



Charter School Research: Questions to Ask When to Understand the Findings

A summary

1. Who wrote or published the study?

Does the author or publisher have bias that may require giving the study more careful analysis, reading critiques of the study, or reading other studies to help identify any possible flaws, questions, or omissions?

2. What is the study measuring?

Is the study based on a broad range or large number of charters—or a sufficient number to be a representative sample—to provide conclusions that are likely to apply to your school district or state? Are the circumstances surrounding the studied charter schools sufficiently similar to the circumstances in your community or state to be applicable? Studies of one or more states, one type of charter, or charters in a specific community may not apply to your state community if the laws and circumstances of the charters studied materially differ from your circumstances. Anecdotal studies of one district or even several states may provide useful information, but may not be sufficient to draw policy conclusions that would apply to other school districts or states, or the nation as a whole.

3. How are the charters being compared?

A more valid comparison of student performance between charters and traditional public school will occur if students enrolled in charters are selected by lottery and compared to those students who entered the lottery but whose name was not drawn. On the other hand, comparisons to all enrollees in the traditional public schools are not valid since factors like student and parent motivation will differ between the two groups. Similarly, comparisons of graduation or test takers rates or even annual test scores may not be valid. This could occur in settings where the number of charter school graduates or test takers may be winnowed down over a period of years or during the year due to charter policies or conditions of continued student enrollment relating to factors such as parent involvement, student work habits, or student discipline that return lower performing or disruptive students to the traditional public school prior to graduation or annual test taking.

4. What does the research find?

Care needs to be taken to be precise about what the findings and conclusions of the study are actually saying. Here there are several factors to consider:

- Findings relating to specific groups of students (e.g., race or gender) or to specific subjects or grade levels should not be generalized to all students or all subjects.
- Comparisons of groups of charters with traditional public schools by averages can be misleading if a few high or low performing schools in either category skew the results from the experience of the schools as a whole. For example, the well regarded Kipp

charter schools do not typify charter schools as a whole and may be over-represented in the study sample base.

- Language that simply says a charter school performs better than a traditional public school is not an adequate basis for making policy decisions without determining whether the difference in performance is significant enough to merit action—or is likely to be sustainable.
- A study of several schools may appear to be large enough to draw conclusions about specific groups of children, grade levels, or subjects. However, if the total is based on aggregate figures from schools in which the sample base is not adequate to be reliable, then the study must be able to show that it has properly factored that shortcoming into the statistical analysis.

5. Does the study accurately isolate characteristics of charter schools that make them successful or unsuccessful?

There are multiple factors, such as school size, waiver of rules, the authorizing and evaluation processes, etc., that can influence the performance of a charter school overall, specific groups of students, or subjects. If a study points to a particular factor as critical, was its importance adequately demonstrated—including accounting for the influence of other factors that could be at play?