

InTASC 10I, m: This artifact highlights my on-going learning regarding current school policies and how they affect schools like the one I teach at in Baltimore City.

## **Charter Schools and Urban School Reform**

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## **Introduction**

Issues regarding school reform are normally quite contentious, eliciting intense emotional response from opposing viewpoints. Many times new ideas regarding school reform catch a lot of attention from education stakeholders and those new ideas are used as a panacea for all of the ills that plague schools. In reality, the problems that face our schools today are quite complex and finding a one-size-fits-all remedy is futile. A fairly recent innovation in school reform is the concept of charter schools. Charter schools are publicly funded schools that operate outside direct control of a local school district under a publicly issued agreement, a charter, that grants the school greater autonomy over curriculum, instruction and operations (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass & Witte, 2009). This freedom is given in exchange for charters being reviewed and renewed or revoked by the authorizing agency. Charter schools must also submit to the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) review under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, and they are subject to federal accountability guidelines if they receive Title I funds (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010). This process is driven primarily by individual state law. Minnesota passed the first charter school law in 1991 (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010) and according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 42 of the 50 states have enacted some form of charter law legislation as of January 2012. According to the most recent numbers available, there over 5,600 charter schools across the United States which enroll about 2 million students – roughly 4 percent of all public school students (Kern, Thukral & Ziebarth, 2012).

The public charter school movement has grown rapidly in the 20 years since the first charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992 (Kern, Thukral & Ziebarth, 2012). There has been much debate about charter schools since their inception and it has received unprecedented attention of late with President Barack Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan making charter schools an important component of the Race To The Top (RTTT) legislation, which was passed in February 2009 (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010). With federal money being awarded to states by RTTT, in the hundreds of millions of dollars, there has been a wave of research on charter schools and their effectiveness. Some educators view charters as the answer to many of the issues in school reform. Evaluating their effectiveness however has proved difficult, since the most common marker of effectiveness used is student achievement scores on state tests. Proponents of charter schools would argue that the purpose of a charter is not solely focusing on raising test scores, but rather they envision a different approach to education (i.e. Montessori or Reggio Emilia approaches), or their charter is based on a given theme (i.e. the arts or environmental stewardship). Is it then fair to evaluate these charters solely on student test scores? Opponents to charter schools would argue that those "soft skills" do not matter as much as student test scores since funding and teacher evaluations are on the line. They believe that charter schools are licenses for people to create a school with teachers and staff that are unqualified and that step outside the bounds of public schools. Each of these arguments, and more, must be scrutinized thoroughly to make any sense of the charter school debate. Based on an analysis of the slim, yet growing, literature of charter schools, it is the position of this paper that charter schools can have a positive

impact on student achievement and they should be allowed to operate based on fair charter laws enacted by individual states. There must also be a fair evaluation system that takes into consideration factors aside from student test scores to deem whether a school should be renewed or revoked by the authorizing agency. While there are a number of bad charter schools that must be shutdown, charters as a whole should be supported; especially considering how much help they provide the population of students who are primarily served by charters, namely students who live in urban areas.

Most of the backlash against the charter school movement has focused primarily on student achievement scores. The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at Stanford University partnered with 15 states and the District of Columbia to gather “longitudinal student-level achievement data” to analyze the impact of charter schooling on student learning gains. Students at charters were compared to a “virtual twin,” a student who matched the charter student’s demographics. Their analysis of 2403 charter schools, published in 2009, found that 46 percent of charter schools had math gains that were indistinguishable from the average growth among their traditional public school (TPS) comparisons. Charter schools whose math growth exceeded their TPS equivalent was only 17 percent of the total and the remaining group, 37 percent of charter schools, posted math gains that “were significantly below what their students would have seen if they enrolled in local traditional public schools instead” (CREDO, 2009). An interesting note about this study is that the states that demonstrated the lowest average charter school student growth than their peers in TPS included Arizona, Florida, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio and Texas (CREDO, 2009). According to the

