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Sass, Tim R. & Witte, John (2009) *Charter Schools in Eight States:
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Reviewed by William L. Brown

Michigan Department of Education

Since the opening of the first U.S. charter school in 1992, controversy has raged across the nation as to whether or not charter schools should be supported with tax dollars. Now, with over a million students attending charter schools in 40 states and the District of Columbia, sufficient data have been collected to begin to address many of the concerns raised by charter school detractors. The questions considered in the study described in this book were:

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 traditional public schools (TPSS) and charter schools?

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3. What is the effect of attending a charter 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?

Some other topics included in the study were cyber classes, how long the charter school had been operating (new schools tend to have more negative effects than more established schools), and racial issues. The data for the study came from: Chicago, San Diego, Philadelphia, Denver, Milwaukee, and the states of Ohio, Texas and (for question 3 only) Florida.

Question 1. What are the characteristics of students transferring to charter schools?

The research team found no systematic evidence that charter schools are skimming off the highest-achieving students. The prior test scores of the incoming charter school students were near or below local (district-wide or statewide) averages in all seven of the locations included in this part of the study. Transfers to charter schools did not create dramatic shifts in the sorting of students by race or ethnicity in any of the sites, although there was some evidence of self-segregation by African American students in five of the seven locales. African American students transferring to charter schools moved to charter schools with higher concentrations of African American students than in the TPSs in those locales.

In all but one case (Chicago reading scores that were nearly identical to the district-wide average), students switching to charter schools had prior test scores that were below district-wide or state-wide averages (although the differences were usually small).

Question 2. What effect do charter schools have on test-score gains for students who transfer between traditional public schools (TPSs) and charter schools?

The study considered the effects on student achievement for students who began their education in TPSs but subsequently transferred to charter schools. As a result, anyone who began as a kindergarten student in a charter school was not included in the achievement analysis. The analysis suggests that non-primary charter schools are producing achievement gains that are approximately equivalent to those of TPSs in most locations, with moderately negative effects in math and reading (Texas middle schools) and in reading (Chicago middle schools). Since many charter school students begin their education in a charter school kindergarten, the achievement effects of charter schools cannot be computed. Thus, most primary charter schools produced nonsignificant results. In general, charter schools in their first year of operation did not do well in regard to student achievement. The more established charter schools produced greater student performance (although sometimes the improvement was sufficient only to be slightly less negative than students in TPSs).

Special attention was given to the students in “virtual” classrooms – i.e., students who take the courses online (usually in their own homes) rather than in a classroom setting. Although the research team stressed caution in interpreting their results, they indicated that large negative estimates of student achievement are almost entirely attributable to virtual charter schools. Since many virtual charter school students enter the school in kindergarten, the analysis could not include these students in the estimates of these effects. The authors recommend that virtual schools be viewed with caution, because of their apparently poor achievement results.

Question 3. What is the effect of attending a charter school on the probability of graduating and of entering college?

The research team used a variety of models to investigate the impact of charter school attendance on graduation rates and college attendance. Overall, the results indicate that charter school attendance has a “substantial positive effect” upon these indicators. These analyses included only students from

Chicago and Florida. The authors show that these improvements are not related to the smaller size of the charter schools, and are only partially explained by achievement differences between charter high schools and TPSs. The authors suggest that the presence of a clear sense of educational mission may be the most important factor in these effects.

Question 4. What effect does the introduction of charter schools have on test scores of students in nearby TPSs?

Supporters of charter schools have often argued that the mere presence of competition will have a beneficial impact on the traditional public schools, although the evidence of this impact has been scant. Critics worry that the drainage of resources from TPSs to charter schools will have a negative impact on TPSs performance. Across the geographic locations, the results indicate that only in Texas has the presence of charter schools created an impact on the TPSs, and that even in Texas this effect has been small. Although there was little positive impact on the TPSs as a result of competition with charter schools, there was no evidence of a negative effect as theorized by critics of the charter school movement.

Key Findings

The authors posit the following key findings from their research.

1. There is no evidence that charter schools are systematically attracting above-average students.
2. Transfers to charter schools do not involve dramatic shifts in the sorting of students by race in any of the sites included in the study.
3. The average achievement effects of elementary charters are very difficult to assess in the absence of pre-kindergarten baseline test scores.
4. Virtual charter schools, which use technology to deliver education to students in their homes, merit special attention.

5. In most locations, charter schools have difficulty raising student achievement in their first year of operation.
6. Charter schools in most locales have marginally greater variation in performance than TPSs, as measured by the achievement-impact estimate for each school.
7. In the two locations (Chicago and Florida) with data on educational attainment outcomes, attending a charter school has statistically significant and substantial increases in graduating and enrolling in college.
8. There is no evidence in any of the locations that charter schools are negatively affecting the achievement of students in nearby TPSs.

Although we are still unable to give assurance that the final word has been delivered on the issues related to charter schools, this study has gone a long way toward answering many of the important questions that have cropped up over the years since charter schools first became part of the educational landscape.

About the Reviewer

William L. Brown is an independent consultant who recently retired as Coordinator of Test Development for the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) Office of Educational Assessment and Accountability. He was responsible for developing K-12 assessments in the four basic content areas as required by the No Child Left Behind Act. He has recently served as a member of the committee reviewing charter school start-up grant applications for the MDE. He received his doctorate from Michigan State University in 1993. Email: bbcllc@sbcglobal.net.

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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
