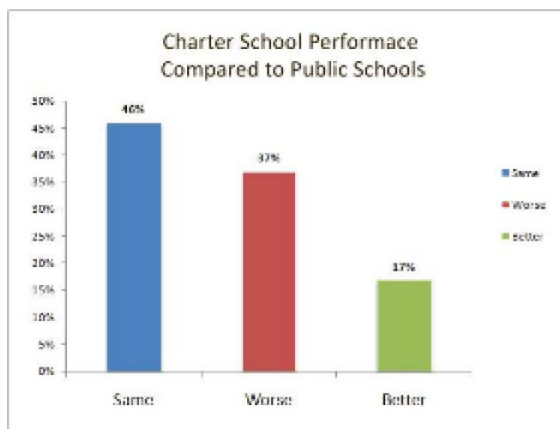


National evaluations of charter schools

One obvious question charter schools face is whether they actually improve educational outcomes, which is their stated purpose. In the interest of testing this assertion, a number of researchers and organizations have examined educational outcomes for students who attend charter schools.

[\[edit\]](#) Center for Research on Education Outcomes



A study done by Stanford University found that charter schools on average perform about the same or worse compared to public schools.

In 2009, the most authoritative study of charter schools was conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) at [Stanford University](#). The report is the first detailed national assessment of charter schools. It analyzed 70% of the nation's students attending charter schools and compared the academic progress of those students with that of demographically matched students in nearby public schools. The report found that 17% of charter schools reported academic gains that were significantly better than traditional public schools; 46% showed no difference from public schools; and 37% were significantly worse than their traditional public school counterparts. The authors of the report considering this a "sobering" finding about the quality of charter schools in the U.S. Charter schools showed a significantly greater variation in quality as compared with the more standardized public schools with many falling below public school performances and a few exceeding them significantly. Results vary for various demographics with Black and Hispanic children not doing as well as they would in public schools, but with children from poverty backgrounds, students learning English, and brighter students doing better; average students do poorer. While the obvious solution to the widely varying quality of charter schools would be to close those who perform below the level of public schools, this is hard to accomplish in practice as even a poor school has its supporters.^[51]

[\[edit\]](#) Criticism and debate

Stanford economist [Caroline Hoxby](#) criticized the study, resulting in a written debate with the authors. She originally argued the study "contains a serious statistical mistake that causes a negative bias in its estimate of how charter schools affect achievement,"^[52] but after CREDO

countered the remarks, saying Hoxby's "memo is riddled with serious errors"^[53] Hoxby revised her original criticism.^[54] The debate ended with a written "Finale" by CREDO that rebuts both Hoxby's original and revised criticism.^[55]

[edit] National Bureau of Economic Research study

In 2004, the National Bureau of Economic Research found data that suggested Charter Schools increase competition in a given jurisdiction, thus improving the quality of traditional public schools (noncharters) in the area. Using end-of-year test scores for grades three through eight from North Carolina's state testing program, researchers found that charter school competition raised the composite test scores in district schools, even though the students leaving district schools for the charters tended to have above average test scores. The introduction of charter schools in the state caused an approximate one percent increase in the score, which constitutes about one quarter of the average yearly growth. The gain was roughly two to five times greater than the gain from decreasing the student-faculty ratio by 1. This research could partially explain how other studies have found a small significant difference in comparing educational outcomes between charter and traditional public schools. It may be that in some cases, charter schools actually improve other public schools by raising educational standards in the area.^[56]

[edit] American Federation of Teachers study

A study performed by the American Federation of Teachers, which "strongly supports charter schools",^[57] found that students attending charter schools tied to school boards do not fare any better or worse statistically in reading and math scores than students attending public schools.^[58] This study was conducted as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2003.^[59] The study included a sample of 6000 [4th grade](#) pupils and was the first national comparison of test scores among children in charter schools and regular public schools. [Rod Paige](#), the U.S. [Secretary of Education](#) from 2001 to 2005, issued a statement saying (among other things) that, "according to the authors of the data the Times cites, differences between charter and regular public schools in achievement test scores vanish when examined by race or ethnicity."^[60] Additionally, a number of prominent research experts called into question the usefulness of the findings and the interpretation of the data in an advertisement funded by a pro-charter group.^[61] Harvard economist [Caroline Hoxby](#) also criticized the report and the sample data, saying "An analysis of charter schools that is statistically meaningful requires larger numbers of students."^[62]

[edit] Caroline Hoxby studies

A 2000 paper by [Caroline Hoxby](#) found that charter school students do better than public school students, although this advantage was found only "among white non-Hispanics, males, and students who have a parent with at least a high school degree".^[63] Hoxby released a follow up paper in 2004 with Jonah Rockoff, Assistant Professor of Economics and Finance at the Columbia Graduate School of Business, claiming to have again found that charter school students do better than public school students.^[62] This second study compared charter school students "to the schools that their students would most likely otherwise attend: the nearest regular public school with a similar racial composition."^[62] It reported that the students in charter schools performed better in both math and reading. It also reported that the longer the charter school had been in operation, the more favorably its students compared.

