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School Context and Charter School Achievement: A Framework for Understanding the Performance "Black Box"

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This article explores the relationship between charter school racial composition, school environments, and student achievement. We offer an original framework for understanding school context and its influence on schooling outcomes. We conclude that policymakers could better attend to the persistent educational inequality that has shaped U.S. schooling if when designing school choice plans they took account of student racial composition even in a postdesegregation environment.

Charter schools: I doubled the number of charter schools in Illinois despite some reservations from teachers unions. I think it is important to foster competition inside the public schools.
— Senator Barack Obama (D-IL), Third Presidential Debate, Hofstra University, October 15, 2008

So choice and competition amongst schools is one of the key elements that's already been proven in places in like New Orleans and New York City and other places, where we have charter schools, where we take good teachers and we reward them and promote them.
— Senator John McCain (R-AZ), Third Presidential Debate, Hofstra University, October 15, 2008

INTRODUCTION

Charter schools began in Minnesota in 1991, and by 2009 they had expanded to 40 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. In 2008, there were more than 1 million children attending approximately 4,000 charter schools. Although the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates agreed on few policy issues during the 2008 campaign, they saw eye-to-eye on expanding charter schools. Yet among researchers, there is more disagreement regarding the effects charter

schools have had on student achievement than might be assumed from the candidates' support of the charter movement. Researchers also disagree about which organizational, fiscal, curricular, or demographic factors contribute to charter school outcomes. These disagreements are particularly important as policy makers increasingly rely on charter legislation to improve U.S. schools in a postdesegregation era.

Despite numerous national, state, and district-level studies, two issues remain unclear: how charter school outcomes fare in comparison to those of traditional public schools and how to best execute such comparisons. A 2004 report issued by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) reinvigorated many of these debates when it found that charter schools underperformed in relation to traditional public schools (Nelson, Rosenberg, & Van Meter, 2004). Although advocates were quick to defend charter schools, most researchers agree that charter school performance has been mixed and that relatively few schools have been closed due to lackluster academic performance (Hill, 2005). There remains significant disagreement about why this is the case and what measures might best capture how charter schools are doing. Despite rigorous and well-intentioned efforts to establish consensus on how to best measure charter school student achievement and how to optimally compare it to performance in traditional public schools, no agreement exists in the research literature about methodological approaches (Lubienski, Weitzel, & Lubienski, 2009). Moreover, much of the charter school achievement literature has paid insufficient attention to the great diversity of schooling forms within the charter school and traditional public school sectors.

Qualitative studies of school context can enrich the research and policy debates on charter school achievement, though those who want to simply ascertain if charter schools are "working" tend to neglect such scholarship. Although research on school contexts cannot establish causal relationships between school characteristics and school outcomes, it can inform and broaden our understanding of quantitative measures of student performance. For example, some critics of charter school reform worried that charter schools would become havens for White students to escape diversity. In fact, in many states and school districts, students of color—especially African American students—tend to be overrepresented in charter schools, often with students from low-income families (Rapp & Eckes, 2007; Wells, Holme, Lopez, & Cooper, 2000). These enrollment patterns hold even in districts where African American students are not the majority population, suggesting that some families are choosing to enroll students in charter schools in part because of the student racial composition (Garcia, 2008). Further, families appear to choose schools largely based on nonacademic considerations—safety, racial/ethnic identification, or school size (Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Weiher & Tedin, 2002). These demographic trends are examples of how issues of race, social class, and student selection complicate charter school achievement research and why performance analyses should be supplemented by demographic considerations in explanations of outcome data.

Organization of the Article

This article reviews the literature on charter school achievement, and then, integrating this literature with primarily qualitative and mixed-methods studies, presents a framework for understanding broader contextual issues that impact student performance. In the next section we discuss three central findings that emerge from research on student achievement in charter schools. First,

the majority of the studies on charter school achievement rely exclusively on statistical measures, and although they often provide needed baseline data, they do little to explain why charter schools post the results they do. Second, there exists an intrasector racial achievement gap within the charter school terrain that goes underexamined in the face of cross-sector achievement comparisons. Third, we find that most achievement studies tend to focus on general sectors for comparisons, for example, "charters" are compared to "traditional public schools." This sector-centric view obscures the political, social, economic, and educational dynamics within sectors and between schools. It also neglects the interaction between sectors—where students often move between charter, traditional public, and even private schools (Garcia, McIlroy, & Barber, 2008).

