

As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III 2023

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Volume 1
Charter School Performance
in 31 States

Volume 2
Charter Management
Organizations 2023

Volume 3
Summary of Findings,
Conclusions and Implications

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Project Description

As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III 2023 (NCSSIII) is the third national study by CREDO evaluating the academic progress of students enrolled in charter schools in the United States. The current report presents findings from 2014 to 2019, which yields four periods of year-to-year student growth as measured by state achievement tests. It includes data from 29 states plus Washington, D.C., and New York City, which for convenience we report as 31 states. In addition, because we have used a common methodology across the three studies, we can combine results into trends to support insights of the performance of students enrolled in charter schools over the past 15 years.

To organize the extensive body of this current research effort, CREDO separated the analysis into two parts and produced two reports: (1) [Charter School Performance in 31 States \(CSP31\)](#) and (2) [Charter Management Organization 2023 \(CMO23\)](#). CSP31 examines the performance of the full set of charter school students and schools, while CMO23 analyzes the difference in academic growth between students attending charter schools associated with charter management organizations (CMOs) and those attending stand-alone charter schools (SCS).¹ We present this combined Executive Summary for both reports as well as common Summary of Findings, Conclusions and Implications to ensure we present the fullest picture of performance in charter schools.

Our work deliberately focuses on a specific outcome: the annual progress that students make over an academic year. In this report, we look at students in charter schools compared to the experience they would have had in the traditional public schools (TPS) they would otherwise have attended. One notable limitation of this approach is that we have limited line of sight “under the hood” and into the role that localized environmental, regulatory and organizational factors play on individual school performance. Our contribution to the K-12 education research and practice landscape is to test fundamental questions of the effectiveness of charter schools and highlight outcomes and trends rooted in academic progress.

A study of the academic impacts of charter schools on their students is timely. Insights about the educational effectiveness of schools, school operators, K-12 academic programs and education policy are valuable today more than ever. The 2022 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress removed any ambiguity about student learning after the COVID-19 pandemic. As a country, student academic performance has regressed by two decades in math and fallen steeply in reading, with the most severe performance declines found among minority, poverty and special needs populations that were already struggling before the pandemic. The need for evidence-backed approaches to sustained academic success for students transcends demographic, economic and political divides. As school and district leaders, policy makers, teachers, families and philanthropists build and implement plans to address pandemic-accelerated declines in student learning, they need analysis of school and system achievement presented here to guide and support their efforts.

¹ The CMO study does not include Idaho, Maryland, and Ohio.

Methodology

This research depends on data-sharing partnership agreements with state education agencies. One common requirement across all agreements is that the processing, analysis and security of the student-level data must meet the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) requirements. This study complies with FERPA regulations as interpreted by each state providing data.

Using both student and school level data, our resulting data set included 81 percent of tested public school students in the United States, making it one of the largest data sets of student-level observations created to date. We used this information to create a matched student data set with over 6,500,000 student-level observations from over 1,853,000 charter students and a matched comparison group.

To create rigorous tests of our research questions, we need to compare charter school students' experience with an alternative, in this case the learning that occurs in nearby TPS. We match each charter student whose records appear in the data with records of traditional public school students with identical traits and aligned prior test scores who enrolled in schools that the charter student would have attended if not at their charter school. This approach, the Virtual Control Record protocol, creates a "virtual twin" to a charter school student. For research purposes, the virtual twin differs from the charter student only in the school attended.

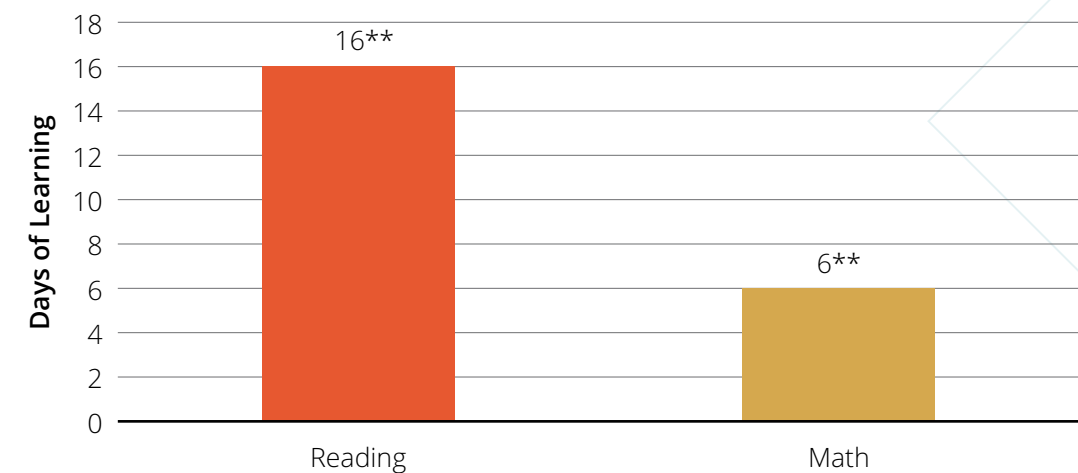
This study approach mirrors the one used in the 2009 and 2013 studies. The only change to the method was to rematch the charter school students to a new set of TPS students each year.² The data collected for this study consisted of student-level demographics, school enrollment and achievement test scores in reading/English language arts (ELA) and math. To assure accurate estimates of charter school impacts, we use statistical methods to control for differences in student demographics and eligibility for categorical program support such as free or reduced-price lunch eligibility and special education. In this way, we have created the analysis so that differences in the academic growth between the two groups are a function of which schools they attended.