[\[edit\]](#) Criticism

The paper was the subject of controversy in 2005 when Princeton assistant professor Jesse Rothstein was unable to replicate her results. Hoxby's methodology in this study has also been criticized, arguing that Hoxby's "assessment of school outcomes is based on the share of students who are proficient at reading or math but not the average test score of the students. That's like knowing the poverty rate but not the average income of a community—useful but incomplete."^[64] How representative the study is has also been criticized, as the study is only of students in Chicago.^[65]

[\[edit\]](#) Learning gains studies

A common approach in peer reviewed academic journals is to compare the learning gains of individual students in charter schools to their gains when they were in traditional public schools. Thus, in effect, each student acts as his/her own control to assess the impact of charter schools. A few selected examples of this work find that charter schools on average outperform the traditional public schools that supplied students, at least after the charter school had been in operation for a few years.^{[66][67][68][69]} At the same time, there appears to be a wide variation in the effectiveness of individual charter schools.^[69]

[\[edit\]](#) Meta-analyses

A report issued by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools,^[70] released in July 2005 and updated in October 2006, looks at twenty-six studies that make some attempt to look at change over time in charter school student or school performance. Twelve of these find that overall gains in charter schools were larger than other public schools; four find charter schools' gains higher in certain significant categories of schools, such as elementary schools, high schools, or schools serving at risk students; six find comparable gains in charter and traditional public schools; and, four find that charter schools' overall gains lagged behind. The study also looks at whether individual charter schools improve their performance with age (e.g. after overcoming start-up challenges). Of these, five of seven studies find that as charter schools mature, they improve. The other two find no significant differences between older and younger charter schools.

A more recent synthesis of findings conducted by Vanderbilt University indicates that solid conclusions cannot be drawn from the existing studies, due to their methodological shortcomings and conflicting results, and proposes standards for future meta-analyses.^[71]

[\[edit\]](#) National Center for Education Statistics study

A study released on August 22, 2006 by the [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#) found that students in charter schools performed several points worse than students in traditional public schools in both reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test.^[72] Some proponents consider this the best study as they believe by incorporating basic demographic, regional, or school characteristics simultaneously it "... has shown conclusively, through rigorous, replicated, and representative research, whether charter schools boost student achievement ...", while they say that in the AFT study "... estimates of differences between charter schools and traditional public schools are overstated."^[65] Critics of this study argue that its demographic controls are highly unreliable, as percentage of students receiving free lunches does not correlate well to poverty levels, and

some charter schools don't offer free lunches at all, skewing their apparent demographics towards higher income levels than actually occur.^[73]

[\[edit\]](#) **United States Department of Education study**

In its Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program: Final Report released in 2003, the U.S. Department of Education found that, in the five case study states, charter schools were out-performed by traditional public schools in meeting state performance standards, but noted: “It is impossible to know from this study whether that is because of the performance of the schools, the prior achievement of the students, or some other factor.”^[17]

[\[edit\]](#) **Local evaluations of charter schools**

Several local evaluations have found urban charter schools to significantly outperform their school district peers.

[\[edit\]](#) **Boston**

A study in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) District^[74] compared Boston’s charter schools to their district school peers as well as Boston’s pilot schools, which are public schools that have been granted the flexibility to determine their own budgets, staffing, curricula, and scheduling but remain part of the local school district and subject to collectively bargained pay scales and seniority protections. The report performed analyses using both statistical controls and using pilot and charter applicant lotteries.

The results using statistical controls to control for demographic and baseline state test scores found a positive effect among charter schools similar to a year spent in one of Boston’s selective exam schools, with math scores, for instance, showing positive effects of 0.18 and 0.22 standard deviations for charter middle and high schools respectively compared to an effect of 0.20 and 0.16 standard deviations for exam schools. For pilot schools, the report found that in the middle school grades pilot school students modestly underperform relatives to similar students attending traditional BPS schools (-0.05 standard deviations in ELA and -0.07 in math) while showing slightly positive results in the high school grades for pilot schools (0.15 standard deviations for writing and 0.06 for math).