These three findings informed our understanding of some of the contextual issues that help to explain student and school achievement. In the third section, we draw from qualitative and mixed-method studies to create a framework for identifying school factors that contribute to student performance in charter schools. This framework considers what charter schools "do," what they "have," and what they "know." Although we do not attempt to draw causal relationships between these contextual factors and performance, we argue that these factors help to explain and interpret charter school achievement. In the article's conclusion, we discuss the implications of the framework for future charter school research and policy.

THE CHARTER SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT DEBATES

Charter school advocates have long claimed that charters would produce greater student achievement for all students, especially for students of color (Nathan, 1996). Believing that traditional public school bureaucracy stifled educational innovations, early charter adherents were sure that with autonomy from school districts, charter schools' outcomes would be superior to traditional public schools.

These claims were called into question when in 2004, an AFT comparative analysis of charter, traditional public, and private school performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress suggested that charter schools and some religious schools underperformed in math and reading when compared to traditional public schools (Nelson, Rosenberg, & Van Meter, 2004). The report also found that charter school students were less poor than public school students, even though charter schools enrolled a greater proportion of central city and minority children. The authors concluded that charter schools were not helping to reduce the racial achievement gap, and were also falling short of claims of improved student achievement.

There are several reasons the AFT report was a watershed moment. The report was highly scrutinized given the AFT's historical opposition to charter school reform, the study's methodology, and because it challenged the findings of many prominent school choice researcher/advocates. In addition, the report attracted significant media attention, including a lead story in the *New York Times* (Hendrie, 2004). A backlash quickly ensued.

With funding from the pro-school choice Center for Educational Reform (CER), a group of researchers took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* in which they denounced the AFT study. The advertisement questioned the methods and validity of the study and called for more value-added studies that assess yearly student learning gains, given achievement levels at enrollment. Moreover, the president of the CER, Jeanne Allen, who just 5 years earlier had claimed charters were clearly superior, argued that it was unfair to judge charter schools' seeming

lackluster achievement because many charters served poor students and racial minorities who were more difficult to educate and who were starting out further behind. The controversy over the AFT study played out for weeks in the mainstream media, in countless blogosphere debates and think-tank-produced research studies (Greene, 2006). Although even those who were not charter school advocates questioned the methodology of the AFT study (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005), subsequent research supported many of the AFT's study's central findings (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Nelson et al., 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2004) and concluded that charter school achievement was mixed (Hill, 2005).

A related set of literature reviewed charter school evaluation research and criticized many aspects of charter school evaluation, calling for better research design (Carnoy et al., 2005; The Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel, 2006). Research on charter school achievement that can generalize across schools and sites is complicated by partisan reports, lack of access to high-quality data sources, diverse state legislative environments, and schools that are different by design. Despite these challenges, researchers have employed several strategies to accommodate this complexity, which have competing strengths and weaknesses. For example, two approaches are single point-in-time studies and value-added studies.

Single Point-in-Time Studies

One of the most significant challenges to measuring performance is the likelihood that charter school students are fundamentally different than their traditional public school counterparts and from other charter school students (Zimmer & Buddin, 2005a). To deal with this, many studies compare charter school students to students in public schools that charter school students had previously attended or to students in schools that are *similar* to the public schools that the charter students would otherwise have attended. Researchers also build in controls for various student characteristics, including race/ethnicity, eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, and limited English proficiency.

Other single point-in-time studies have tried to account for selection bias by "matching" the charter schools they are examining with comparable noncharter schools. This has been done by matching each charter school to its neighboring public schools geographically and in terms of racial composition (Hoxby, 2004). It has also been done by matching charter schools to traditional public schools with similar characteristics—percentage of minority students, pupil socioeconomic status, and percentage of English language learners (Zimmer & Buddin, 2005b). These studies yielded different results, which have been hypothesized to be the result of method-ological decisions such as "the omission of more than half of the charter schools from Hoxby's sample, the use of different proficiency standards for the charter and comparison schools, and errors in the identification of closet neighbors" (Buckley & Schneider, 2007, p. 95). Despite attempts to address these issues (Hoxby & Rockoff, 2005), these matching approaches continue to have issues of selection bias associated with them (Zimmer & Buddin, 2005a).

