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New report: Consortium's first look at charter high schools examines student performance, transfers, variation across schools

Study goes beyond test scores; explores attendance, school climate

CHICAGO – A new study from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research (UChicago Consortium) finds differences between charter and non-charter high schools in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in terms of students' incoming characteristics, performance in high school, and performance on post-secondary outcomes. It also finds variation on outcomes across charter schools. The study finds charter high schools in Chicago enroll students with higher eighth-grade attendance but similar or lower eighth-grade test scores than non-charter high schools. Once enrolled, students in charter high schools reported more challenging instruction, had higher attendance, and had higher test scores, on average, compared to students in non-charter high schools with similar attendance and test scores in the middle grades. Rates of four-year college enrollment and enrollment in more selective colleges were higher, on average, for students at charter schools than similar students at non-charter high schools. At the same time, the study finds charter high school students were more likely to transfer schools between 9-12th grade than similar students in non-charter high schools. Notably, the study also finds substantial variation across charter schools on test scores, college enrollment, and college selectivity.

The study—the UChicago Consortium's first in-depth look at charter high schools—examined four key dimensions of charter high schools in CPS: school organization and policies; incoming skills and characteristics of charter high school enrollees; school transfers; and student performance. It expands the existing research base on charter schools in important ways by moving beyond test scores to look at a range of outcomes, and by examining variation among charter high schools.

“The research base on charter schools relies heavily on test scores as a student outcome, despite the fact that grades and attendance have been shown to be more predictive for students' later outcomes,” says the report's lead author Julia A. Gwynne, Managing Director and Senior Research Scientist at the UChicago Consortium. “Therefore, we thought it was important to look beyond test scores to have a more comprehensive understanding of charter schools in Chicago. In fact, this study is one of the first studies anywhere to look at attendance and measures of school climate in charters.”

Using the five essentials framework to measure school climate, the study finds, on average, CPS charter high schools looked similar to non-charter, non-selective schools on some dimensions of organizational capacity, such as leadership, but looked quite different on other dimensions, such as preparation for post-secondary. Charter school students were more likely than similar students in non-charter high schools to describe their schools as more academically demanding and report that their school engaged in helping them plan for the future. Charter school teachers also reported that their schools were more likely to expect students to go to college and to promote college readiness.

The study also found charter high school students transferred out of their schools at higher rates, compared to similar students in non-charter high schools. By the beginning of the fourth year of high school, 24.2 percent of students who began high school in a charter school transferred to another school in the district, compared to 17.2 percent of non-charter students. The majority of students who transferred by the beginning of their second year in high school transferred to a CPS non-charter high school. Transfer rates were highest in low-performing or recently-opened charter high schools. The study did not look at the reasons students transferred.

The study also found considerable variation across charter high schools on some student outcomes, including test scores and college enrollment, compared to non-charter high schools. After controlling for differences in students' incoming skills, experience, and background characteristics, there was far more variation among charter schools on these outcomes, than among non-charter schools.

“This study raises some important questions. In particular, why do students transfer out of charter schools at higher rates than other schools, and what are the implications of this for their long-term educational attainment?” says Dr. Gwynne. “We hope that this work will expand how charter schools are studied overall—especially looking beyond test scores—and that it will provide additional insights for understanding charter high schools in Chicago.”

Read the full report, *Chicago's Charter High Schools: Organizational Features, Enrollment, School Transfers, and Student Performance* by Julia A. Gwynne and Paul T. Moore, on the UChicago Consortium website: consortium.uchicago.edu/publications

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