In these 2023 studies, we present our findings about learning outcomes measured in days of learning. The measure uses a benchmark of learning: the average student in TPS will obtain a year's learning in a year's time. Computationally, the benchmark student attends school for 180 days in a year and advances their learning by 180 days. If another student makes more (or less) progress in the same period of time, we present that as additional (or fewer) days of learning.

Summary of Findings

Looking at year-to-year academic progress from 2015 to 2019, **the typical charter school student in our national sample had reading and math gains that outpaced their peers in the traditional public schools (TPS) they otherwise would have attended.** We report these differences as marginal days of additional (or fewer) days of learning on a learning benchmark of 180 days of learning each school year for matched TPS students. In math, charter school students, on average, advanced their learning by an additional six days in a year's time, and in reading added 16 days of learning.

Figure 1: Annual Academic Growth of Charter School Students, Reading and Math



** Significant at $p \leq 0.01$
Figure above originally appears as Figure 1.7 in CSP31.

These average effects are across all students, all schools, for all time periods. There is considerable variation around these averages and this variation forms the foundation for additional analyses and findings in our two papers.

This growth represents accelerated learning gains for tens of thousands of students across the country. Each student and each school is a proof point that shows that it is possible to change the trajectory of learning for students at scale, and it is possible to dramatically accelerate growth for students who have traditionally been underserved by traditional school systems.

² This change meets the new standards of the What Works Clearinghouse at the National Center for Education Evaluation.

Do All Students Benefit?

When we probe these results to determine if all students benefit, we find positive results are not only present in the aggregate, but also across student race/ethnicity groups:

- > **Black and Hispanic students** in charter schools advance more than their TPS peers by large margins in both math and reading.
- > **Multiracial, Native American, and White students** in charter schools show equivalent progress to their TPS peers in reading, but had weaker growth than their TPS peers in math.
- > **Asian students** in charter schools showed similar growth to their TPS peers.

When we examined academic growth for special populations of students, we found that, compared with their TPS peers:

- > Charter school **students in poverty** had stronger growth
- > **English-language learner students** attending charter schools had stronger growth
- > **Students receiving special education services** had significantly weaker growth in both math and reading on average, though CMO-affiliated students with Special Education needs have learning on par with their TPS Special Education peers.

In the past, a common claim asserted that positive academic results in charter schools arise from advantages that their students bring to their schooling. In some cases the claim focused on students having more motivated parents. Another version suggests targeting behavior on the part of the school results in a student body that is better prepared academically, a practice commonly referred to as “cherry picking” or “cream skimming”. If true, the students in charter schools would show higher academic achievement at the point of enrollment. In multiple analyses, we do not see significant evidence of an undue advantage to charter schools. In fact, we find the opposite is true: charter schools enroll students who are disproportionately lower achieving than the students in their former TPS.

Where Is Positive Academic Growth Happening?

Deeper into our analysis, we examine *where student learning gains are occurring*, and find that positive and strong effects exist in charter schools that vary widely by location and configuration.

- > **States** – 18 states in the NCSS3 study produced significantly stronger growth for students enrolled in their charter schools when compared with their TPS peers; in 12 states, growth was similar to TPS peers. Students attending charter schools had weaker reading growth than their TPS peers in only one state, Oregon. In 12 states, charter school students had significantly stronger growth in math than their peers in TPS. In 16 states, math growth was similar between charter students and their TPS peers. Only three states showed weaker growth for charter students compared to their peers.
- > **Locale** – compared to their TPS peers, urban charter school students had 29 additional days of growth per year in reading and 28 additional days of growth in math, both of which were significant. Suburban charter school students also had stronger growth in reading (+14 days) and in math (+3 days). Rural students enrolled in charter schools had the equivalent of five additional days of learning in reading,

but 10 days less growth in math than their TPS peers. These results are strongly hampered by the performance of virtual charter schools; despite having only six percent of charter school students enrolled, their impact on student progress of 58 fewer days of learning in reading and 124 fewer days in math has damaging consequences for students and exerts a outsized drag on overall national results.