The results using a sub-sample of schools with random lottery results found very large positive effects in both math and ELA scores for charter schools, including 0.16 and 0.19 standard deviations in middle and high school ELA scores respectively and 0.36 and 0.17 standard deviations in middle and high school math scores respectively. Boston’s pilot schools, however, showed a concerning negative effect in middle school math and ELA and a slightly positive effect in high school.

[\[edit\]](#) **New Orleans**

A recent case study by the [Harvard Business School](#) examined the charter school reform efforts in [New Orleans](#).^[75] After Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of New Orleans in 2005, the state of Louisiana took over 102 of the 118 public schools and shifted management to a system of schools. The district is now composed of 70 Recovery Schools District (RSD) schools managed by the state (including 37 RSD charter schools) and 16 schools managed by

the local Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) (including 12 OPSB charter schools). Charter schools now account for more than 60% of the public schools in New Orleans.

When evaluating New Orleans' schools against the 200 point index called the State Performance Index (SPI), 19 of the 20 highest performing non-selective schools were charter schools. Charter schools affiliated with charter management organizations such as [KIPP](#) tended to perform better than stand-alone schools. The overall percentage of schools performing below the failing mark of 60 fell from 64% in 2005 to 36% in 2009.

[edit] Policy and practice

As more states start charter schools, there is increasing speculation about upcoming legislation. In an innovation-diffusion study surveying education policy experts in fifty states, Michael Mintrom and Sandra Vergari (1997) found that charter legislation is more likely to be considered in states with poor test scores, Republican legislative control, and proximity to other states with charter schools. Legislative enthusiasm, gubernatorial support, interactions with national authorities, and use of permissive charter-law models increase the chances for adopting what they consider stronger laws. He feels union support and restrictive models lead to adoption of what he considers weaker laws.

The threat of vouchers, wavering support for public education, and bipartisan support for charters has led some unions to start charters themselves. Several [AFT](#) chapters, such as those in Houston and Dallas, have themselves started charters. The [National Education Association](#) has allocated \$1.5 million to help members start charter schools. Proponents claim that charters offer teachers a measure of empowerment, employee ownership, and governance that might be enhanced by union assistance (Nathan). Former President Bush's [No Child Left Behind Act](#) also promotes charter schools.

Over two dozen private management companies are scrambling to increase their 10 percent share of a "more hospitable and entrepreneurial market" (Stecklow 1997). Boston-based Advantage Schools Inc., a corporation specializing in [for-profit schooling](#), has contracted to run charter schools in New Jersey, Arizona, and North Carolina. The Education Development Corporation was planning in the summer of 1997 to manage nine nonsectarian charter schools in [Michigan](#), using cost-cutting measures employed in [Christian schools](#).

[edit] Public opinion

Historically, Americans have been hesitant to the idea of Charter schools, often with more opposition than support.^[76] There is also widespread sentiment that states should hold Charters accountable, with 80% thinking so in 2005.^[76] However, openness to Charter schools has been increasing^{[76][77]} especially among minority communities who have shifted opinions higher than the national average.^[77]

Charter schools provide an alternative for educators, families and communities who are dissatisfied with educational quality and school district bureaucracies at noncharter schools. In early 2008, the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, a pro-charter organization, conducted two polls in primarily conservative states Idaho and Nevada where they asked parents about their preferences concerning education. In Idaho, only 12% of respondents said that their regular public school was their top choice for the children's school. Most preferred

private schools over other options.^[78] In 2008, Polls conducted in the conservative states Georgia^[79] and Wyoming^[80] found similar results.

The charter approach uses market principles from the private sector, including accountability and consumer choice, to offer new public sector options that remain nonsectarian and non-exclusive. Many people, such as former President Bill Clinton, see charter schools, with their emphasis on autonomy and accountability, as a workable political compromise and an alternative to vouchers. Others, such as former President [George W. Bush](#), see charter schools as a way to improve schools without antagonizing the [teachers' union](#). Bush made charter schools a major part of his [No Child Left Behind Act](#). Despite these endorsements, a recent report by the [AFT](#), has shown charter schools not faring as well as public schools on state administered standardized testing,^[81] though the report has been heavily criticized by members of conservative think tanks like William G. Howell of the Brookings Institute.^{[82][83][84][85]} Other charter school opponents have examined the competing claims and suggest that most students in charter schools perform the same or worse than their traditional public school counterparts on standardized tests.^[86]

Both charter school proponents and critics admit that individual schools of public choice have the potential to develop into successful or unsuccessful models. In a May 2009 policy report issued by Education Sector, "Food for Thought: Building a High-Quality School Choice Market",^[87] author Erin Dillon argues that market forces alone will not provide the necessary supply and demand for excellent public schools, especially in low-income, urban neighborhoods that often witness low student achievement. According to Dillon, "In order to pressure all public schools to improve and to raise student achievement overall, school choice reforms need to not just increase the supply of any schools. They need to increase the supply of good schools, and parents who know how to find them." Drawing lessons from successful food and banking enterprises located in poor, inner-city neighborhoods, the report recommends that policymakers enhance the charter school market by providing more information to consumers, forging community partnerships, allowing for more flexible school financing, and mapping the quality of the education market.

