



One of the most common questions state legislators ask about charter schools is whether students who attend them perform better than their peers at traditional public schools. Since the introduction of charter schools in the 1990s, policymakers, parents and researchers have wanted to know whether student success or failure in charters differs from traditional schools. The question is fundamental to evaluating the charter school experiment. Early charter school theory suggested that the flexibility and autonomy given to these schools would result in improved student performance. Twenty years after the charter school movement began, the answer to this question remains unclear. This brief explores what has been learned from recent research on student achievement in charter schools, how that achievement compares to traditional public schools, and what policies states are considering to evaluate student achievement in charter schools.

Defining and Evaluating Student Achievement

It is not easy to define, quantify and measure student achievement. The most common indicator of achievement generally refers to a student's performance in academic areas such as reading, language arts, math, science and history as measured by achievement tests. These include statewide exams, SAT/ACT scores, or National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. Policymakers know, however, that academic achievement also depends on a child's circumstances and situations, the quality of schools and teachers, and many other factors. Researchers thus have also studied academic proficiency, achievement gaps, graduation and dropout rates, student and school improvement over time, and students' success after high school. All these factors are indicators of effective schools and teachers. Further complicating the matter is the fact that many public schools serve different student populations in different ways. Furthermore, vigorous debates have occurred among researchers over the methods used in some studies. All these considerations have made it difficult for researchers to provide compelling information about how schools compare to each other and how charter schools compare to traditional public schools.

Comparing Charters to Traditional Schools

Comparing student achievement at charter schools to that at traditional public schools is important to policymakers who must make decisions about school accountability, administration and funding. Research on this issue has produced mixed results. When only test scores are considered, traditional public schools consistently outperform charter schools nationwide not only in reading and math proficiency of fourth and eighth graders, but also in mean SAT and ACT scores.¹

Charter Schools in the States

Charter schools are publicly funded, privately managed and semi-autonomous schools of choice. They do not charge tuition. They must hold to the same academic accountability measures as traditional schools. They receive public funding similarly to traditional schools. However, they have more freedom over their budgets, staffing, curricula and other operations. In exchange for this freedom, they must deliver academic results and there must be enough community demand for them to remain open.

The number of charter schools has continued to grow since the first charter law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Some have delivered great academic results, but others have closed because they did not deliver on promised results.

Because state laws enable and govern charter schools, state legislatures are important to ensuring their quality.

This series provides information about charter schools and state policy topics, including finance, authorization, limits to expansion, teaching, facilities and student achievement.



Nationwide test scores often fail to capture the complexity of student achievement. A more detailed look at student assessments reveals certain trends in charter school performance. In a 2011 meta-analysis, the National Charter School Research Project found that charter school students perform differently based on factors such as grade level and subject. Researchers found that charter middle school students tend to perform better in math and reading compared to similar students in traditional public schools.² A 2010 study from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) found evidence that low-income and low-achieving charter middle school students perform better in mathematics than similar students in traditional public schools. On the other hand, high-income/prior high-achieving charter middle school students showed significantly lower scores on state math tests.³ The study hypothesizes that low-income students in charter schools tend to show high gains in reading and math because they are entering a new school environment that is more likely to focus on student achievement. Researchers found no evidence, however, that the schools students previously attended had any influence on their performance in a charter school. They note that the study was not designed to directly measure this relationship, and further research may, in fact, show a correlation.⁴

A 2009 report from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) suggests a possible explanation of low-income student success could be that charter schools structured specifically to serve disadvantaged students tend to produce better results among such students.⁵ In general, existing research has been unable to conclusively explain why low-income and low-achieving students tend to perform better in charter schools.⁶

A 2009 report from RAND Corporation finds that students in charter schools generally have lower test scores than their traditional public school colleagues. Researchers suggest it is reasonable to assume that a charter school (or any school) operating in its first year will have low test scores. Second, virtual charter schools, which comprised 4.5 percent of all charter schools in the 2009-10 school year,⁷ historically have shown lower levels of achievement. The report also finds that, despite evidence of lower test scores, charter school students are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college than are their traditional school counterparts.⁸

In a 2009 study that comes closest to a randomized experimental design, researchers with the New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project compared New York City charter school students who were selected in charter school lotteries with those who participated in the lottery but were not selected. The review found that those students who attended charter schools substantially closed the achievement gap and were more likely to graduate with a high school diploma.⁹ An overall important finding, however, is that the schools vary greatly, a finding that could be expected when charters and traditional schools are compared.

A 2011 study by the Washington Policy Center suggests that some charters have closed the achievement gap between minority and white students and that “well run charters perform better than traditional public schools.”¹⁰ Finally, as part of a larger study of 40 Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) representing 292 public charter schools in 14 states, charter school students in three of the six CMOs with available graduation data were more likely to graduate high school on time than similar students in traditional public schools, while students in two other CMOs showed no significant difference and students in one were less likely to graduate on time.¹¹

The 2009 CREDO study found that the state in which a charter school is located also affects student performance. Certain state policies appear to be correlated to charter school student achievement. Those states examined in the study that placed a cap on the number of charter schools permitted were found to have significantly lower-achieving charter school students compared to those from states with no such cap. The study also determined that states with multiple authorizers witnessed lower charter school student achievement, potentially suggesting some charter school sponsors may be strategically selective about the authorizer to which they apply looking for what the researchers referred to as “the option that is “easiest” on charters.”¹² In other words, they may choose the authorizer with the most relaxed accountability standards.