- > **Grade configuration** – charter schools serving elementary, middle, and high school students had statistically positive growth in both reading and math. Results for multilevel charter schools were negative in math and similar to the TPS comparison groups in reading. Seeing growth in all grade spans helps us understand that trends in the national aggregate performance are not concentrated in particular grades.
- > **Continuous Enrollment** – charter students overcome an initial learning dip associated with a school change, and by their fourth year in their charter school, they show 45 days stronger growth in reading than their TPS peers and 39 additional days of learning per year in math. The longer a student stays enrolled in a charter school, the better the student’s academic outcomes are.
- > **School Management** – students who attend a charter school that is part of a charter management organization (CMO) experience significantly accelerated growth compared to students enrolled in stand-alone charter schools (SCS). Even so, CMO schools and SCS provide stronger learning than TPS in reading, and CMOs do so in math. CMO-affiliated students advanced by 27 additional days in reading and 23 more days in math over TPS, both of which are statistically significant. Stand-alone charter schools still grew significantly more than TPS in reading by 10 additional days of learning, but were no different in math. Given that SCS serve two-thirds of all students enrolled in charter schools, soft math performance in these schools taints the otherwise decisive results in other parts of the study.

Figure 2: Annual Academic Growth of Charter School Students by Charter School Type, Reading and Math

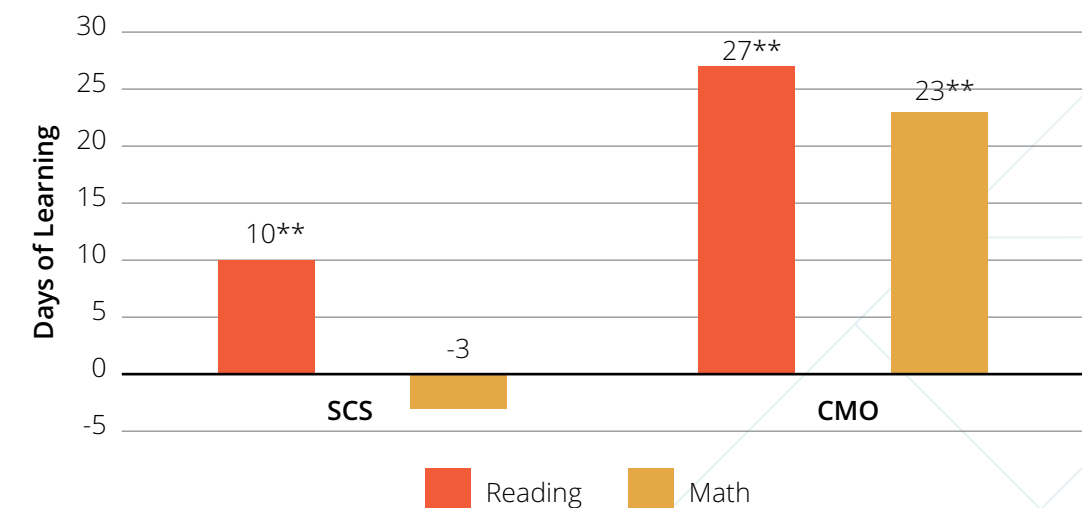


Figure above originally appears as Figure 2.4 in CMO23.

What Can We Learn from CMOs?

Comprising one-quarter of the schools, but serving 37 percent of students in our national data set, Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) are producing much of the learning gains we observed for charter school students.

As with our national top-line results, we find robust results for CMOs when we grouped their students by race/ethnicity, special populations, where the CMOs are located, grade spans of the schools in the network and how long a student enrolls in the school. As with all schools, there is a range of performance for CMOs, and we share their student impacts in [Appendix A](#).

Our analysis uncovered additional ways that CMOs are returning more positive, and often gap-busting, results:

- > **New CMOs and new schools in existing CMOs** open with strong results, in both cases delivering stronger average gains for their students than their local TPS. The student gains in new CMOs are not as strong initially as their older CMO peers. New schools started by mature CMOs deliver positive gains in their early years that were none the less smaller than the older CMO schools.
- > **Size or age of a CMO does not relate to their quality**, which means some CMOs are growing poorly performing networks of schools.
- > **Clustering of CMOs' schools within a single state** returns significantly more days of learning for their students than in CMOs that operate schools in more than one state.
- > **CMOs that took on "turn-around" schools**, absorbing those schools into their portfolios, positively impacted results for students who remained enrolled in the turn-around school. In addition, the balance of the CMO portfolio did not experience a downturn in student learning.
- > **The Charter School Growth Fund** serves as a case study of charter school growth accelerators. CMOs that the Growth Fund chooses to support have dramatically larger pre-funding learning gains than other CMOs. The schools that existed at the time of selection remain strong. New CMO schools also open with dramatically larger learning gains in both subjects judged against their TPS comparisons.
- > **Excellence at Scale** puts dozens of CMOs at the forefront of efforts to provide education that is both equitable and effective in moving student achievement to give their students full preparation for their next steps.