Value-Added Studies

A critique of snapshot studies is that point-in-time data fail to include a measure of students' initial academic achievement as a control variable, which makes it difficult to assess the "value-added"

of charter schools relative to other schools (The Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel, 2006). Many researchers agree that examining year-to-year score changes rather than single-year score levels yields more valid data. Consequently, researchers are increasingly using value-added models to evaluate the performance of charter schools.

A study conducted by the United Teachers of New Orleans and the American Federation of Teachers of New Orleans (2007) traditional and charter schools after Hurricane Katrina used 2005 and 2007 scores on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Programs to compare how fourth-grade students in 2007 compared to students in the same schools in 2005. According to this study, "10 charters improved in both subjects (reading and math), 4 improved in only one subject, and 16 declined in both subjects" (p. 7). Using a similar comparison strategy, Zimmer and Buddin (2005a) examined charter school achievement in California using "2,592,518 student-year observations from Los Angeles and 442,532 student-year observations from San Diego from 1997–1998 through 2001–2002 school years" (p. 5). Growth in achievement scores on the Stanford 9 Achievement Test in reading and mathematics showed that charters are not outperforming traditional public schools. Further, the authors found that the "charter effect" does not vary systematically with the race/ethnicity or English proficiency status of students, though Black charter school students in San Diego had statistically significant lower test scores in reading and math at the secondary-school level.

Even more ambitious than comparing school-level growth is the task of tracking the growth of individual students. Longitudinal data on student achievement attempt to disaggregate school effects on student performance from student characteristics. This research has evaluated charter schools based on students' own rates of annual growth before and after entering charter schools (Bifulco & Ladd, 2005; Booker, Filpatric, Gronberg, & Jansen, 2004; Gronberg & Jansen, 2001; Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2005; Sass, 2005; Solmon, Park, & Garcia, 2001; Zimmer et al., 2003).

As with other charter school performance studies, the findings of value-added analyses have been mixed. The national charter school network that operates under the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) has received significant media and researcher attention and philanthropic support because of their high student achievement scores as well as their success with transitioning students from middle school to elite public and private high schools. Such results have led policymakers to conclude that the KIPP model of longer school days and years, parent and student contracts, emphasis on discipline, and structured curricula should be replicated across urban systems (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Research on KIPP, however, has had difficulty establishing the educational value KIPP charter schools provide their students. One study compared student achievement outcomes of three KIPP Diamond Academies and their matched control counterparts (Gallagher & Ross, 2005) by looking at the difference between "pretest" scores and scores on the 2004 Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program/Achievement Test. When charter and non-charter students with similar initial scores were compared, findings showed significant advantages for the fifth-grade cohort and the sixth-grade cohort who had attended KIPP for 2 years, but no advantage for sixth graders in their first year at KIPP.

Two growth studies of Texas charter school students also yielded disparate outcomes. Hanushek et al. (2005) followed individuals for 4 consecutive years to compare average test score gains of charter students with the same students' gains in district schools. They found that students' gains were initially lower in charter schools but showed no significant differences after 2 or 3 years

of charter school life. Using similar value-added and matched sample approaches, Gronberg and Jansen (2005) tracked individual student performance on the state assessments (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) over 2 years. They found that attending a charter school for several years resulted in achievement gains for elementary and middle school students, whereas academic gains for high school charter school students was significantly lower than those attending traditional public schools. The study also showed that charter schools were more effective with lower achieving students.

A Methodological Consensus?

Currently, policy scholars and educational economists are trying to establish consensus about how to best measure charter school achievement. The Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel (2006) favors experimental methods, where students are randomly assigned to schools, but recognizes that this method is often not possible. Although the panel's work has the potential to generate common standards for evaluation research on achievement, it also assumes that other researchers will abide by its recommendations. Of importance, the panel calls for the inclusion of qualitative data to understand variation in charter school achievement. One type of variation that is often overlooked by the previously described achievement studies is the intrasector charter school achievement gap.