[\[edit\]](#) Debate over funding

Nearly all charter schools face implementation obstacles, but newly created schools are most vulnerable. Some charter advocates claim that new charters tend to be plagued by resource limitations, particularly inadequate startup funds. Yet a few charter schools also attract large amounts of interest and money from private foundations such as the [Gates Foundation](#), the Walton Family Foundation and the Broad Foundation.

Although charter advocates recommend the schools control all per-pupil funds, charter advocates claim that their schools rarely receive as much funding as other public schools. In reality, this is not necessarily the case in the complex world of school funding. Charter schools in California were guaranteed a set amount of district funding that in some districts amounted to \$800 per student per year more than traditional public schools received until a new law was passed that took effect in fall 2006. Charter advocates claim that their schools generally lack access to funding for facilities and special program funds distributed on a district basis.^[88] Sometimes private businesses and foundations, such as the Ameritech Corporation in Michigan and the Annenberg Fund in California, provide support.^[89] Congress and the President allocated \$80 million to support charter-school activities in fiscal year 1998, up from \$51 million in 1997. Despite the possibility of additional private and non-

district funding, a government study showed that charter school may still lag behind traditional public school achievement.^[90]

Charters sometimes face opposition from local boards, state education agencies, and unions. Many educators are concerned that charter schools might siphon off badly needed funds for regular schools, as well as students. In addition, public-school advocates assert that charter schools are designed to compete with public schools in a destructive and harmful manner rather than work in harmony with them. To minimize these harmful effects, the American Federation of Teachers urges that charter schools adopt high standards, hire only certified teachers, and maintain teachers' collective-bargaining rights.

[edit] Critiques of charter schools

[edit] Difficulties with accountability

The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for greater accountability. They are meant to be held accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups, including the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them. Charter schools can theoretically be closed for failing to meet the terms set forth in their charter, but in practice, this can be difficult, divisive, and controversial. One example was the 2003 revocation of the charter for a school called Urban Pioneer in the [San Francisco Unified School District](#), which first came under scrutiny when two students died on a school wilderness outing.^[91] An auditor's report found that the school was in financial disarray^[92] and posted the lowest test scores of any school in the district except those serving entirely non-English-speakers.^[93] It was also accused of academic fraud, graduating students with far fewer than the required credits.^[91] There is also the case of [California Charter Academy](#), where a publicly funded but privately run chain of 60 charter schools became insolvent in August 2004, despite a budget of \$100 million, which left thousands of children without a school to attend.^[65]

In March 2009, the Center for Education Reform released its latest data on charter school closures. At that time they found that 657 of the more than 5250 charter schools that have ever opened had closed, for reasons ranging from district consolidation to failure to attract students. The study found that "41 percent of the nation's charter closures resulted from financial deficiencies caused by either low student enrollment or inequitable funding," while 14% had closed due to poor academic performance. The report also found that the absence of achievement data "correlates directly with the weakness of a state's charter school law. For example, states like Iowa, Mississippi, Virginia and Wyoming have laws ranked either "D" or "F". Progress among these schools has not been tracked objectively or clearly."^[16] A 2005 paper found that in Connecticut, which it characterized as having been highly selective in approving charter applications, a relatively large proportion of poorly performing charter schools have closed.^[94] Under Connecticut's relatively weak charter law,^[95] only 21 charter schools have opened in all, and of those, five have closed.^[96] Of those, 3 closed for financial reasons. Charter school students in Connecticut are funded on average \$4,278 less than regular public school students.^[25]

In a September 2007 public policy report, education experts Andrew Rotherham and Sara Mead of Education Sector offered a series of recommendations to improve charter school quality through increased accountability. Some of their recommendations urged policymakers

to: (i) provide more public oversight of charter school authorizers, including the removal of poor-quality authorizers, (ii) improve the quality of student performance data with more longitudinal student-linked data and multiple measures of school performance, and (iii) clarify state laws related to charter school closure, especially the treatment of displaced students.^[97]

[edit] Exploitation by for-profit entities

“The education industry,” according to these analysts, “represents...the final frontier of a number of sectors once under public control” that have either voluntarily opened or...have “been forced” to [open up to private enterprise](#). Indeed...“the education industry represents the largest market opportunity” since health-care services were privatized during the 1970’s...From the point of view of private profit, one of these analysts enthusiastically observes, “The K–12 market is the Big Enchilada.”