Variations in Charter School Performance

In our reports, we analyze school-level performance, in addition to student-level performance, continuing to report on growth as the outcome variable. Not every charter school provides quality academic programming or an effective learning environment for students. Across all charter schools in our study, 36 percent have greater growth, 47 percent have equivalent growth and 17 percent have lower growth relative to their local TPS. CMO-affiliated charter schools display stronger performance, with 43 percent having greater growth, 42 percent having equivalent growth, and 15 percent having lower growth in comparison to their local TPS. Stand-alone charter schools have slightly more moderate results.

Figure 3: Academic Growth of Charter Schools Compared to Their Local TPS, Reading

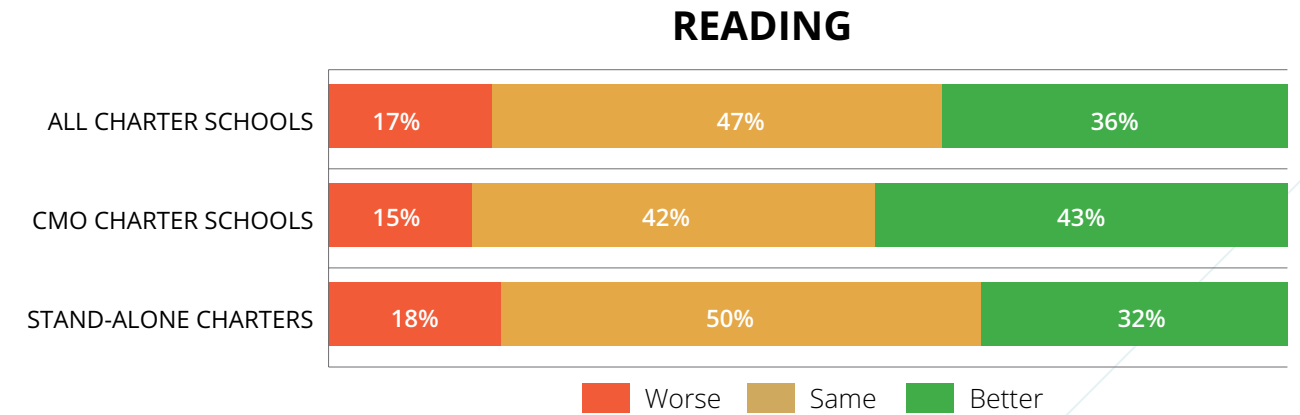


Figure above draws from Figure 1.22 in CSP31, and Figure 36 in CMO23.

In math, more charter schools have weaker results than they do in reading, as presented in the figure below. As the share of charter schools with growth greater than their TPS peers is comparable with the same growth in reading across all categories, the driver of the overall weaker performance in math is the greater percentage of charter schools (all, CMO-affiliated and stand-alone charter schools) that perform worse than their TPS peers. Stand-alone charter schools have the largest share of schools with lower growth in math in comparison to their local TPS.

Figure 4: Academic Growth of Charter Schools Compared to Their Local TPS, Math

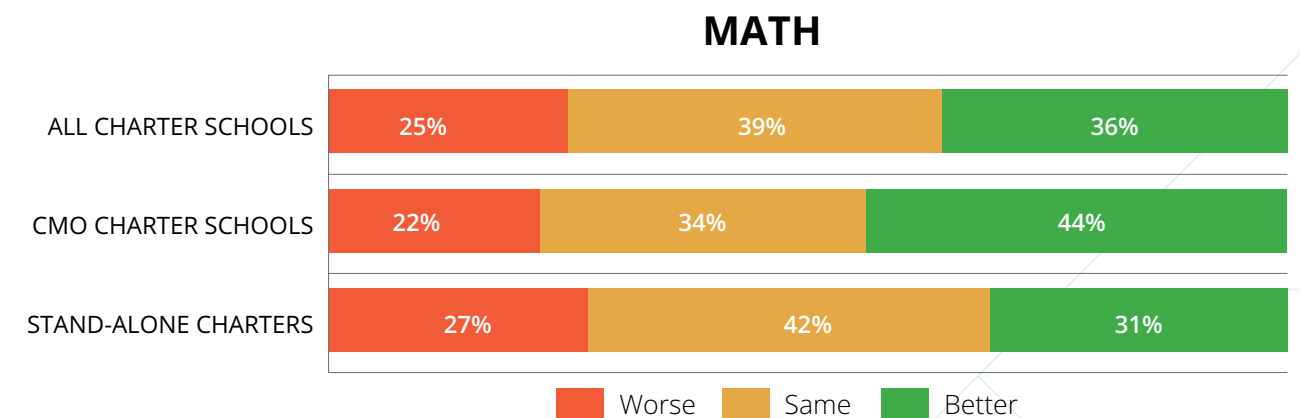


Figure above draws from Figure 1.22 in CSP31, and Figure 37 in CMO23.