Charter School Segregation and the Intrasector Racial Achievement Gap

A closer look across the research reveals that a similar racial achievement gap to the one in the traditional public sector is emerging within the charter school sector (Nelson et al., 2004). For example, White charter school students outperform Black students by roughly 20 points in math and reading and Latino charter students by 15 points (Carnoy et al., 2005). These data require close attention, especially considering that many charter schools underserve special education students and English language learners, and may enroll students who, although coming from poverty, are relatively more motivated and privileged than students in nearby traditional public schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

Researchers have found that charter schools are more likely to be located in urban school districts and enroll disproportionately more African American students than their public school counterparts, but enroll fewer Latino, language minority, and special education students (Welner & Howe, 2005). Charter school student composition is the result of several dynamics at both the macro policy level and within local school practices. Some indicate that families of color are self-sorting into racially homogeneous schools. Others find that charter school recruitment and marketing strategies are geared toward attracting particular demographic profiles, whereas other research documents the practice of charter schools to serve "niche" populations (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002; National Charter School Research Project, 2007; Smith, 2001; Wells, Lopez, Scott, & Jellison-Holme, 1999).

Another factor shaping student racial composition in charter schools is the absence of meaningful incentives or enforced regulations to create or maintain diverse charter schools. Given the deregulatory impetus of early charter school reformers, some states' charter school legislation is either vague or silent on racial balance imperatives (Wells, Holme, Lopez, & Cooper, 2000).

And where more specific racial balance provisions exist, researchers have found little evidence that state or local authorities have the capacity or will to enforce existing guidelines (UCLA Charter School Study, 1998). In fact, influential policy advocates, such as CER, express little concern for racial balance or racial integration. Indeed, CER's 10-point rubric for evaluating a "strong" charter school law does not include any mention of race or civil rights protections (Scott & Barber, 2002).

Aggregate numbers of charter school racial enrollments can obscure the segregation found within local charter schools. Although African American students are well represented in the aggregate charter school enrollment, they tend to go to schools that are majority African American. For example, 70% of Black charter school students attend hypersegregated schools compared to 34% Black students in traditional public schools (Frankenberg & Lee, 2003). These numbers become especially stark when assessing how they play out in individual charter schools:

> Charter schools serve larger shares of African American and Latino students than their respective proportions found in regular public schools. But *ethnic segregation* is comparatively greater in charter schools. Three-fourths of all black charter school students are enrolled in 273 schools. The share of students who are African American in these schools averages 80%, compared to 54% black representation among the comparable set of regular public schools. (Fuller, Gawlik, Gonzalez, Park, & Gibbings, 2003, p. 3)

As a result, prominent advocates now claim that charters should be given different accountability consideration even when they underperform because they serve a disproportionate number of high-poverty students of color. After Ohio ranked most of its urban charters with failing or mediocre grades in 2007, for example, Jeanne Allen wrote a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* that called for a different standard for evaluating charters, and argued against closing down struggling schools.

> Certainly some of Ohio's charter schools are not performing as well as had been hoped for when they were founded. But in many of these cases it's because the schools have taken on the challenge of educating the difficult-to-reach children who were given up on by traditional public schools—the children who, every year, fell further and further behind and received no help; the children who, were it not for their charter school, would have dropped out or landed in jail or worse. For them, charter schools are their last best hope for receiving an education and ultimately succeeding in life. Will these students be better off if their charter schools go out of business? The answer must be a resounding no. (Allen, 2007)

This logic about charter school achievement being singularly tied to the students themselves challenges many of the central policy assumptions that originally drove charter school reform, including the belief that regulation caused underachievement in traditional public schools and that bureaucratic structures stymied educational innovation and experimentation that could lead to more dynamic student learning. This was claimed to be especially true in large, urban systems, which tend to serve poor students, students of color, and English language learners (UCLA Charter School Study, 1998; Wells, Grutzik, Carnochan, Slayton, & Vasudeva, 1999). Under the more recent charter school accountability rhetoric, the value of being a charter becomes less important than school context and school practices, and multiple measures of success are trumpeted. Although these arguments signal a shift in how advocates are thinking

about charter schools and achievement, perhaps more important, it redirects research attention to school-level factors that shape such achievement—the contexts under which students learn.

