

NEW KNOWLEDGE



Chicago's Charter High Schools

THE BIG PICTURE

In the last decade, charter schools have experienced explosive growth in the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of all public schools that were charter schools increased from 4 to 7 percent between the 2004-05 and 2014-15 school years, and the number of students enrolled in public charter schools increased by 1.8 million students (from 0.9 million to 2.7 million), while the number of students attending traditional public schools decreased by 0.4 million.¹ We have also seen the rapid growth of charter schools in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) district. As of 2016, 22 percent of CPS students in grades 9-12 were enrolled in a charter high school, compared to only four percent a decade earlier.²

When charter schools were conceptualized in the 1970s, they were intended to be autonomous schools which could pursue innovative educational practices, with the goal of improving student achievement. As the charter sector grows, families, teachers, and policymakers alike are asking: do charter schools actually improve the educational achievement of their students?

Over the past 20 years, many research studies have sought to address this question. While early studies found charter students had similar or, in some cases, lower levels of achievement than peers in traditional public schools³, recent studies show students in charter schools – particularly those in urban areas – performing significantly better than their traditional public school peers.⁴

This body of research has focused almost exclusively on comparing standardized test scores, leaving many important questions unanswered about their influence on other academic outcomes, such as enrollment and persistence in college. In light of research findings that grades and attendance are more predictive than test scores for outcomes such as high school and college graduation and even lifetime earnings^{5,6}, it is important to understand how charter school students compare to their traditional public school peers on these measures. Prominently, policymakers worry that charter schools could be harming traditional public schools by siphoning off high-performing students. There are also concerns that charter schools may be counseling out low-performing students in an effort to protect their academic reputation. Although some studies have referenced specific charter school policies that may affect student results, there remains almost no research that quantifies the differences in students' subjective experiences in school, or differences in the organizational features between charters and traditional public schools. Also absent is any significant analysis of the variation in charter school performance.

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The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research's new report "Chicago's Charter High Schools: Organizational Features, Enrollment, School Transfers, and Student Performance" is UChicago Consortium's first in-depth look at charter high schools, *and* one of the first major studies of charter schools to examine student performance indicators other than test scores, namely academic behaviors, attendance, and grades. The study examines four key dimensions of charter high schools in CPS: school organization and policies; incoming skills and characteristics of charter high school enrollees; school transfers; and student performance. It relied primarily on survey and administrative data from 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013. However, many students in these years had not yet had sufficient time to graduate from high school and transition to post-secondary opportunities when this study was conducted, so students who were first-time ninth-graders in 2008, 2009, and 2010 were included in analyses of these later student outcomes. Analyses control for an array of background characteristics and academic performance prior to students' entry into high school.

¹The National Center for Education Statistics. See: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>

²Gwynne, J., & Moore, P. (2017). *Chicago's charter high schools: organizational features, enrollment, school transfers, and student performance*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Consortium on School Research.

³See, for example, Zimmer & Buddin (2006); Bifulco & Ladd (2006); Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2009); Zimmer et al. (2009).

⁴See for example, Hoxby et al. (2009); Abdulkadiroglu et al. (2011); Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2013; 2015); Harris & Larsen (2016).

⁵Allensworth & Easton (2005; 2007).

⁶Allensworth & Easton (2005; 2007); Balfanz et al. (2007); Bowers (2010); Bowen et al. (2009); Camara & Echternacht (2000); Geiser & Santelices (2007); Hoffman & Lowitzki (2005); Rothstein (2004).

Organizational Features

"Chicago's Charter High Schools" conducts its comparison of organizational capacity and practices using 5Essentials survey data, which CPS and other districts around the country use to understand schools' organizational conditions. The 5Essentials survey is grounded in the UChicago Consortium's seminal research on the five essential factors that drive school improvement: Effective Leaders, Collaborative Teachers, Involved Families, Supportive Environment, and Ambitious Instruction. The UChicago Consortium's research has shown schools strong on at least three of the five essentials for school improvement were 10 times more likely to show substantial gains in student learning than schools weak on three or more of the five essentials.

Using data from the 5Essentials survey, the UChicago Consortium's study finds that, on average, CPS charter high schools looked similar to non-charter, non-selective schools on some dimensions of organizational capacity, such as leadership, but looked quite different on other dimensions, such as the level of trust and collective responsibility among teachers, parent involvement, instruction and preparation for post-secondary education.

Specifically, survey data indicated that charter schools and traditional schools are similar on measures of **effective leaders** and **collaborative teachers**, with a couple of exceptions: charter school teachers reported significantly stronger levels of trust, and collective responsibility among teachers, but significantly lower levels of school commitment than traditional neighborhood schools.

