

# DO CHARTER SCHOOLS IMPROVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE?

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## ABSTRACT

Charter schools reflect the notions of decentralization, competition, and public choice that the New Public Management approach champions. However, the effectiveness of charter schools is under debate. This study examines whether charter school students perform better than their peers in traditional public schools. Using a dataset of 279 charter schools and 654 non-charter public schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in 2013 and 2015, the study finds that charter school students perform better in standardized tests on both mathematics and English language arts/literacy compared to their public school peers, controlling for other school characteristics.

**Keywords:** Charter school, marketization, New Public Management, student performance.

## INTRODUCTION

Charter schools are publicly funded independent schools that provide K-12 education. They are usually established by teachers, parents, and community leaders or groups under a contract or “charter” with a local or state authority (California Department of Education, n.d.). Charter schools were created with the idea that their existence would help improve the public education system by offering parents with alternative options for their child’s learning needs. In addition, charter schools often provide specialized programs that focus on distinct areas such as Science Technology Engineering or Math (STEM), visual and performing arts, and language immersion programs. These types of teaching aim to develop new learning models and break the mold of the traditional classroom. Charter schools reflect the notions of decentralization, competition, and public choice that the New Public Management approach champions. However, empirical studies find mixed results in terms of charter school’s effectiveness in improving student performance. This study seeks to fill this research gap in the literature by investigating the relationship between the marketization of K-12 public education through charter schools and student performance. Specifically, the research question is: Do students in charter schools earn higher test scores than their peers in traditional public schools?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Supporters of charter schools assert that charter schools foster curricular and pedagogical innovations, encourage parental and community involvement, improve accountability of the schools, and ultimately increase the level of student achievement and parent satisfaction (Finn, Manno, & Vanourek, 2001; Kolderie, 2004). On the other hand, critics argue that charter schools drain public resources away from public schools and raise the concern that public assets may be unnecessarily transferred to private hands, at public expense, risking the future provision of public education (Baker & Miron, 2015).

In addition, empirical findings on the impact of charter schools are mixed. Some suggest that charter school students perform better academically than those in traditional public schools especially in minority serving schools (Greene, Forester, & Winters, 2003; Toney, Brown-Olivieri, Robitaille, & Castrejon, 2011; Witte, Weimer, Schober, & Scholomer, 2007). Others claim that performance by students in charter schools is very similar to that of traditional public school students (Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2015; Miron & Urschel, 2012). Further, a recent study conducted by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2015) indicated that charter school students in Texas perform worse in reading and mathematics compared with their peers in district schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study uses a dataset of charter schools and traditional public schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), California. Data were collected from the California Department of Education (CDE)'s DataQuest online portal. According to the CDE, as of 2016, there are 1,023 active public schools in the LAUSD, of which, 279 are charter schools, 654 are traditional public schools, and 81 are classified as alternative schools of choice, community day schools, continuation schools, opportunity schools, and special education schools. All charter schools in LAUSD provide traditional type of education. The study examines the 933 active public schools offering traditional education (279 charters and 654 non-charters) in LAUSD. OLS regression analyses were used to estimate the impact of charter schools on student performance. The independent variable is a dummy variable indicating whether the school is a charter or not. The dependent variables are the mean scaled test scores for Grades 5, 8, and 11 students in each school, respectively. Control variables include a set of school characteristics.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Since California changed its K-12 testing system starting the 2013-2014 school year, the study uses the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) results in the 2012-2013 sample (the last year of STAR tests) and the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CASSPP) results in the 2014-2015 sample (the latest year available for all variables). The preliminary analysis shows that charter school students in grades 5, 8 and 11 perform better in both the STAR and CAASPP tests compared to their public school peers, controlling for percentages of minority students, percentages of English learners, number of FTE administrators, pupil-teacher ratio, average class size, and percentages of students having free or reduced meals.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study not only contributes to the public administration literature on the effectiveness of marketization of public education, but also provides policy implications to school administrator and policy makers on how to improve the quality of public education through innovations. Future studies are suggested to examine other school districts in California and in other states in order to gain better understanding of the effectiveness of charter schools. In addition, because charter schools may be operated independently or through a network under the Education Management Organizations (EMO's) or Charter Management Organizations (CMO's), future studies are suggested to examine whether students in networked charter schools perform better than their peers in stand-alone charter schools.

## **REFERENCES**

References available upon request from Dr. Rui Sun via email at [rsun@csudh.edu](mailto:rsun@csudh.edu).