We conclude from this review of charter school achievement that some charter schools have unique combinations of qualities that make them more likely to be high achieving, and that although these characteristics can be similar across charter and traditional school sectors, the unique policy environment of charter schools make them especially important to scrutinize in relationship to school performance. Charter schools are different from one another by design. "By design, that 'movement' is a collection of unique schools ranging from international baccalaureate academies to intensive last resorts for juvenile lawbreakers; taking their average temperature probably wouldn't be enlightening" (Schorr, 2000, p. 20). Understanding how charters produce their outcomes can inform explanations of student achievement, as well as inform policymakers about whether to make public investments in supporting their practices. We next offer a framework of contextual issues, generated from our review of charter school research that helps to unpack the school-level dynamics that may explain school outcomes.

SCHOOL-LEVEL CONTEXT: LOOKING INSIDE THE EDUCATIONAL "BLACK BOX" OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

There is limited understanding about the ways in which the local charter school context, especially with regards to school racial composition, might illuminate the seeming underperformance of charter schools and explain the intrasector racial achievement gap. In this section, we bring policy studies and sociological literature on local charter school contexts to bear on the achievement issues raised in the previous section. These studies highlight the importance of student racial and social class composition and site-level resources—including quality teachers, facilities, funding, class size, curriculum, and instructional materials. These factors comprise a school's educational environment, whose dynamics are often called the "black box" of schooling given the lack of understanding about how they directly impact schooling outcomes (Zimmer & Buddin, 2005b).

Researchers and charter school advocates have not given sufficient attention to the qualitative educational environments within charter schools and the ways in which they might contribute to our understanding of charter school achievement data. Rather, much of the literature has tried to draw quantitative correlations between school-level characteristics (such as management and governance type) and student achievement (Peterson, 2007; Zimmer & Buddin, 2005a). Our framework holds that school context must be considered to help explain charter school achievement, especially given the lack of consensus on charter school effects. We take a descriptive rather than a causal approach here, in part to present options that other researchers might consider in mixed-methods study of charter school achievement, and because there is not sufficient study on these elements to support causal arguments.

We base our framework primarily on qualitative case studies, which allow for rich and thick descriptions. Our review yielded three categories of school-level environments that help to explain the previously documented variation in student achievement. Briefly stated, our framework of charter school context considers what schools (a) do, (b) have, and (c) know. We summarize these areas in Table 1 before discussing them each in greater detail.

TABLE 1
A Framework for Explaining Charter School Outcomes

Do	Have	Know
Curriculum and teaching (specialized focus, scripted curriculum/direct instruction, ethnocentric)	Private funding: Foundations, businesses, individual donors	Pedagogy: Traditional, back-to-basics, constructivist, culturally relevant
Admissions	Public funding	Business/fiscal/legal expertise
Discipline policy	Political/Social networks	Assessment and accountability
Student recruitment	In-kind resources	Fund-raising
Personnel: recruitment, compensation, retention	Partnerships: Universities, corporations	Marketing/branding
Governance	EMO/CMO management	Cultural/racial competence
School organization: Grade levels, school and class size, school day & year, teacher-pupil ratio	Student demographics: Race, poverty, prior academic achievement, English language attainment, immigration status, special education	Teacher and leadership professional development
Within school resource allocations, student and teacher assignment	Teacher characteristics: Level of education, certification, years of experience	Community engagement

Note. EMO/CMO = educational management organization/charter management organization.

Examining the Practices of Charter Schools

The first area of charter school context is what they "do"; the local practices in several areas: school size, curriculum and pedagogical approaches, admissions and discipline policies, personnel policies, and governance. In all of these areas, charter school research reveals a range of practices.