With respect to **involved families**, charter school teachers reported significantly higher levels of parental involvement and greater levels of trust with the parent community compared to teachers in non-charter, non-selective schools. Nevertheless, having a more involved parent body does not mean parents have more influence over decision making in charter schools. In fact, teachers reported that parents had significantly less influence on school policies and practices in charter schools than in non-charter, non-selective schools

In terms of a **supportive environment**, charter school students felt safer and significantly more supported in planning for postgraduate life than non-charter students. Teachers reported that charter schools were much more likely to expect all students to attend college and promote college readiness. Finally, in **ambitious instruction**, charter students reported more interactive learning and greater teacher expectations than their non-charter peers.

Enrollment

While it is sometimes assumed that students enrolling in charter schools have higher academic skills than their counterparts enrolling in traditional schools, the study shows that this is not the case in Chicago. Comparing students who enroll in each charter high school to students who came from the same elementary schools and neighborhoods, it found that charter school students had similar or lower 8th grade test scores than the comparison group, but higher 8th grade attendance. Thus, charter schools students had particularly strong academic behaviors prior to entering high school, while showing similar or lower performance on tests than other students.

School Transfers

The study found charter school students transferred out of their schools at higher rates, compared to similar students in non-charter high schools. By the beginning of the fourth year of high school, 24.2 percent of students who began high school in a charter school transferred to another school in the district, compared to 17.2 percent of non-charter students. The majority of students who transferred by the beginning of their second year in high school transferred to a CPS non-charter high school. Transfer rates were highest in low-performing or recently-opened charter high schools.

Student Performance

In comparison to similar students at non-charter schools, charter students in Chicago showed higher achievement in high school on many but not all metrics. Charter students had significantly higher high school test scores, classroom engagement, attendance, 4-year college enrollment, and selective college enrollment than their non-charter peers, comparing students who had identical achievement, attendance and backgrounds in the middle grades. Study habits, grit, high school graduation rates, and college persistence rates among college enrollees were similar between charters and non-charters.

Chicago's Charter High Schools

The study also found considerable variation across charter high schools on some student outcomes, including test scores and college enrollment, compared to non-charter high schools. After controlling for differences in students' incoming skills, experience, and background characteristics, there was far more variation among charter schools on these outcomes, than among non-charter schools, highlighting that not all charter schools are the same.