These encouraging results require a note of caution. Since the reference point in these comparisons is the growth that equivalent students in the local TPS realize, this comparison does not reveal if the difference is modest or large, nor does it indicate where in the range of absolute achievement the difference occurs. Positive differences at the lowest levels of achievement may not be sufficient to move students ahead fast enough to reach long-term outcomes such as academic proficiency or post-secondary readiness. Similarly, a charter school may post growth results that are considered outsized for any school but still lag behind

the community schools in achievement. Simultaneous consideration of student academic growth and achievement is the only way to get the complete picture of charter school performance.

Charter School Growth and Achievement

Student academic growth measures how much students advance their learning in a year’s time, and student achievement measures the stock of their knowledge at the end of the year. We believe it is critical to examine both growth and achievement in order to understand how well schools prepare students for next steps in school and life. We map each school’s average growth and average achievement against the the growth of matched TPS students and average state performance. Examining both measurements for all schools in our national data set during the most recent growth period, we present findings in four basic categories of school performance:

- > **High Growth—High Achievement:** schools that exceed the growth of their local options and whose students are above the state average in overall achievement
- > **High Growth—Low Achievement:** schools that exceed the growth of their local options but with overall student achievement below the state average
- > **Low Growth—High Achievement:** schools whose students exceed the state average on achievement but do not advance as much yearly as their comparisons
- > **Low Growth—Low Achievement:** schools with lower academic growth than their local alternatives and whose students’ achievement is lower than the state average at the end of a school year.

NOTE TO READERS:

The thumbnail table below presents the total proportion of students in each major quadrant in Figure 5. These values appear on the [study website](#) as a layer of the chart—the user can see the quadrant totals and then drill down to see the inner-quadrant values.

11.4	31.7
26.3	30.9

Figure 5: Academic Growth and Achievement 2015 to 2018, Reading

Growth (in Days of Learning)	Low Growth, High Achievement		High Growth, High Achievement		
	-87	0	87		
	0.1%	1.5%	5.8%	2.8%	70th Percentile
	0.7%	9.1%	17.0%	6.1%	50th Percentile
	3.1%	12.3%	17.6%	6.4%	30th Percentile
	4.1%	6.8%	5.8%	1.1%	
	Low Growth, Low Achievement		High Growth, Low Achievement		

Figure above originally appears as Figure 1.25 in CSP31.

Schools that have average student achievement above the state average (above the 50th percentile) are presented in the top half of the figure. In reading, 43 percent of all schools have average performance in the upper half in their respective states, with a majority of those high achievement schools also having stronger growth than their local TPS. Zeroing in on the low-growth/low-achievement quadrant, 207 schools (4.1 percent) in our study have lower academic growth than their local alternatives and have student achievement that is below the 30th percentile of state achievement at the end of the school year.

NOTE TO READERS:

The thumbnail table below presents the total proportion of students in each major quadrant in Figure 6. These values appear on the [study website](#) as a layer of the chart—the user can see the quadrant totals and then drill down to see the inner-quadrant values.

11.8	28.2
33.8	26.4

Figure 6: Academic Growth and Achievement 2015 to 2018, Math

Growth (in Days of Learning)	Low Growth, High Achievement		High Growth, High Achievement		
	-87	0	87		
	0.2%	2.0%	4.9%	3.8%	70th Percentile
	1.0%	8.6%	12.0%	7.5%	50th Percentile
	4.9%	14.3%	13.8%	6.2%	30th Percentile
	7.1%	7.5%	5.3%	1.3%	
	Low Growth, Low Achievement		High Growth, Low Achievement		

Figure above originally appears as Figure 1.26 in CSP31.

In math, above average achievement exists in 40 percent of charter schools, while 60 percent of schools have achievement that is lower than their state averages. Twenty-eight percent of schools in the data set are high-growth/high-achievement schools, returning great gains for their students. Zeroing in again on the low-growth/low-achievement quadrant, 348 schools (7.1 percent) have lower academic growth than their local alternatives and have student achievement that is below the 30th percentile of state achievement at the end of the school year.

The number of schools in the low-growth/low-achievement quadrant, though smaller in reading than in math, remains a key concern.