Two areas in which charter schools are generally allowed freedom are school size and school mission/curriculum. In terms of school size, charter schools tend to be smaller than traditional public schools, for example, but the average size of charter schools that are operated by educational management organizations (EMOs)[1] tend to be larger than other charter schools (Miron & Nelson, 2002; Molnar, Garcia, Miron, & Berry, 2007). In this regard, many non-EMO affiliated charter schools have much in common with the small schools movement—founders, teachers, and parents seem attracted to schools that are small, but that also have a specific curricular orientation or mission (DiMartino, 2007). A focus on curricular approach or school mission often accompanies many charter schools, regardless of size, but within smaller schools, staffs may find it easier to adhere to early purposes and foci of the schools since there are potentially fewer voices of dissent (Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1998). When EMOs manage charter schools, however, the organization often brings a prescribed curriculum or pedagogical approach—leaving little room for parents

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[1]EMOs provide a range of governance and management services to schools on both for-profit and nonprofit bases. Approximately 13% of charter schools are managed by an EMO, but in particular states and districts, the concentration is much higher; in Michigan nearly 75% of charters are run by EMOs (Miron & Nelson, 2002; National Charter School Research Project, 2007).

or teachers to alter the approach but allowing EMOs the ability to ensure fidelity to their school models (Bulkley, 2005; Scott & DiMartino, 2008).

Charter schools also have the ability to limit student enrollments, provided they adhere to state and federal civil rights guidelines. Formal screening mechanisms used by charter schools to admit students vary, however, charter schools do pay attention to which students they enroll and use a range of strategies to shape which students are admitted to schools, and which students are expulsed (Becker, Nakagawa, & Corwin, 1997; Lacireno-Paquet et al., 2002; Urietta, 2006; Yancey, 2000). These techniques include the use of applications, contracts, steering families away from enrolling, recruiting families from particular neighborhoods, school discipline policies, and various forms of branding to communicate to parents which students are good "fits" for the particular charter school (Lopez, Wells, & Holme, 2002). This attention to student composition is not only tied to the need to produce greater student achievement but also connected to many school founder's desires to serve particular populations—often poor, African American and Latino students, but also "gifted" students, special education students, or students interested in a particular career or academic subject. Many charter schools serving such populations employ selective admissions processes, such as that used by the highly regarded KIPP schools.[2] Although schools in the KIPP charter network appear to generate significantly higher student achievement than surrounding public schools, they also require an admissions application and aparent and student contract, and they lose many students unable or unwilling to abide by its policies. Looking only at KIPP or similar schools that are racially homogenous but distinctive in other ways can distort research conclusions about student outcomes.

Another area in which charter schools utilize different strategies is school personnel. Depending upon state policy, charter schools have had diverse orientations to hiring noncertified teachers, for example. They have also differed on whether teachers can be represented by teachers unions. Researchers have also found that differential compensation abounds within the charter school sector. Although some charter schools pay teachers more than traditional public schools, charter school teachers might also be required to work longer school days and years (Johnson & Landon, 2000). Perhaps as a result of such additional work requirements, but also because of the intensive nature of start-up organizations, many charter schools have high teacher turnover. In the early years of many charter schools, entire staffs changed (Fitzgerald, 2000; Henig, Holyoke, Lacireno-Paquet, & Moser, 2001; Leonard, 2002; National Charter School Research Project & Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2007). Finally, for the most part, charter school leaders are able to enjoy autonomy in hiring teachers, having more control and input than their traditional school counterparts (Finnigan, 2007).

Charter schools also employ different governance mechanisms. Community-based or grassroots charter schools generally have trustees or boards whose members include teachers, school leaders, parents, and community members. EMO-run, and other charter schools have governance models that have less community and school-based participants and rely instead primarily on members of the fiscal, legal, and business communities (Rhim, 1998). Where the former governance model tends to focus on internal school issues, the latter attends to local school issues while also working to generate political and fiscal support for the schools. Researchers have found that board members in these environments expect to have an active role in site-based decisions, which

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[2]Charter school advocates correctly point out that there are traditional public schools that have selective admissions.

can sometimes result in tension between boards and school leaders and teachers (Ascher et al., 2001; Deal & Hentschke, 2004).

Examining the Resources of Charter Schools

The second area is what charter schools "have." This includes their combinations of public and private funding, the former of which can be of different levels, even within the same school district, and the latter of which can be quite significant. For example, the Broad Foundation and the New Schools Venture Fund have distributed millions of dollars to several EMOs over the last several years.

