

WORKING P A P E R

Evaluating the Performance of Philadelphia's Charter Schools

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Summary

For many years, poor student outcomes have plagued the Philadelphia school district. A number of reforms have been implemented within the district to improve the district's performance, including the use of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate autonomously, outside the direct control of local school districts, and generally enroll students through the choices of their parents rather than through residential assignment.

These schools have proven to be popular both in Philadelphia and nationwide. The number of such schools in Philadelphia has risen from four in the 1997-1998 school year to more than 60 today, serving over 30,000 students. But this growth has not occurred without a highly charged debate. Critics in Philadelphia, as in other parts of the country, charge that charter schools siphon off the best students from the traditional public schools, divert badly needed resources from the school district, and foster racial enclaves within a district. An equally fervid group of supporters defends the charter schools, claiming that they not only improve the performance of their students but also that the competitive pressures charters generate cause the traditional public schools to improve.

In this report, we present findings related to some, but not all of these issues. We examine the effects of charter schools on reading and mathematics achievement for students who attend charter schools in the School District of Philadelphia.¹ The report also examines several other important questions about charter schools, including: What are the effects of years of operation, grades served, mission, and demographics of charter schools on student achievement? What types of students do charter schools attract? Do charter schools have higher student turnover rates than traditional public schools? Does the existence of charter schools have an impact on student achievement in traditional public schools?

To answer these questions, a RAND-led team of researchers collected a longitudinal database from the Philadelphia school district for school years 2000-01

¹ Later this year, we will be producing a report on charter schools nationwide, of which this study of Philadelphia is one component.

through 2006-07. This database enabled researchers to track student movement between schools and provides student-level information of race/ethnicity, grade, and test scores in math and reading.

Who goes to the charter schools?

Charter schools are attracting students whose prior achievement levels (when they were in traditional district schools) are slightly below the district-wide average, but higher than the average achievement levels of the traditional public schools they left. Students are transferring to charter schools with a slightly larger population of their own race/ethnicity than the traditional public schools from which they come.

How do the charter schools perform?

Using a within-student analysis known as a fixed-effect model, we examine whether students who switch between traditional public schools and charter schools have stronger math and reading gains in charter schools. The analysis indicates that students' average gains attending charter schools are statistically indistinguishable from the gains they experience while at traditional public schools.

Does the type of charter school matter?

The performance of Philadelphia's charter schools as measured by student achievement gains does not appear to be related to how long the charter school has been operating. However, attending a charter school in grades 9-12 shows a small positive effect on student achievement while attending a charter school in elementary and middle grades shows a small negative effect.

Do charter schools cause traditional schools to perform better?

We find no evidence that the district schools located in neighborhoods with the greatest charter competition are performing any better or any worse as a result of the competition. It is possible that charter schools could be exerting a district-wide effect, but district-wide effects could not be examined in this study.

Do charter schools have more student turnover than traditional schools?

Charter schools and traditional schools have similar percentages of students who change schools from year to year.

How should this report be viewed?

This study offers findings about charter schools in Philadelphia that can contribute to debate surrounding charter schools. However, our research is by no means a comprehensive evaluation of charter schools in Philadelphia. In addition to our analysis of charter schools' effects on test scores, student sorting and mobility, we advise that policymakers and citizens take into account other factors in assessing the value of charter schools for the city. These might include student attendance, graduation, college attendance, and disciplinary rates as well as program and course offerings, and cost effectiveness.