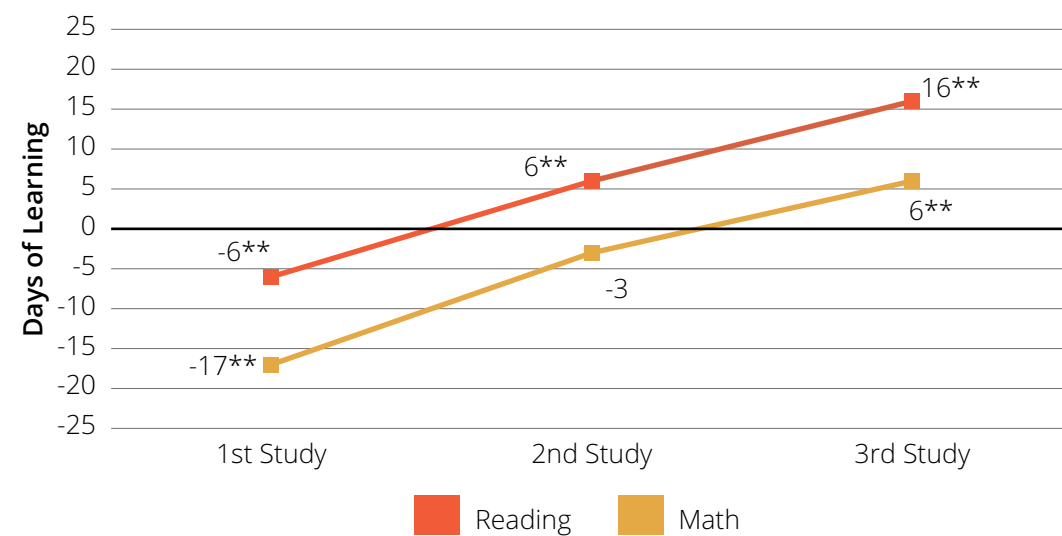
Exceptional Performance in Charter Schools

Perhaps the most revealing finding of our study is that more than 1,000 schools have eliminated learning disparities for their students and moved their achievement ahead of their respective state's average performance. We refer to these schools as “gap-busting” charter schools. They provide strong empirical proof that high-quality, high-equality education is possible anywhere. More critically, we found that dozens of CMOs have created these results across their portfolios, demonstrating the ability to scale equitable education that can change lives.

Evidence of Improvement over Time

Findings from this study take on even more weight when considered in the historical context of the 15 years of CREDO studies on student academic progress in charter schools. Between the 2009 and 2023 studies, against a backdrop of flat performance for the nation as a whole, the trend of learning gains for students enrolled in charter schools is both large and positive.

Figure 7: Annual Academic Growth of Charter School Students across Three National Studies



** Significant at $p \leq 0.01$
Figure above originally appears as Figure 1.8 in CSP31.

Conclusions

The outcomes of these studies are largely positive and support several conclusions about the current landscape of charter schools across America. Perhaps more importantly, the opportunity to position these findings in the larger body of research leads to a number of implications about the fundamental policies and practices of charter schooling at a more global level.

1. In both reading and math, charter schools provide students with stronger learning compared with the learning in the traditional public schools that are otherwise available to them.

Across the broad range of charter schools, the evidence suggests that they are a robust education option under many conditions. Whether stand-alone or networked, charter schools operate by law mainly on their own, making decisions they expect will serve their students well. According to our latest findings, the autonomy given to them usually yields positive results. The majority of charter schools provide better year-to-year outcomes for students compared to their traditional public-school options. Most of these schools perform better to such a degree that the difference is statistically significant.

The results stand up to deeper investigation. Charter schools produce superior student gains despite enrolling a more challenging student population than their adjacent TPS. They move Black and Hispanic students and students in poverty ahead in their learning faster than if they enrolled in their local TPS. They are more successful than the local public school alternatives across most grade spans and community settings. These results show that charter schools use their flexibility to be responsive to the local needs of their communities.

These findings generalize into lessons for policy leaders, educators, and funders. Knowing that the average student in the average charter school can outperform their TPS peers raises important questions about the priority placed on student outcomes in education decisions in many communities.

2. Some charter schools provide less student learning than their local district schools, although a larger proportion delivers better learning outcomes. The latter group includes over 1,000 charter schools managing staffing and resources to deliver superior academic results that eliminate the learning gap across student groups.

Vital lessons also come from the distribution of school performance around the average. Over the past 30 years, small, large, urban, rural, networked or stand-alone charter schools, autonomous and independent of each other, have arrived at their own solutions for giving their students stronger learning experiences. The discretion that charter schools enjoy does not guarantee that each school or every charter network realizes strong student outcomes. Our study illuminated the range of learning across schools.

Despite declining shares, there remain a concerning number of charter schools with weaker student outcomes. While lower-performing schools make up a larger share of stand-alone charter schools, CMOs and networks also have a substantial share that produces low gains for their students. This study has profound implications for charter schools and charter networks that do not support student learning. Charter boards and authorizers are the accountability side of the charter school equation. They evaluate school performance and, if necessary, dictate remedies. As our analysis shows, disturbing numbers of charter schools and networks have low learning levels. There are brick-and-mortar, online, networked, and stand-alone charter schools with sub-par results.

