

NEPC REVIEW: STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN FLORIDA'S CHARTER SCHOOLS (FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, MARCH 2019)



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June 2019

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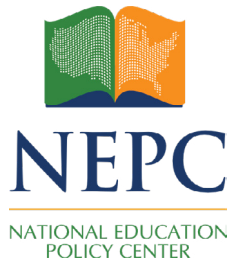
Suggested Citation: Bifulco, R. (2019). *Review of “Student Achievement in Florida’s Charter Schools.”* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/fl-charters>.

Funding: This review was made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Educational Research and Practice.



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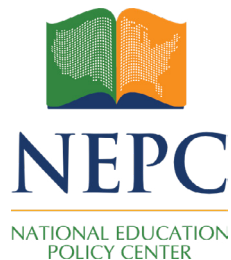
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Executive Summary

In March 2019, the Florida Department of Education published a report titled *Student Achievement in Florida's Charter Schools*. The report consists almost entirely of simple graphs comparing achievement levels, achievement gaps, and achievement gains on state-wide tests among charter school students to those among traditional public school students. Beyond the odd exercise of counting the number of comparisons that appear favorable to charter schools, the report offers no discussion. The comparisons are not even explained. The fact that the report merely presents comparisons required by law without putting any policy “spin” on them might be considered a virtue. The danger is that the report might encourage erroneous conclusions. The simple comparisons reveal very little about the relative effectiveness of charter schools and still less about other policy questions. At the very least, the report should have clarified the purposes of its comparisons and cautioned the reader against drawing unwarranted conclusions.



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I. Introduction

In March 2019, as required by law, the Florida Department of Education authored and published *Student Achievement in Florida's Charter Schools: A Comparison of the Performance of Charter School Students with Traditional Public School Students*.¹ Charter schools have become a significant part of public education, both in Florida and the United States. As the report indicates “[c]harter school enrollment has more than doubled over the last decade and represents more than 10 percent of public enrollment in Florida.”² Although charter schools are likely to remain an important part of the educational landscape for the foreseeable future, many decisions regarding charter schools continue to require the attention of policymakers. For instance: To what extent and under what conditions should regulators open new charter schools and/or expand charter school enrollments? When should regulators look to close charter schools or reduce charter school enrollments? What form of regulation is most appropriate for charter schools, and what specific rules and regulations ought to govern charter school operations? Are there lessons either from charter school governance or programming that can be transferred to traditional public schools? How should the costs of charter schools be financed? What effects do charter schools have on traditional public schools and what policies should be adopted to ameliorate negative effects and/or realize potentially positive effects?

The report does not explain what policy questions its analyses are intended to inform. Information on the performance of students in charter schools and how it compares to the performance of students in traditional public schools might offer some insight into some of the policy questions charter schools raise. However, the questions this report's comparisons are intended to address are not clear. This review focuses largely on the implications that should *not* be drawn from the report—but which policymakers and the public might be tempted to assume.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

Using data from the 2017–18 school year, the report compares the percentage of charter school students and traditional public school students who perform above grade level on tests in several different subjects and at several different grade levels. These comparisons are made for all students as well as within various subgroups defined by ethnicity, free and reduced-price lunch eligibility, English language learner status, and exceptionality. The study finds that in a total of 77 comparisons, students enrolled in charter schools demonstrated higher levels of grade level performance in 63, and lower rates of grade level performance in 13.

Next the report compares gaps in the percentage of students performing above grade level across several pairs of subgroups in the charter school sector to similarly defined gaps among traditional public school students. The report finds that the gaps are smaller among students enrolled in charter schools in 19 of the total 22 comparisons and larger in only 3.

Finally, the study makes 96 comparisons of the percentage of students making learning gains in different subjects, different grades, and within different student subgroups. In 88 of these 96 comparisons, the percentage of charter school students making gains was higher than that for traditional public school students.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report merely presents these hundreds of comparisons in a series of simple graphs, and then it reports counts of comparisons in which one sector is greater than or less than another. It does not explicitly draw conclusions from these comparisons and offers virtually no discussion.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report does not reference or use any of the extensive charter schools research literature.³ It does begin with some positive claims about what charter schools provide for parents and strive to achieve for students, but it offers no discussion of the concerns that have been raised about charter schools. For instance, potentially negative effects on segregation or on traditional public schools are not mentioned. Nor are the reasons why charter schools might be expected to outperform or underperform the state's traditional public schools discussed.

Nor is there any discussion of the literature on how student performance data can be used to inform questions about charter schools. A large literature identifies the many pitfalls involved in trying to derive policy-relevant conclusions from simple performance comparisons and provides suggestions for how to avoid such pitfalls and provide more useful information.⁴ These lessons are particularly relevant for policymakers and members of the public

who might not be familiar with the challenges of policy evaluation, and yet, are not even mentioned in this report.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The largest concern with this report is that it provides no guidance on what the comparisons presented mean for issues policymakers might be interested in, and thereby either intentionally or unintentionally encourages unwarranted conclusions. Beyond this problem, however, the report provides virtually no detail to help the reader understand what exactly is being compared.

The report would be more useful if it provided additional information about the student sample. Anyone who has worked with administrative data understands that some number of students cannot be used in analyses of this kind because they are missing test score data or other information. It would be helpful to know how many students were excluded from the various calculations made in the analyses, and whether the proportion of charter school students excluded is greater or less than the proportion of traditional public school students excluded. If the number of students excluded is large, then the reported percentages above grade level or making learning gains might not be representative of these percentages across all charter or traditional public school students.