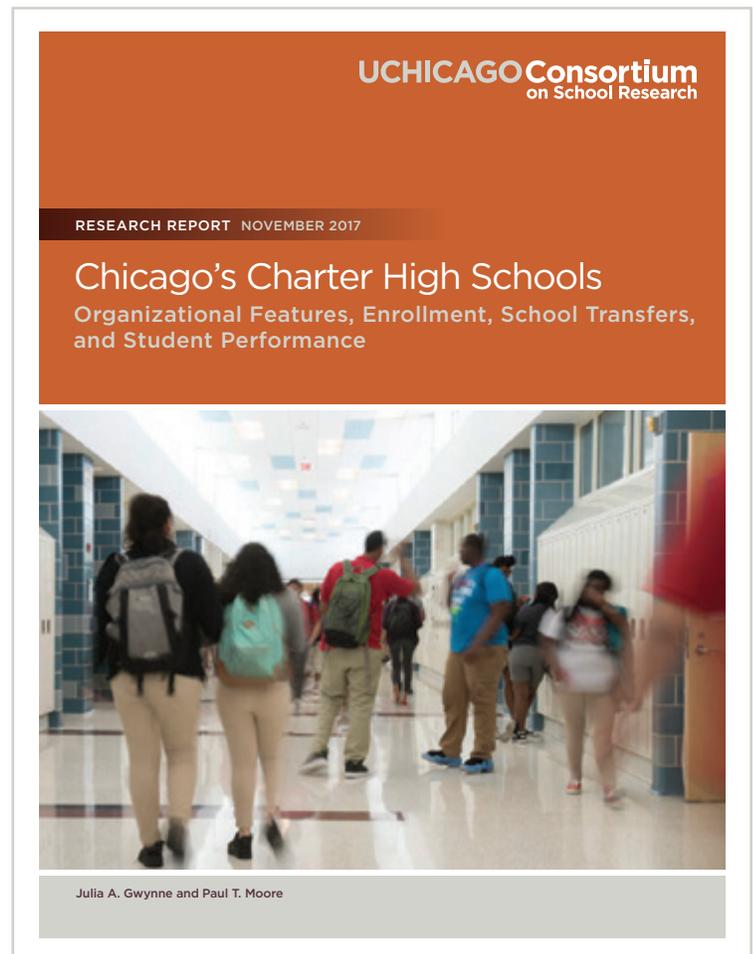
Interpretive Summary

The subject of charter schools often invokes strong reactions among different stakeholders, both locally and nationally. While advocates highlight the possibility for innovation and improved student performance in these schools, critics voice concerns that charter schools may attract the most talented students away from traditional public schools while encouraging unsuccessful students to transfer elsewhere. The study finds some evidence of each of these claims. Although charter high schools in Chicago do not enroll students with the best test scores in 8th grade, they do enroll students with better 8th grade attendance. This means that charter high schools start with a population of students who are more likely to come to high school regularly, which is an essential ingredient for promoting a strong school climate. Despite this, students who begin high school in a charter school are more likely to transfer to another school in the district at some point during the next four years. Transfer rates were highest for students who enrolled in a low performing or newly opened school, which may mean these students are in search of better educational opportunities. The study also finds that charter school students outperform similar students in non-charter high schools on some key metrics, including better attendance, higher test scores, and higher rates of college enrollment. At some charter schools, the size of the test gains that students make, and the college enrollment rates, are considerably larger than in typical schools. There is a great deal of variation among charter high schools on these outcomes, suggesting a need to better understand what is happening in schools that show particularly strong student outcomes.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

In the past decade, there has been a significant amount of national research asking if charter schools improve their students' test scores. The UChicago Consortium's new report answers this question affirmatively in Chicago, but also suggests the need for caution about potential effects on non-charter schools. It also moves the research base forward in important ways by examining non-test student metrics such as academic behaviors and college enrollment and persistence, as well as using 5Essentials survey data to quantify differences in charter school practice.

Still, more work remains to understand the driving forces and factors behind some of the UChicago Consortium study's key findings. For example, the study found many students who enrolled in charter schools in ninth grade transferred out at some point during high school, most often to a neighborhood high school. Identifying the reasons why charter students change schools should be a high priority, given that transferring to a new school in the middle of high school can create disruptions in students' educational experiences and potentially place them at a disadvantage as they prepare for post-secondary opportunities. Moreover, since most charter school students transferred into neighborhood schools, this can create a burden for



these schools, particularly as they work to ensure that transfer students have the credits they need to be on the path toward high school graduation and college enrollment. Also, although “Chicago’s Charter High Schools” explores the question of whether charter schools are harming traditional public schools by skimming off their highest-performing students, similar analysis on the national scale is needed to inform policymakers outside of Illinois.

Finally, although some studies have examined correlations between charter school practices and student achievement, and the UChicago Consortium report quantifies the extent to which Chicago’s charters are organizationally different from traditional public schools, no real work has been done to establish causal links between specific innovations in educational practice and improvements in student achievement. Studies presenting data-backed arguments for such causalities are needed for charter schools to definitely decide which innovations are helpful and which are not.

Ultimately, given the range of performance among charter schools, and also among non-charter schools, schools in both sectors may benefit from opportunities to share best practices, potentially leading to more growth for all high schools. Charter schools were developed with the idea that they could serve as laboratories of innovation that would benefit all public schools. To date, there has been some collaboration between charter and non-charter schools in Chicago⁶, but finding more ways to promote regular citywide conversations between charter and non-charter schools could be beneficial, given the range of performance that exists within both sectors.

The University of Chicago Charter School’s Woodlawn campus has recently opened its doors to traditional public school leaders on Chicago’s South Side. Many of the Woodlawn community’s traditional public school principals have toured the UChicago Charter School’s new high school facility, which will open in January 2018 and serve students from Woodlawn and other South Side neighborhoods with technology-equipped classrooms, state-of-the-art engineering science labs, a media arts space, and a college resource center, among other 21st century resources for learning and development. The shared goal of the UChicago Charter School and Woodlawn’s traditional public schools is to create safe spaces and enrichment opportunities for Woodlawn’s students, families, and community members.

Still, more opportunity to foster connections and substantive dialogue between traditional public school and public charter school leaders remains. Many non-charter schools in Chicago have spent years focused on improving student course performance in an effort to increase Freshman OnTrack rates and high school graduation rates. Some of these schools may have insights to share about how to promote strong academic behaviors and mindsets, which could prove helpful to charter schools if they choose to invest more time in developing students’ skills in these areas. Similarly, a number of charter high schools have developed strong records promoting test-score growth and sending their students to college. Sharing best practices among charter and non-charter schools could be one way to ensure that there are strong school options for students in both sectors.

Finally, we expect to see more research on public charter schools come to the fore as the proportion of students enrolled in them grows. For example, the New Orleans public school district became the first all-charter district in the nation in 2014, and [new research from the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans at Tulane University](#)⁷ is shedding light on how New Orleans’ charter-based school reforms have affected pre-kindergarten program offerings.

To download the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute’s full New Knowledge in Public Education Report, visit: <https://www.ueiknowledge.org/newknowledgereport>

⁷Bell Weixler, L., Arnold Lincove, J., Gerry, A. (2017). *How Have New Orleans’ Charter-Based School Reforms Affected Pre-Kindergarten?* New Orleans, LA: The Education Research Alliance for New Orleans.