The number of school closures we observed in the years of this study was small compared to the counts of schools with the lowest student growth and academic achievement. Since primary and secondary education is essential to the social contract, providing a foundation for future opportunities, the claim of “choice” cannot justify derailing students’ preparation. Especially in the post-COVID era, the need for charter boards and authorizers to address under-performance in their schools has never been more critical.

Closure is not the sole remedy. As we learned from our special investigation, the “takeover” of underperforming schools by strong CMOs led to improved student learning for the students who remained enrolled before and after the transfer. The gains did not adversely affect student academic progress in the rest of the CMOs’ schools. This policy tool may have broader utility than previously realized.

At the high end of the performance range, good news exists in the growing share of schools outpacing learning in their local TPS. In both subjects and for both CMO and stand-alone schools, larger shares are “better than” and a smaller share is “weaker than” compared to earlier work.

The real surprise of the study is the number of charter schools that have achieved educational equity for their students: we call them “gap-busting” schools. Ensuring equivalent yearly growth across student groups has two critical consequences. First, ensuring minority and poverty students learn on par with or better than their White peers interrupts or reduces the achievement gap. It happens regularly in a large swath of charter schools. More critically, there is strong evidence that these gap-busting schools can be scaled. Added to the traditional district schools that achieve similar results, this is the life-transforming education that so many students need. Second, these schools deliver hundreds of independent proof points that learning gaps between student groups are not structural or inevitable; better results are possible.

Charter schools function as a portfolio, and their varied impacts on student learning are expected. Charter school boards and authorizers are responsible for ensuring students perform well. Evidence shows that the charter school enterprise benefits students, and its positive outliers (e.g., gap busters) can pressure the rest of the system.

The near-term implication for charter school boards and authorizers is two-pronged. Addressing chronic and/or severe underperformance is necessary and imperative in the current education climate. Identifying high-impact exemplars for probationary charter schools to study and emulate is possible. Transfer of sub-par schools to higher-performing operators could be part of a larger incentive for growth and replication. At the same time, authorizers might consider longer charter terms for charter schools that consistently demonstrate outstanding student learning success.

Education leaders and policy makers need to understand that in efforts to improve, some failure is inevitable. Any subsequent failure to address the poor performance compounds the damage. It also blocks constructive learning for the future. Strong examples of authorizing exist and should be emulated.

Leadership and responsibility demand embracing practices and policies that lead to better results for students, not maintaining the status quo.

3. The larger scale of Charter Management Organizations does not guarantee high performance—but on balance, it helps.

When taken as a whole, schools managed by Charter Management Organizations and charter networks bring a greater learning benefit to students compared to stand-alone charter schools. Despite the differences, both groups of charter schools have had larger student success than traditional public schools with respect to reading. We note, however, that math gains in stand-alone charter schools were equivalent to TPS learning.

Our analysis highlights attributes of higher-performing CMOs and networks that could be useful in future discussions. Size or age of the CMO does not relate to student learning: at every increment of CMO age

or portfolio size, we see high- and low-impact CMOs and networks. This further supports earlier CREDO research that showed that CMOs only replicate the quality they already have. The implications of replicating schools with weak results is clear. The big upside is the ability of dozens of CMOs to scale their gap-busting performance. Additionally, CMOs that concentrate their operations within a single state have stronger gains than multistate CMOs, though both groups do well by their students.

Programs of external funding and support to CMOs to grow their networks, represented here by the Charter School Growth Fund, focus on some of the stronger CMOs and networks in our study. After high-performing CMOs receive endorsement, the learning of students in those CMO schools rises in reading but holds steady in math.

The majority of new CMO schools are no better or worse than the parent organization has already produced, so decisions to approve applications by CMOs to open new schools must consider the contributions to student learning of schools in the existing portfolio.

CMO growth accelerators help augment board and authorizer reviews through their extensive selection process; the growth of their grant-receiving CMOs maintains the strong student learning that led to their selection. The expansion of these high-quality schools and networks benefits more students and communities.

4. Charter schools and networks improve over time, as do the systems that oversee them.

Insights about improvement in schools and networks stem from this study and CREDO’s prior multistate studies.

In the years of this study, student growth in charter schools was the strongest observed in any of CREDO’s multistate studies. Added to the results from the previous two studies, a strong trend of improvement becomes clear. We see substantial increases in student learning in CMOs in both tested subjects and in reading for stand-alone charter schools. Even the finding of no difference in math learning in stand-alone charter schools vis a vis TPS, a decline from the 2017 study results, still marks an improvement from the statistically significant negative results in the first CMO vs. stand-alone comparisons in 2013.