National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) charter school law rankings, three of the states mentioned, Minnesota, Florida and New Mexico, are ranked two, three, and four respectively for being states with favorable charter laws (compared to the NAPCS model law). If states with favorable charter laws are ranked amongst the worst in the nation in student achievement, this suggests that charters and the flexibility they gain from favorable charter laws actually hurt students. As the CREDO study states: “States that empower multiple entities to act as charter school authorizers realize significantly lower growth in academic learning in their students, on the order of -.08 standard deviations” (2009). While more research must be done to determine the causal mechanism, it would appear that charter school operators are able to choose more permissive entities to provide oversight (CREDO, 2009). Other studies also indicate the negative impact on student achievement experienced by charter schools. The University of Minnesota found that charters in the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul ranked 7.5 and 4.4 percentage points lower than public elementary schools for math and reading scores respectively (Charting a better..., 2012).

Proponents of charter schools purport that charter schools usually serve a greater purpose besides simply raising student achievement scores. Many schools have a specific theme or focus that is meant to address other aspects of education. However, research suggests that charter schools are not succeeding in helping students with these skills either. According to a study by Mathematic Policy Research completed in 2010 on charter middle schools that held lotteries, charter schools showed no significant overall impacts on achievement. The study also said that participating schools had no

significant impact on other measures of academic progress such as attendance, grade promotion, or student conduct within or outside of the school (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle & Dwoyer, 2010).

While the data for student achievement scores for charter schools seems sobering, a closer look at the methods and nuances of these studies is warranted. Most studies about charters conclude that more research must be done and that the results are too varied to make any concrete determinations. According to a meta-analysis of literature by Betts and Tang there is considerably heterogeneity in effect sizes across studies (2011). They found that 90% or more of the variation across studies reflected “true variation rather than statistical noise” (Betts and Tang, 2011). These “large gaps in research” are primarily due to the difficulty to obtain student-level data (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009b). These studies are also difficult to draw evidence from conclusively because the comparisons made are not fair. For example, in an editorial by the Economist, 75% of research on charters was discarded because “because it had failed to account for differences between the backgrounds and academic histories of pupils attending the schools” (2012). This is important because then the comparison is not selecting for differences based on charter school instruction (or attendance) but rather other factors could affect student achievement, such as students may have weaker skills, more involved parents, may come from poorer families or even be immigrants just learning English (Rainey, 2011). While the CREDO study was deemed sound by the Mathematica Research Policy study, as shown later on this is

paper, the comparisons made in the CREDO study have been criticized and questioned. Once those data points are analyzed, the results are actually positive in some cases.

While the CREDO study seems quite comprehensive, other studies suggest that the CREDO study was not sound. In a report by Hoxby 2009, Hoxby points out that the CREDO study actually matches each charter school student to a group of TPS students whose average achievement is used. With much statistical proof, Hoxby concludes that the CREDO study's estimate of the effect of charter schools is biased. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools also issued a publication that analyzed the results of the CREDO report (2009a). The brief publication states "half of CREDO's overall charter-student sample...uses a comparison of gains based upon those students' first test scores in a charter, not a test that took place when they were in an actual school district" (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2009a). This is important because if a student had low student performance before choosing a charter and then made gains after entering the charter, the student was "not matched with a traditional public school student with the same lower prior achievement at the time of the decision." This is due to the averaging method described by Hoxby 2009. While the NAPCS acknowledges that charter students perform lower than non-charter students in reading and math in the first year, it states that the CREDO report shows evidence that by the third year, national results show charter students performing high than non-charter students in both subjects. At a state level, the NAPCS also notes that the CREDO study shows that by the third year, charter students out-perform non-charter students in 11 of 12 states in reading and 9 of 12 states in math.

