “are to 1) facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools, and 2) provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

The project page can be accessed using the following link:

<http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/projects/1>

- **US Charter Schools**

http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/index.htm

From the ‘About this Site’ section of the website, “This Web site was established in 1997 and operated until September 18th, 2004 with support from the U.S. Department of Education. Currently the site is neither supported nor endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education. The US Charter Schools Web site is a place where charter school developers, authorizers, and operators can meet, exchange ideas, and access a valuable resource library. The Web site provides a wide range of information and links to resources to guide charter schools in every phase of their development — from start-up, to expansion, to renewal.

USCharterSchools.org is the most widely used and comprehensive online resource available to charter schools today. It receives an average of 4,000 visits (80,000 hits) per day and has over 10,000 subscribers to its online newsletters.”

- **Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO)**

(<http://credo.stanford.edu/home.html>)

According to the 'Mission' section of the website, "The chief focus of the Center is to support education policy makers in their use of reliable research and program evaluation to assess the performance of education initiatives. To accomplish this objective, CREDO addresses both the supply and demand sides of evaluation practices with focus on the utilization of sound research and evaluation methodologies." The centers work on charter school can be accessed at the following link: (<http://credo.stanford.edu>)

- **National Center on School Choice.**

(<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/>)

From the website: "Since 2004, the National Center on School Choice (NCSC) has been doing research on how school choice affects individuals, communities, and systems... The NCSC is funded by a 5 year, \$13.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences.

Key words and search strings used in the search:

"charter schools viable" or "charter schools" or "research charter schools" or "policy research and charter schools" or "student achievement and charter schools"

Search databases and websites:

Sources For Rigorous Research Reports: What Works Clearinghouse (WWC); Doing What Works (DWW); National Center for Education Statistics (NCES); Institute for Education Sciences (IES)

Other Federally Funded Sites: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Additional Data Resources: ERIC; <http://www.google.com>; <http://www.goglescholar.com>

Criteria for inclusion:

When Reference Desk Researchers review resources, they consider, among other things, four factors:

1. **Date of the publication:** The most current information is included unless in the case of nationally known seminal resources
2. **Source and funder of the report/study/brief/article:** Priority is given to IES, nationally funded, and certain other vetted sources known for strict attention to research protocols;
3. **Methodology:** i.e. Random control trial studies, surveys, self-assessments, literature reviews, policy briefs, etc. Priority for inclusion is given generally to random control trial study findings; however, the reader should note at least the following factors when basing decisions on these resources: Numbers of participants (just a few? Thousands?); Selection (did the participants volunteer in the study, or were they chosen?); Representation (were findings generalized from a homogeneous or a diverse pool of participants? Was the study sample representative of the population as a whole?)
4. **Existing knowledge base:** Although we strive to include vetted resources, there are times when the research base is slim or non-existent. In these cases we have included the best resources we could find, which may include newspaper articles, interviews with content specialists, organization websites, etc.

REL Northeast and Islands

The Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Reference Desk is a service provided by a collaborative of the REL program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES). This response was prepared under a contract with IES, Contract ED-06-CO-0025, by REL Northeast and Islands administered by Education Development Center, Inc. The content of the response does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.