A better understanding of the improvement in the sector comes from two different findings. The first is that the largest share of improvement comes from existing charter schools. Compared to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) trend, evidence of schools getting better over time is welcome news.

Second, new schools opened with stronger results than at any time in the past. Growth in the number of CMOs since the last study plays a role. Many stand-alone charter schools also pushed their results upward. Strengthening authorizer standards and practices, a drive that took root in the 2010s, also sets a higher bar that resulted in better schools opening.

Finding ways to improve student academic outcomes is an ambition shared by policy and community leaders, educators, funders and parents. Charter school results show that change for the better is possible in the larger education system. The key to improvement lies outside any particular school or network model, though many are worthy of emulation. It is simply not possible to drive single solutions through the diverse landscape that is U.S. public education. Lessons from the charter school experience and results may be helpful in charting a future course in public education.

Implications

The **charter school policy framework** sets the conditions for charter schools' growing positive outcomes. It is the fundamental common denominator in every case, and its role is powerful.

The framework offers a divergent approach from the conventional strategy for public schools. The “flexibility for accountability” construct is not just a catchphrase. It is a distinctly different mode of operation. The “loose-tight” parameters of the framework create incentives to which schools and networks respond. The incentives find positive support in this study’s findings and the broader trends. While our study design cannot make causal claims (because randomly assigning schools to the traditional or charter school approach has yet to happen), it can deliver a plausible argument of the value of the policy based on available evidence.

On the “loose” side of the approach, the framework establishes a **policy of possibility** where educators, leaders and boards of directors have the discretion to build and deliver curriculum and instruction that meets high standards for learning and is responsive to local needs.

According to this study, there are a lot of positive possibilities. The process has led to many successful schools nationwide, often with meaningful innovations. The diversity of schools illuminates an important feature of the framework: success is attainable via **many paths**. Over time, many have sought and gained permission to expand and then shown the ability to create strong student learning at scale.

Students in these schools, especially minority students and those in poverty, make larger advances than in local public schools. Beyond the benefits for their students, successful charter schools deliver **critical proof points** of ways to improve outcomes for students. In the current regulatory climate, it is difficult to imagine how similar efforts could become conventional among traditional public schools.

Beyond flexibility in school design, school teams have the leeway to tinker with their operations. The results show that existing charter schools have improved over time. The proportion of charter schools with superior results is on the rise. The share that lags behind the local TPS alternatives is also shrinking. This means schools and networks use their discretion and autonomy to foster a **standing capacity to adapt over time**.³

Accordingly, the framework also aims to be “tight” at key points as schools open and mature. Authorizers are expected to behave as **governors of quality**. They set the bar to receive initial permission to operate, which exerts quality and safety controls at the outset. Others have documented stronger standards among authorizers in the review and approval of new applications (Mumma & West, 2018). The findings of stronger new schools in this study compared to earlier results attest to the effort and to the CMO replications and new charter schools that meet the higher bar.

Authorizing is a delicate job that requires resources, expertise and substantial political acumen and courage. There is growing attention to authorizers adopting rigorous standards and practices and using a variety of performance data to evaluate schools that apply for renewal (NACSA, 2016).

³ We saw that capacity in stark terms when we examined how charter schools in three states responded to the COVID-instigated school closure orders (CREDO, 2022). Rapid transformation into remote instructional mode; acquisition and distribution of food, technology, or internet access; and strengthening of personal supports were widespread. Return to in-person instruction in the fall of 2020 was nearly universal. These points rest admittedly on smaller bases of qualitative evidence, but they provide human dimensions to the point that the present quantitative analysis illuminates nationally. See also: Boast et al. (2020); Henderson et al. (2021); Childs et al. (2022).

Poorly performing charter schools are often ignored. A number of these schools were observed during this study window. There is data to assess policy leaders and authorizers to hold them accountable for protecting children’s futures. As tough as closing schools is, the disservice of not closing poorly performing schools has large and lingering ripple effects.

Our results show that the framework of charter schools helps current students and strengthens public education overall. We contend these incentives have broader applicability in public schools and see signs of their spread. Collaborations between charter schools and local district schools have grown over time. Some states, including Kentucky and Maine, have adopted policies to give educators freedom in adjusting instruction and boosting performance. However, uptake is slow.

In the year 2023, the importance of strong academic achievement among America’s students has never been greater. The students hit hardest by school closures during the coronavirus pandemic are precisely those whom this research illuminates as being able to benefit the most from charter schools. In this study thousands of charter schools have proved that we can do better for our students. The current number of students benefiting from these schools is 3.7 million, but the number could drastically increase if more schools agreed to the same arrangement. Whether it be termed “charter school” or something else, the deduction from this data is that when both sides of the equation—flexibility and accountability—are working together for more schools, more students’ academic results will improve.

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