Other research has shown that charter schools do positively impact student test scores. In New York City, research by Hoxby, Murarka and Kang (2009) suggest that charter school students score 3 points higher on Regents examinations for every year spent in the charter school before taking the test. For instance, “ a student who took the English Comprehensive exam after three years in a charter school...score[s] about 9 points higher [than their TPS counterpart]” (Hoxby, Murarka and Kang, 2009). In a study which looked at charter schools in Indiana, students who attended charter schools at some point during the four years of the study had larger achievement gains than students in TPS (Nicotera, Mendiburo & Berends, 2009). According to the Indiana study charter school switchers in Indianapolis experience positive and statistically significant annual gains compared to the gains they experienced while attending traditional public schools, 0.305 and 0.304 standard deviations for math and reading, respectively (Nicotera, Mendiburo & Berends, 2009). Compared with findings from previous studies of charter schools, these effect sizes are relatively large in magnitude (CREDO, 2009; Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass & Witte, 2009).

Charter school founders have found favor amongst urban school districts. According to NAPCS Dashboard, approximately 52.2% of charter schools were located in cities, compared to 24.5% of non-charter schools (for 2009-2010 data). Gross, Bowen and Martin suggest that charter schools have always served higher percentages of low-income and minority students largely because founders have chosen to locate charter schools in urban areas (2011). According to the Mathematica Research Policy study, charter schools serving more low income or low achieving students had “statistically



significant positive effects on math test scores” (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle & Dwoyer, 2010). Similar results were noted by the National Charter School Resource Center that states “studies that use the randomization of the lottery oversubscription process to study student achievement in urban settings all find positive effects” (2010). Betts and Tang 2011 also note that while charter schools had no significant effect in the overall sample, in the set of studies or urban schools, “the estimated effect becomes positive and significant.” Betts and Tang speculate that charter schools have more “value to add” in large urban districts (2011). This would be due to traditional schools in these areas under-serving their students more than their non-urban counterparts (Betts and Tang 2011). Clearly those whom a majority of charter schools aim to serve are experiencing a positive impact. While it is yet to be seen how charter schools will play a role in suburban, small-town and rural communities, the positive effects they have had on urban centers cannot be undermined (Gross, Bowen & Martin, 2011).

Aside from the positive effects on student achievement, charter schools have also shown to have a positive impact on educational attainment. Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, and Witte conducted in-depth studies in Florida and Chicago regarding educational attainment (2009). According to their study, researchers found that attending a charter high school boosted a student’s possibility of graduating by 7 to 15 percentage points. Similarly, 57 percent of students attending a charter school in grade nine in Florida went to either a two-year or four-year post-secondary institution within five years of starting high school. This compares to only 40 percent of students who started high school in a TPS (Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, Sass, and Witte, 2009). In

Chicago, 49 percent of charter school students went to a post-secondary institution compared to 38 percent for high school students in a TPS. In New York City, research by Hoxby, Murarka and Kang (2009) suggest that a student who attends a charter high school in New York City is about 7 percent more likely to earn a regents diploma by age 20 “for each year he spends in that school.” For example, a student who spends grades ten through twelve in a charter high school will have about a 21 percent higher probability of getting a Regents diploma (Hoxby, Murarka and Kang, 2009).

Based on the research, it is too early to come to hard-set conclusions about charter schools. There is too much variation to completely discredit the amazing work that is occurring in charter schools across the United States. While the amount of success is small compared to the amount of schools throughout the United States, charters have had significant impacts once they have been given the time to grow as a school. Most public schools in the United States have been around for decades and the legacy the school has built plays into the effectiveness of a school. In New York City for example, a charter school has on average been open for 6 years (Hoxby, Murarka & Kang, 2009). Betts and Tang note that New York City appeared to deliver achievement gains larger than charter schools in most other locations (2011). With time, these charters can provide examples of schools that focus on student achievement and also enrich students in various other ways, preparing them for a path with post-secondary education in mind. Avenues should be available for parents and teachers in a community to initiate a new school with a vision in mind (Cody, 2010).

Much still needs to be done in researching charter schools and their effectiveness. State and district school boards face significant challenges in assessing charter schools (O'Brien & Dervarics, 2010). Upcoming research should hopefully provide more data on the roles of authorizing agents and charters, as well as provide larger samples of student data, lottery-based or longitudinal.

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