[Jonathan Kozol](#)^[98]

Critics have accused for-profit entities (Educational Management Organizations or EMOs)^[99] and private foundations such as the [Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation](#), the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the [Walton Family Foundation](#)^[100] of funding Charter school initiatives to undermine public education^{[99][100]} and turn education into a "Business Model" which can make a profit.^[101] According to activist [Jonathan Kozol](#), education is seen as one of the biggest market opportunities in America or "the big enchilada".^[98]

[edit] Shift from progressive to conservative movement

Charters were originally a [progressive movement](#) (called the “small schools” movement) started by University of Massachusetts professor Ray Budde and conservative [American Federation of Teachers](#) leader, [Al Shanker](#) to explore best practices for education without bureaucracy. However, the Charter movement is said to have shifted into an effort to privatize education and attack teachers' unions.^[99] Education historian [Diane Ravitch](#) has estimated, as a "safe guess," that 95% of charters in the United States are non-union and has said that charters follow an unsustainable practice of requiring teachers to work unusually long hours.^[102]

[edit] Lower student test scores and teacher issues

According to a study done by [Vanderbilt University](#), teachers in charter schools are 132% more likely to leave teaching than a public school teacher.^[103] Another 2004 study done by the [Department of Education](#) found that charter schools "are less likely than traditional public schools to employ teachers meeting state certification standards."^[104] A national evaluation by [Stanford University](#) found that 83% of charter schools perform the same or worse than public schools (see [earlier in this article](#)).

It is as yet unclear whether charters' lackluster test results will affect the enacting of future legislation. A Pennsylvania legislator who voted to create charter schools, State Rep. Mark B. Cohen of Philadelphia, said that "Charter schools offer increased flexibility to parents and administrators, but at a cost of reduced job security to school personnel. The evidence to date shows that the higher turnover of staff undermines school performance more than it enhances it, and that the problems of urban education are far too great for enhanced managerial

authority to solve in the absence of far greater resources of staff, technology, and state of the art buildings."^[105]

[edit] Lottery for admissions disappoints some

When admission depends on a random lottery, some hopeful applicants may be disappointed. A film about the admission lottery at the [Harlem Success Academy, New York City](#), has been shown as *The Lottery*.^{[106][107]} It was inspired by a 2008 lottery.^[107] [Waiting for "Superman"](#) is another film examining this issue.

[edit] Collective bargaining

Concern has also been raised about the exemption of charter school teachers from states' collective bargaining laws, especially because "charter school teachers are even more likely than traditional public school teachers to be beset by the burn-out caused by working long hours, in poor facilities."^[108] It has recently been noted that "an increasing number of teachers at charter schools" are now attempting to restore collective bargaining rights.^{[109][110]} [Steven Brill](#), in his book, *Class Warfare: Inside the Fight to Fix America's Schools* (2011), changed his position on charter schools and unions. He said that after two years of researching school reform, he understood the complexities. He reversed his view of union leader [Randi Weingarten](#) and suggested she run the school system for a city.^[111]

[edit] Racial segregation

One study states that charter schools increase racial segregation.^[65] A UCLA report points out that most charter schools are located in African-American neighborhoods.^[112] Here are the demographics for Colorado charter schools: 57.7% are white (not Hispanic), 28.6% are Hispanic, 6.7% are Black (not Hispanic), 3.6% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.8% are Native American, [and] 2.6% are two or more ethnicities. Here are the demographics for traditional public schools in Colorado: 56.8% are white (not Hispanic), 31.8% are Hispanic, 4.6% are Black (not Hispanic), 3.1% are Asian or Pacific Islander, 0.9% are Native American, [and] 2.8% are two or more ethnicities. In this state, charter and public schools have almost identical demographics.

[edit] Too much power for teachers and parents

Professor Frank Smith, of [Teachers College, Columbia University](#), sees the charter-school movement as a chance to involve entire communities in redesigning all schools and converting them to "client-centered, learning cultures" (1997). He favors the Advocacy Center Design process used by state-appointed Superintendent Laval Wilson to transform four failing New Jersey schools. Building stronger communities via newly designed institutions may prove more productive than charters' typical "free-the-teacher-and-parent" approach.