



CHARTER SCHOOLS

*The Case for Public Charter Schools:
Ten Studies and Data Sets for Policymakers*
ExcelinEd – July 2018

Charter schools are tuition-free public schools open to all students and held to state academic and financial standards. However, unlike traditional public schools, charter schools are run independently of school districts and operate under a performance contract with an authorizer (a district, the state or another approved government or nonprofit entity). In exchange for more operational autonomy, charter schools are held accountable for student success.

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENTS LEARN MORE IN LESS TIME

Most public charter schools reside in urban settings. In 2015, The Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) released an [overview of its Urban Charter School Study](#) that looked at 41 urban areas in 22 states. They found that **students who attended public charter schools learn more in less time when compared with their neighborhood peers who attended traditional public schools**. Attending a public charter school in one of these cities added the equivalent of 40 days of learning gains in math to a typical school year, and an additional 28 days in reading. It should be noted that not all charter schools perform equally well. In fact, this study confirms that the charter school sector is not a monolith. “The charter sector is regularly treated as a monolithic set of schools,” the report’s executive summary explained. “But recent research has made clear that across the U.S. there are in fact distinct charter markets with dramatically different student profiles, governance and oversight structures, and academic quality.”

THE PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL SECTOR CAN AND DOES IMPROVE OVER TIME

In 2013, CREDO released its [National Charter School Study](#) that was written as a follow-up from the 2009 national study. **The report clearly indicates that public charter school sector can and does improve over time**. “We see slow and steady progress in the performance of the charter sector,” the report says. “The dialogue as a community of educators, policymakers, community members, and a growing fraction of parents and students has affirmed the predominant value of the charter school enterprise to be academic quality.”

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENTS FROM LOW-INCOME FAMILIES GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE AT HIGHER RATES

In 2017, [a study by Richard Whitmire](#) and the education news source *The 74* revealed that **public charter school graduates from the lowest-income households are graduating from college at three-to-five times the national rate**. [That data includes](#) charter school networks like KIPP, who track students from ninth grade through college graduation. Thirty-nine percent of KIPP ninth-grader students graduate from college within six years of graduating high school—a rate that is four times the national rate for their peer groups.



PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS IMPROVE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN NEIGHBORHOOD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 2017, a study by Dr. Sarah Cordes of Temple University clearly found that **the introduction of charter schools within a given neighborhood raises the performance of students in the nearby traditional public school.** In the study, [For the Common Good: The Spillover Effects of Charter Schools on Public School Students in New York City](#), Dr. Cordes finds that when a charter school opens within one mile of a traditional public school, student outcomes within that traditional public school significantly increase in reading and math. Furthermore, the closer the charter school is located to the traditional public school, the better the academic outcomes are for students in the traditional public schools. That means co-locations, when charter schools share the same facilities with traditional public schools, can be productive for students in both charters and traditional public schools.

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS REMAIN A POPULAR CHOICE FOR FAMILIES

Susan Pendergrass and Nora Kern from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools released [Waiting for Their Chance: A Closer Look at Wait Lists in Urban Public Charter Schools](#) in 2015 as a follow-up from [their 2014 report](#) that numbered charter school waitlists at one million names. Both studies examine the number of students on waitlists wishing to enroll in public charter schools in ten urban cities. **Charter schools remain a popular choice for families.** For example, according to the data in the report there are about 100,000 names on charter school wait lists in New York City, which equals about 10 percent of the traditional public-school students in the city. That number is nearly 18,500 in Washington, D.C. and 25,000 in Boston, MA.

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE BETTER SERVING MORE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Both the National Center for Special Education in Charter School's 2018 report, [Key Trends in Special Education in Charter Schools: A Secondary Analysis of Civil Rights Data Collection](#) and [our own analysis](#) found that public charter schools are serving more students with disabilities than ever before. Enrollment of students with disabilities *slightly decreased in traditional public schools* (12.55 percent to 12.46 percent) and *slightly increased in charter schools* (10.42 percent to 10.62 percent) from 2012 to 2014. According to the report, **84 percent of students with disabilities are being educated in general education classrooms in public charter schools, compared to 68 percent in traditional public schools.** This should be terrific news for special education advocates.

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT CAN INCREASE STUDENTS' LIKELIHOOD TO ENGAGE IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

[Mathematica Policy Research](#) released research in 2018 that measured the impact of the Democracy Prep Charter School Network on voter registration and participation in elections. According to data reported by the Brookings Institution, voter turnout among young people aged between 18 and 34 years hovered between 40 and 50 percent. Some predict those numbers to go up. According to new research published by Mathematica, 98 percent of alumni from Democracy Prep Public Schools will likely vote in coming elections. As the report states, "We estimate that enrolling in Democracy Prep substantially increases the probability that students will vote when they reach adulthood." The charter network increased voter registration of its students by 16 percent and the voting rate of its students by about 12 percent. **This is a powerful example of a public charter school network providing a public service to create and engage active citizens.**



SOME PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS PURPOSEFULLY SERVE DIVERSE SETS OF STUDENTS

In 2018, The Century Foundation released the report [Diverse-by-Design Charter Schools](#). For the first time, researchers attempted to measure how many public charter schools are purposefully diverse. **Purposefully diverse charter schools intentionally serve sets of students who differ in racially, ethnically and socioeconomically.** According to the report, there are at least 125 public charter schools nationwide that are diverse-by-design.

NOT ALL PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS ARE THE SAME

In the 2015 report [Measuring the Diversity of Charter School Offerings](#), the American Enterprise Institute divides public charter schools in to thirteen different categories and measures their prevalence. It's a good reminder that people create charter schools for many different reasons and to fulfill many different missions. From the Montessori charter school to the no-excuses charter schools, **this research is a compelling case that different school models exist.**

CHARTER-FRIENDLY STATES ARE IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES FASTER THAN OTHER STATES

Known as the Nation's Report Card, the [National Assessment of Educational Progress](#) (NAEP) is the only academic achievement measurement given in all 50 states. While the 2017 NAEP showed mixed results nationally, two states with charter-friendly policies showed strong student improvements.

Florida

The Florida Department of Education [recently reported](#) that **the choice-friendly state is the only state in the nation to demonstrate significant improvements between 2015 and 2017 on NAEP.** [ExcelinEd reported in 2017](#) that over 270,000 public school students in Florida attend public charter schools, accounting for 9 percent of public school students and 16 percent of public schools in the state.

Arizona

The [Arizona Charter Schools Association reported](#) in 2018 that **public charter school students in Arizona, another choice-friendly state, improved faster than any state between 2009 and 2017 on NAEP.** Over 185,000 public school students attend public charter schools in Arizona, accounting for 17 percent of public school students and 30 percent of public schools in the state.