Despite a national trend showing that charter school students perform below traditional schools on standardized testing, a closer look reveals that factors such as state policies, student demographics, grade level, subject and teaching methods play a role in determining specific charter school

performance. As with many education issues, comparing student achievement in charter schools to that in other public schools is difficult and complex.

The State Role in Student Achievement

The state's most significant role in improving charter school student achievement is to create strong mechanisms that both promote replication of high-performing charter schools and ensure that low-performing charter schools are identified and held accountable. Charter school accountability typically is the responsibility of the agency or organization (the "authorizer") that approved and authorized the charter school. Although this usually is a school district, in many states the authorizer also can be a state agency, nonprofit organization, business or university. State policymakers can create an accountability framework—including standards for measuring and evaluating charter school performance, incentives for high-performing charter schools, repercussions for low-performing charter schools, and methods for ensuring quality authorizing—that authorizers must follow.

Many states—including Hawaii, Minnesota and New York—require charter schools to sign performance-based contracts with their authorizers, either as a component of the original charter or as a separate document. Performance-based contracts are agreements that set specific benchmarks the charter school must meet within a specified period of time. Among other accountability factors such as financial stability and attendance, performance-based contracts typically identify expectations for academic achievement and student performance growth.¹³ If a charter school fails to meet the terms of the contract, the authorizer can impose sanctions on the charter school, up to and including revoking its charter.

A key component of student performance accountability is accurately measuring student progress. Comprehensive assessments and data systems allow states and charter school authorizers to identify both low- and high-performing schools. Schools that perform poorly can be held accountable, and those that show high marks can be studied and replicated. Individual charter schools can use the collected data to identify and help struggling students.¹⁴

Holding charter schools accountable also can include raising parental awareness about the performance of their child's school. In New Mexico and Utah, for example, schools are assigned a letter grade based on their students' performance on statewide assessments. Schools in Ohio, including charter schools, are assigned one of six performance designations each year by the state Department of Education. Parents can easily look up the test results for their child's school, including whether student achievement has improved. New York requires charter schools that have been audited by the state to publish the audit in their annual report, which also must be accessible to the public.

Another strategy to hold charter schools accountable for their student performance involves punitive actions. These include placing a charter school on probation and revoking its charter, forcing the school to close. New Jersey allows the state's education commissioner to place a charter school on probation for 90 days if it is failing to meet its stated goals, including student academic performance. If, within the 90 days, the charter school cannot implement a remedial plan, the state can revoke the charter. In Rhode Island, a school's charter can be revoked for a list of reasons, including failure within three years of start-up to reach the classification of a "high-performing charter school" as defined by state law.

While attention often focuses on low-performing charter schools, some states have enacted incentives and rewards for high-achieving charter schools. In Florida, charter schools rated as "high performing" are rewarded with longer charter contracts and a reduced administrative payment to authorizers.¹⁵ States that received waivers from the federal No Child Left Behind law now are recognizing the top-performing and progressing schools, including charter schools, as Reward Schools. Under Oklahoma's waiver application, the state gives the top 10 percent of schools, as measured by the state's A-F school grading system, more autonomy to spend state and federal funds, the ability to serve as advisors to the state education department and, if available, additional funds from both the state and from private sources.¹⁶

States not only can put in place policies directed at school accountability, but also can hold authorizers accountable for low-performing charter schools under their supervision. Minnesota requires the state's education commissioner to review each authorizer in the state every five years. The

commissioner has authority to take corrective actions—including revoking the charters of schools operating under the authorizer or suspending an authorizer’s ability to sponsor new charter schools—against low-performing authorizers.

Other states such as Nevada and Ohio require prospective authorizers to apply to the state in order to sponsor charter schools.

Summary of Research

This is a summary of the major findings from the research studies cited in this brief.

- Nationwide data show traditional public schools have consistently outperformed charter schools in reading and math proficiency of fourth and eighth graders.¹
- Charter middle school students tend to perform better in math and reading when compared to similar students attending traditional public schools.²
- Low-income and low-achieving charter school students perform better in mathematics than students in traditional public schools.³
- High-income/prior high-achieving charter middle school students showed significantly lower scores on state math tests than similar traditional school students.³
- A charter school operating in its first year likely will have low test scores.⁸
- Virtual charter schools, which comprised 4.5 percent of all charter schools in the 2009-10 school year,⁷ historically have shown lower levels of achievement.⁸
- Charter school students are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college than their traditional school counterparts.⁸
- In New York City, students who attended charter schools substantially closed the achievement gap and were more likely to graduate with a high school diploma.⁹
- States with caps on the number of charter schools tend to have lower-performing charter schools.¹²
- States with multiple authorizers tend to have lower-performing charter schools.¹²

Policy Questions to Consider

- Does your state collect data that allows you to evaluate student performance in public schools, including charter schools? If so, legislators should be familiar with this information.
- Does your state have mechanisms that hold charter schools accountable for student achievement? If so, are those mechanisms being enforced?
- Can your state take corrective actions to enforce authorizer accountability?
- Does your state hold charter school authorizers accountable for low-performing charter schools?
- Does your state recognize and reward charter schools that are consistent high performers?
- Are expectations for student achievement defined and communicated clearly to charter schools? Are specific time limits set for meeting those expectations?
- Do parents have easy access to the test results of their child's school? If so, are these results presented clearly?

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Josh Cunningham wrote this brief. Josh, a research analyst in the NCSL Education Program, focuses on charter schools.

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William T. Pound, Executive Director

7700 East First Place
Denver, Colorado 80230
(303) 364-7700

444 North Capitol Street, N.W., #515
Washington, D.C. 20001
(202) 624-5400

www.ncsl.org

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