Political and social networks can assist with building community and state support for the school. For example, charter schools that are resource rich have access to social, political, and financial networks that help to sustain their schools. These resources can help them develop instructional, governance, and school organizational practices that can encourage a more focused effort on student learning. In-kind resources such as time and expertise from parents within the school help sustain the school's operations. Finally, having resources to try out innovative pedagogical, governance, and organizational approaches can help to build institutional knowledge and capacity for improved or sustained high performance.

Partnerships with universities and businesses can also play a key role. For example, they can assure long-term support for a variety of measures, and provide access to internships and employment for students ("Mass-Producing Excellence," 2005). Another resource is the presence of a management organization. Depending on the organization's level of expertise, the school can enjoy the benefit of having its operations overseen by those with administrative capabilities (Bulkley & Fusarelli, 2007; Bulkley, Mundell, & Riffer, 2004; Burch, 2006).

Students, teachers, parents, and community members are also resources for charter schools. The demographics of the students are an especially overlooked resource. As mentioned earlier, the kinds of students charter schools serve can not only increase their achievement results but also connect the school to donors looking to support particular kinds of students (Scott & Holme, 2002).

Finally, teachers are perhaps one of the most important resources. Their levels of education, certification, and years of experience are important—though not the only—indicators of teacher quality (Miron & Nelson, 2002). Researchers have found that teachers in racially segregated, low-income charter schools tend to have less experience and fewer credentials, and tend to leave schools at higher rates than their traditional public school counterparts. Although this turnover can help to keep salary expenditures low, it also suggests that these schools may struggle to build a network of teachers who can mentor and support newcomers to the school. Unfortunately, the charters most impacted by this trend are those comprised mainly of students of color (Fuller, Gawlik, Gonzalez, Park, & Gibbings, 2003). Further, charter school teachers in general tend to be less experienced and have fewer credentials, but this trend is magnified in high-minority schools. Case studies of charter schools reveal these trends in teacher qualifications correlate with student demographics—wealthier schools tend to have more experienced and credentialed teachers (Fuller et al., 2003; Henig et al., 2001; Wells, 2002; Wexler & Huerta, 2000). The context of resources, segregation, and achievement is complex within the charter school movement. There have been a number of seeming success stories (high-achieving

charter schools that are attended by low-income students of color). Many of these schools are run by EMOs like KIPP, Green Dot Public Schools, or Uncommon Schools—organizations that have received millions from charter supporting philanthropies and enjoy tremendous financial and political support from the private sector (Matthews, 2007). At the other end of the charter school demographic spectrum, students from wealthy backgrounds can bring families who would provide fiscal support to the school, whereas a concentration of poor students of color increasingly attracts donors looking to expand the choice movement to those communities (Scott, 2008).

Racially segregated, well-resourced, and high-performing schools tend to be the exception rather than the rule, however, and are examples of how school context relates to achievement given their selective admissions, charismatic leaders, and significant financial and political support. For the majority of segregated charter schools, student racial composition relates to resources, teacher quality, and ultimately school performance. These findings imply that being a charter alone is an insufficient mechanism for closing the racial achievement gap. Further, a myopic policy focus on charters may actually widen the gap by creating a sector of schools that are selective but do not necessarily have the capacity to provide students with greater opportunities to achieve. At the other end of possibility, we see the emergence of highly selective, racially homogenous charter schools that receive significant private financial and political support and whose outcomes are touted as exemplars for charter schools and traditional public schools alike. The larger racial context of schools—particularly poverty, inequality, and segregation—has been missing from recent educational debates. Increasingly, the public argument is that equality can be better achieved through greater privatization, marketization, and competition among schools (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2005). Examining these resources helps to temper the claims of some charter schools' success in closing the racial achievement gap and in the general ability of charter models to be replicated. In 2007, KIPP, for example, terminated its contract with the KIPP Sankofa Charter School in Buffalo, New York, indicating that its model does not work in all settings (Matthews, 2007).

Examining the Capacities of Charter Schools

The last school level contextual factor is perhaps the most nebulous—what charter schools "know." Here we refer to the capacity of the leaders, board members, and teachers to deliver and to sustain high-quality schooling.