More information on how subgroups are defined would also have been helpful. For example, the definition of “exceptional education students” might be well understood by educational insiders in the state of Florida, but no definition is provided in the report for other readers. Because a wide variety of factors can qualify a student as an “exceptional education student,” the category seems to include a wide variety of exceptionalities. It would be useful to know whether the distribution of charter school students across different exceptional education categories differs from that of traditional public school students. For example, challenges for schools would be significantly different if one sector needed to accommodate predominantly mild exceptionality while schools in the other sector faced large numbers of students with severe disabilities. Such information is needed to understand if the performance of “exceptional education students” in one sector is comparable to the performance of those in the other.

Finally, clear definitions of the performance measures examined would be useful. Does the measure of achievement gaps in charter schools reflect average differences across black and white students attending the same school, so that they are average within-school gaps, or are they more simply just differences between black and white charter school students regardless of school attended? Also, how is a learning gain defined? Such questions are not answered in the report.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

It might be viewed as a virtue of this report that it does not try to put any “spin” on the comparisons presented by drawing policy conclusions. Rather, it merely presents the comparisons required by legislation and leaves it to the reader to draw conclusions. What could be more transparent? The danger is that some readers might be tempted to draw erroneous conclusions from these comparisons or to use them to support predetermined political positions.

For instance, some might be persuaded that these comparisons provide evidence that charter schools are more effective than traditional public schools. However, among people familiar with program evaluation, it almost goes without saying that charter school students are likely to differ from traditional public school students in many ways other than their state test scores. In fact, a table provided at the beginning of the report suggests charter school students are less likely to be classified as eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch, as English language learners, or as having disabilities. They are also more likely to identify as Hispanic. These and many other differences between charter school students and traditional public school students are as likely to account for differences in achievement as any difference in the effectiveness of charter schools relative to traditional public schools.

This point is crucially important even when considering comparisons of charter school and traditional public schools within subgroups. We know that not all Black or Hispanic students are the same. Nor are all free-lunch eligible students or English language learners the same. Within any group, some students have greater academic ability, are more motivated, or have more parental support than other students in that group. If we believe either high- or low-ability students are more likely to see charter schools as an attractive alternative to their traditional public school, then we cannot draw any conclusions about the relative effectiveness of charter schools from simple comparisons within subgroups.

In response to critics who worry that charter schools may exacerbate educational disparities, some might argue that the report’s comparisons tend to show smaller achievement gaps among charter school students than among traditional public school students. Unfortunately, these comparisons do not tell us very much about how charter schools affect educational disparities. Most of the ways that introducing charter schools and parental choice into public school systems might increase educational disparities would not result in larger achievement gaps within the charter school sector than within the traditional public school sector. For instance, suppose high-achieving Black students are disproportionately drawn away from predominantly Black, traditional public schools with low levels of student performance. Such a drain of the most talented students could make educational challenges in those traditional public schools more severe, negatively affecting the remaining students. Such a situation could yield smaller Black-White test score gaps in the charter sector even as it produced greater disparities overall between the most and least advantaged students. That is not to say that charter schools in Florida are having those types of effects. The point here is that the report’s analyses shed very little light on the question of what impact charter schools actually have on achievement disparities.

Finally, some charter proponents argue that even if differences in the percentage of students

performing above grade level do not indicate that charter schools are more effective than traditional public schools, surely differences in the percentage of students achieving learning gains says something about the relative effectiveness of charter schools. However, systematic differences between charter and traditional public school students that have nothing to do with school effectiveness can lead to differences in learning gains as well as achievement levels. Thus, although the fact that a relatively high percentage of charter school students are achieving learning gains suggests at least that charter schools as a group have not been disastrous for students, it does not tell us much about the relative effectiveness of charter schools or help address any of the policy questions posed earlier in this review.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Clearly the usefulness of this report for guiding policy and practice is extremely limited. Comparisons of achievement between charter schools and traditional public schools are usually intended to indicate something about the relative effectiveness of charter schools. Unfortunately, the simple comparisons presented in this report reveal very little about that issue. And of course, the report suggests even less about critical policy questions concerning whether to expand or contract the charter school sector, how to most effectively regulate charter and traditional public schools, or how to best finance charter school costs.

The danger of this report is that it might encourage readers to draw unwarranted conclusions. At the very least, the report should have clarified the purposes of its comparisons and cautioned against the danger of jumping to unwarranted conclusions. An even more ambitious study might have taken on the challenge of exploring whether students in charters are faring better than they might have if the charter option were not available—and why. Busy policymakers might struggle with the methodological challenges such a study would present and the detailed considerations it would have to discuss. However, that seems better than providing a report that encourages simplistic and potentially harmful conclusions.

Notes and References

- 1 Florida Department of Education (2019). *Student achievement in Florida's charter schools: A comparison of the performance of charter school students with traditional public school students*. Tallahassee, FL: Bureau of Accountability Reporting, Office of K-12 School Choice, Florida Department of Education. Retrieved May 21, 2019, from <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7778/urlt/SAR1819.pdf>
- 2 Florida Department of Education (2019). *Student achievement in Florida's charter schools: A comparison of the performance of charter school students with traditional public school students*. Tallahassee, FL: Bureau of Accountability Reporting, Office of K-12 School Choice, Florida Department of Education, p. 2. Retrieved May 21, 2019, from <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7778/urlt/SAR1819.pdf>
- 3 For a review of this literature see Bifulco, R. & Bulkley, K. (2015). Charter schools. In H.F. Ladd. & M.E. Goertz (Eds.), *Handbook of research in education finance and policy, Second edition*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- 4 For an in-depth discussion of these issues and evidence on how failure to address them can bias estimates of charter school effects see:

Betts, J., & Hill, P.T. (2006). *Key issues in studying charter schools and achievement: A review and suggestions for national guidelines*. Seattle, WA: National Charter School Research Project;

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