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TECHNICAL
R E P O R T



Achievement and Attainment in Chicago Charter Schools

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Summary

Over the past decade, charter schools have been among the fastest-growing segments of the K–12 education sector in Chicago and across the country. In this report, we address several key issues related to charter schools using student-level data provided by Chicago Public Schools (CPS). First, we provide evidence on whether charter schools are attracting high- or low-achieving students and assess the effects of the transfers on racial mix in the city’s public schools. Second, we attempt to assess whether charter schools are producing achievement gains for the students who attend them, relative to district-run schools in CPS, as measured by state test scores. Third, we examine longer-term attainment outcomes, analyzing whether Chicago’s charter high schools (HSs) are increasing their students’ likelihood of graduating, their scores on the ACT® college-admission exam, and their probability of enrolling in college (again relative to district-run CPS schools).

Charter School Transfers

We began by examining students transferring to charter schools, to provide purchase on two policy issues relevant to the debate over charter schools. First, do charter schools “skim the cream,” serving students who had above-average achievement levels prior to entering charters? We found that, on average, the prior achievement levels of students transferring to charter schools differ only slightly from the citywide average and from the achievement levels of peers in the district-managed CPS schools they exited.

Second, do charter schools exacerbate or ameliorate racial stratification? We examined how transfers affect the racial and ethnic mix of the charter schools and the traditional public schools (TPSs) that the students exited. We found that transferring students are moving to schools with similar or slightly lower proportions of other students of the same race and ethnicity. In sum, transfers from TPSs to charter schools in Chicago do not increase racial stratification across the schools.

Charter School Achievement Effects in Grades 3–8

We gauge the achievement effects of charter schools in elementary and middle grades with a difference-in-differences analysis: For students who have attended charter schools and district-operated CPS schools, we observed whether their annual achievement gains were greater in the charter setting or the CPS setting. Consistent with similar studies in other locations, we found

only small differences in average achievement gains between charter schools and CPS schools, and these differences do not point in consistent directions. The only strong finding regarding achievement is that charter schools do not do well in raising student achievement in their first year of operation.

Charter High School Effects on Graduation, College Entry, and ACT Scores

We estimated attainment and ACT effects of Chicago’s charter HSs using a quasi-experimental design in which both the treatment group (charter-HS students) and the comparison group (CPS-HS students) attended charter schools in eighth grade, prior to entering HS. This method allowed us to address the selection bias that is inherent in comparing charter students who have chosen their schools with TPS students who may have been assigned to their schools. In this analysis, both the treatment students and the comparison students previously chose charters. In many instances, whether they went on from a charter middle school to a charter HS depended simply on whether their existing charter middle school included HS grades, rather than on a second active choice. Four of the eight charter HSs operating in Chicago during the years included in our analysis were multi-grade charters that included not only grades 9–12 but also grades for younger students (i.e., they served grades K–12, 6–12, or 7–12). Before entering ninth grade, charter eighth-graders who went on to charter HSs were very similar to charter eighth-graders who went on to district-run CPS HSs. Comparing their subsequent ACT scores, graduation rates, and college-entry rates (with statistical adjustments for baseline differences) should therefore provide useful information on how the charter HSs affected those outcomes.

We found evidence that Chicago’s charter HSs may produce positive effects on ACT scores, the probability of graduating, and the probability of enrolling in college—but these positive effects are solidly evident only in the charter HSs that also included middle school grades. For the average eighth-grade charter student in Chicago, continuing in a charter HS is estimated to lead to

- an advantage of approximately half a point in composite ACT score (for which the median score for the students included in the analysis is 16)
- an advantage of 7 percentage points in the probability of graduating from HS
- an advantage of 11 percentage points in the probability of enrolling in college.

We cannot be sure whether these positive effects are attributable to charter status or to the unconventional grade configurations that eliminate the change of schools between eighth and ninth grade. In one respect, there is no need to distinguish the two possible explanations. Eliminating the middle school–to-HS switch is an inherent part of the educational model of these four charter schools; they have unconventional grade configurations because they are charter schools. The state’s charter school policy led to the creation of schools that are producing improved educational outcomes, one way or another.

Nonetheless, the ambiguity about possible interpretations suggests the need for caution in drawing broader inferences for policy. Further research will be needed before we can say definitively whether charter HSs produce positive effects in conventional 9–12 grade configurations—

and whether district-run schools can produce positive effects by incorporating middle school (and perhaps elementary) grades.

For now, the large, positive attainment results in Chicago (as well as in Florida, as reported in Booker, Sass, et al., 2008) suggest promise for (at least) multi-grade charter HSs and demonstrate that evaluations limited to test scores may fail to capture important benefits of charter schools. If charter schools (or other multi-grade HSs) have positive effects on graduation and college entry, they have the potential to make a substantial, long-term difference in the life prospects of their students.