Under the category of school knowledge, we include the pedagogical capacity, the school's understanding of the particular instructional needs of its students, and the ability to meet them through rigorous curricula. Another area related to pedagogical capacity is that of assessment and accountability skills—how schools are able to use data to inform practice (Darling-Hammond, 1997). One strategy that has been utilized by charter schools seeking to build curricular and pedagogical capacity has been the establishment of partnerships with organizations who might have strengths in these areas (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2004). It has been common for charter schools to align with universities, museums, community-based organizations, and even corporations based on the particular needs of the schools. These alliances and partnerships happen under formal and informal arrangements, can bring much needed expertise to a charter

school, but can also raise tensions about the level of control each entity exercises over critical school processes (Lin & Hassel, 2001; Minow, 2003).

Also important in the area of capacity is a combination of business, fiscal, and legal expertise (UCLA Charter School Study, 1998). This is especially critical for schools that are start-ups and have fewer ties to school district resources as well as schools partnered with EMOs or external educational providers. Charter school stakeholders need to be able to negotiate and oversee multiple contracts, for example. Charter schools can also benefit from knowledge of marketing, branding, and fund-raising, especially because charters are often ineligible for an equal level of state resources. Marketing and branding knowledge is related to fund-raising; understanding how to position the charter school as unique and worth attention from funders and parents alike is a key area of capacity (Lubienski, 2007).

Research from school reform and school restructuring also indicates that the degree to which the school staff is competent to engage with the racial and cultural backgrounds of their students is also important (Carter, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Consistent professional development, focused on teachers' weaknesses, is another issue of school knowledge. Finally, the charter school's knowledge of the community it serves, and its ability to be engaged with that community, can have implications for the school's longevity and success (Lipman, 1998).

We argue that it is important to consider these three areas—what schools do, have, and know—when interpreting claims of charter school success or failure. This can shift current policy attention away from what are ultimately narrow measures of schooling outcomes and push quantitative and qualitative researchers to develop compelling explanations for how particular charter schools accomplish their results. This can inform what public and private investment, social policy, and oversight are required to encourage the growth of high-performing and equitable schools. These three areas of qualitative indicators, then, complement statistical analyses of charter school achievement to help explain why schools' performance on assessments can be so varied.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article explored the relationship between charter school contexts and student achievement. Our review of the literature on charter school outcomes and our framework for explaining and interpreting those outcomes raise further challenges for researchers. In particular, this review makes clear that we need more complex and interactive methodologies to make summary conclusions about how *all* schools perform given their unique institutional, political, racial, and social environments.

As we discussed, many charter schools have self-selected populations, exercise control over student admissions, and are designed to specialize in particular curricular foci or organizational structures, making each school distinct. Aggregating charter schools together by sector, and then drawing conclusions about their average performance is as unfair as evaluating traditional public schools together.

The unresolved debates about charter school achievement suggest that researchers should use more nuanced and holistic methods than are traditionally employed. Mixed-method studies could paint a more complete picture of the characteristics that encourage greater student learning and achievement. Mixed-method studies could also pinpoint the bureaucratic, curricular, organizational, institutional forms and resources that help support schools that are higher achieving.

From a political advocacy standpoint, we see at least two trends emerging that require further exploration: (a) an argument that charters serve harder to educate students, and so low achievement is to be expected, at least for a while, and (b) a shift in the accountability rhetoric that says charters might serve other social purposes besides increasing achievement. These claims suggest different purposes than originally envisaged for charter school reform. They are also particularly worrisome given the decrease in potential policy tools resulting from recent Supreme Court decisions about the use of race in achieving integrated schools. Charter schools may be one of the few politically viable tools left for improving the outcomes of traditionally disadvantaged students. Despite mixed achievement findings and little consensus on how to best measure charter school achievement, policymakers at all levels continue to tout charter schools as solutions for lackluster academic performance.

To the extent that the United States will increase its investment in charter schools through a reauthorization of current No Child Left Behind provisions, further public deliberation about what social and educational value they hold in American public education is required. There are many possibilities that charter schools can bring to public education, including expanded choices, the opportunity to experiment and innovate, and the ability to shape more responsive and challenging schooling. To realize these possibilities, however, charter schools—much like traditional public schools—need support from policymakers to craft educational environments that are diverse, highly resourced, and of high academic quality.

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