
Other Studies of Charter Schools’ Academic Performance

How do charter schools compare to traditional public schools in terms of academic performance? The question has been fiercely debated among researchers. Beginning in the late 1990s, they have concluded everything from charters performing better than traditional public schools on tests of student performance to those same schools falling far behind the traditional schools on proficiency tests. That means the picture is less than clear. Certain states have been studied carefully and others less so, but what bearing do all of these studies have on North Carolina’s decision to either expand or maintain its charter system?

Caroline M. Hoxby of Harvard University and the National Bureau of Economic Research conducted one of the most highly debated studies. Entitled *Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences*, Hoxby concluded that on the whole, “charter students are 5.2 percent more likely to be proficient in reading and 3.2 percent more likely to be proficient in math on their state’s exams.”¹ She used the proficiency exams for each state and compared the scores from elementary charter schools that were “matched” with local traditional elementary schools. The “matched” schools approach compared the academic performance of two schools in a geographic region that were similar in both racial and socio-economic make-up of their student bodies.

Though positive for charter schools on the whole, Hoxby’s study found North Carolina charters to be far behind the national average, and in both reading and math, North Carolina charter schools lagged 4 percent behind their traditional school counterparts.² Several parties have tried to refute Hoxby’s findings and her methodology. In fact, the National Charter School Research Project, a research group focused on unbiased measurement of all facets of charter schools, rated this specific study as “poor” because her model type had “no regression used.”³

In another study by researchers Robert Bifulco and Helen F. Ladd of Duke University, which focused primarily on North Carolina, the results were also “discouraging for charter school supporters.” Students in grades 3 through 8 were found to make “considerably smaller achievement gains in charter schools than they would have in traditional public schools.”⁴ Their study used individual information from the North Carolina Education Research Data Center, and followed the progression of 3rd through 8th graders, marking their academic achievement

“We get a lot of concern from people that we are not funding our public schools to the amount we want to.” Of further concern, says Garrou, is academic performance at some charter schools. “I’m not seeing the results that would make me want to look at raising that cap,” she says.

The Charter Schools Advisory Committee agrees with raising, but not eliminating, the cap. “I believe the proposal to add 10 schools a year would be prudent,” Fedewa says. “The Committee has recommended this to the State Board of Education, and the Board said they would support this. We’ve been in a holding pattern since the last action [by the General Assembly]. The cap is discouraging people from applying.”

Moyer says the Office of Charter Schools could easily handle a limited number of new charters. “I believe the cap needs to go up,” Moyer says. “Looking at our staff, if we could add 9 or 10 new schools a year, we could do a good job. I personally don’t favor eliminating the cap. You need to have controlled growth.”

as they moved through those grades. The researchers studied student gains on standardized tests, using standard deviations as their means of measuring the results. Their initial findings showed that "... a student enrolled in charter schools for 5 years would score nearly one-half of a standard deviation lower in reading and nearly eight-tenths of a standard deviation lower in math than they would if they remained in traditional public schools."⁵ This means that students in charter schools are significantly farther behind in both reading and math than if they had attended traditional public schools for five years.

A 2003 study of California charter schools by the highly respected RAND Corporation yielded results that carried nationwide implications. *Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence from California* was authored by 11 noted researchers who studied charter schools in California. According to these researchers, charter schools can be evaluated in terms of whether they both (1) "improve learning of pupils over time" and (2) "outperform conventional public schools."⁶ In the California study, researchers used both methods and found that on average charters do tend to improve learning over time, as both traditional and charter schools "have experienced growth in student performance in recent years." But in terms of outperforming traditional schools, the study found, "Charter schools generally have comparable or slightly lower test scores..."⁷

—Aisander Duda

FOOTNOTES

¹ Caroline M. Hoxby, *Achievement in Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences*, Program on Education Policy and Governance, Cambridge, Mass., December 2004, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*

³ See NCSRP listing of Achievement Studies at Web Site www.ncsrp.org/cs/csr/print/csr_docs/achstud.htm.

⁴ Robert Bifulco and Helen F. Ladd, "Results from the Tar Heel State," Hoover Institution, Stanford, Calif., 2005, p. 10.

⁵ Robert Bifulco and Helen F. Ladd, "The Impacts of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: Evidence from North Carolina," Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Durham, N.C. August 2004, pp. 19–20.

⁶ RAND Education, *Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence from California*, RAND Publishing, Santa Monica, Calif., 2003, pp. 175–176.

⁷ *Ibid.*

The State Board of Education supports an increase of 8–10 charter schools based on the premise that some 80 of the 100 charters schools operating in the state are "very successful," says Rebecca Garland, State Board of Education executive director. "Raising the cap 8 to 10 percent would be comfortable for them," she says. However, that's less than the 10-schools-per-year increase for multiple years recommended by the advisory committee and sought by the N.C. Office of Charter Schools.

Roger Gerber of the League of Charter Schools wants no constraints on the growth of charter schools. "I want to see the cap eliminated," Gerber says. "Last year, there were 17 applications for three spots, and there's only one available now. The demand for new charters is there. Why shouldn't we give people a choice?"

However, Winner of N.C. Schools Boards Association says the association opposes raising the cap at all for three reasons. First, she says charter schools were intended by statute to be small, experimental schools that could serve as laboratories