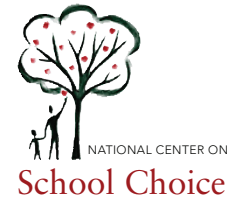


# RESEARCH BRIEF

## Charter Schools and the Teacher Job Search



Marisa Cannata

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Charter schools have been the subject of much education policy research, particularly related to student achievement, governance, funding, and student composition. Although high-quality teachers are essential for the educational success of any school, much less research exists on charter schools' ability to recruit talented teachers.

This study from the National Center on School Choice explored how prospective elementary teachers view charter schools as they enter the labor market, apply for teaching jobs, and decide where to work. Using a framework of labor

market segmentation, the study developed a model for understanding the interaction between institutional structures and informal boundaries (such as social networks and preferences for working in a familiar setting) and teachers' job searches. The data examined came from a mixed-methods longitudinal study of prospective elementary teachers from six teacher preparation colleges in the Detroit metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup> The data included interviews with 27 teacher applicants at several points in their job search and a longitudinal survey of 160 teacher applicants. After identifying patterns in the qualitative data, the researchers

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Few teacher applicants give equal consideration to charter schools and traditional public schools in the job search.
- Social and institutional contexts influence teacher applicants' familiarity with and openness to working in charter schools.
- Teacher applicants are confused about whether charter schools are public or private entities.
- Teacher applicants who ended up working in charter schools earn lower salaries and are less satisfied with their schools.

<sup>1</sup> The colleges include public and private institutions and represent a diverse set of programs, including traditional undergraduate programs, programs designed for midcareer entrants, and programs of varying sizes.

### Labor Market Segmentation

Labor market segmentation theory focuses attention on the institutional structures that may contribute to differences between sectors. Charter schools operate in a complex institutional environment. Some institutional rules make them similar to private schools (e.g., no defined attendance areas and students must apply), while others make them similar to public schools (e.g., publicly funded, may not be selective in admitting students, and may require teachers to be certified). These institutional rules are important in labor market segmentation theory because they create barriers that keep workers from moving between sectors.

Some research suggests that there is a small degree of movement of charter school teachers into traditional public schools (Harris, 2007; The Ohio Collaborative, 2003). There is little evidence, however, about whether traditional public school teachers move into charter schools.

The second key characteristic of a segmented labor market is the differentiated qualifications, salary, and working conditions between sectors. Although several studies have documented that charter school teachers have characteristics different from teachers in traditional public schools (e.g., charter school teachers have less experience and education and are

less likely to be certified [Burian-Fitzgerald, Luekens, & Strizek, 2004; Harris, 2007; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Texas Center for Educational Research, 2003]), the evidence is more mixed on whether the different working conditions between charter and traditional public schools favor one sector over the other. That is, charter school teachers report feeling more empowered in their classrooms (Bomotti, Ginsberg, & Cobb, 1999; Hoxby, 2002) but are less satisfied with the physical environments of their schools (Bomotti et al., 1999). Overall, the existing literature suggests that there are notable differences in the qualifications and work experiences of charter and traditional public school teachers.

used survey data to model the decision to apply to a charter school with a larger sample using a binomial logistic regression model. Key study questions were:

- To what extent are teachers likely to compare charter schools on an equal basis with traditional public schools?
- Are there institutional rules or informal barriers that influence whether teachers consider charter schools in their job searches?
- Are there observable differences in the qualifications, salary, and working conditions between teachers who end up in charter and traditional public schools?

**Few prospective teachers give equal consideration to charter schools and traditional public schools in the job search.** Most teachers avoided charter schools altogether or included them in their job searches only if positions in traditional public schools were not available.

**Social and institutional contexts influence teacher applicants' familiarity with, and openness to, working in charter schools.** Informal boundaries, such as personal and professional networks and teacher applicants' preferences for working in a familiar setting, shaped how they thought about charter schools in their job searches. Prospective teachers wanted to work in schools with which they were familiar and that were personally relevant to them (e.g., they had contacts in the schools or lived in communities where such schools were located). For many, charter schools were unfamiliar places and therefore were not considered an option. For some, however, charter schools were more familiar because of institutional contexts, such as the attention paid to charter schools in teacher preparation programs and the role of public colleges in authorizing charter schools in Michigan. Teacher applicants who attended universities that authorized charter schools and lived in communities that had charter schools were more likely to apply to teach in a charter school.

**Teacher applicants are confused about whether charter schools were public or private entities.** Specific aspects of charter schools led them to consider charter schools as more similar to private schools. Thus, some applicants explained their decision to avoid charter schools by stating their commitment to public education. Others thought charter schools served public purposes by

### Charter School Context in Detroit

About 45 charter schools—mostly elementary—are located within Detroit's borders, and more than 100 are within the Detroit metropolitan area. In 2009, 25 percent of children in Detroit attended charter schools. Thus, charter schools are a significant part of the educational landscape in the area, and their presence has impacted the teacher labor market. Although many districts in the area announced that they were not hiring new elementary teachers, charter school enrollment—and thus their need for more teachers—continued to grow. Thus, charter schools represent a considerable source of jobs for potential teachers.

Charter schools may be authorized by community colleges, universities, local school districts, and intermediate school districts. Most charter schools in the area are authorized by universities and are operated by educational management organizations (EMOs). Charter schools' funding is tied to the per-pupil foundation grant in their host districts, but due to (1) caps on the foundation grant a charter school can receive and (2) difficulties in obtaining capital expenses, charter schools receive about \$1,800 less per pupil than their host districts (Michigan Department of Education, 2008).

Charter schools in Michigan do not have any automatic waivers from state regulations. Charter school teachers must be fully certified. Charter schools that are authorized by local school districts are included in the district's collective bargaining agreement. Teachers in charter schools are allowed to bargain collectively, but in practice, few charter schools are unionized. Salaries are significantly lower (about \$15,000 on average) in charter schools than in traditional public schools, although two-thirds of this gap is due to the fewer qualifications held by charter school teachers (Harris, 2006).

educating predominantly students from low-income families. Teacher applicants who preferred to work in an urban school or who also applied to private schools were more likely to apply to teach in a charter school.

**Teacher applicants who end up working in charter schools earn lower salaries and are less satisfied with their schools.** Applicants who accepted jobs in charter schools earned salaries that were about \$4,300 less than those of peers in traditional public schools. Traditional

public school teachers also reported higher levels of satisfaction with teaching in their schools than teachers who ended up in charter schools. Half of teachers hired by charter schools indicated that they planned to apply for another teaching job at the end of the school year, compared with 15 percent of teachers in traditional public schools. Although these teachers may change their minds when the next hiring season actually begins, the data suggest that applicants who landed positions in charter schools were more likely to wish they were working somewhere else than applicants who ended up working in traditional public schools.

## Policy and Research Implications

Understanding why teachers may seek out or avoid working in charter schools is vital to evaluating the educational success of the charter school movement. That teachers hesitate to work in charter schools suggests these schools may face difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers beyond what might be expected given the students they serve. Because teachers are important components of the educational process and a school's success, recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers is critical. Future research should focus on the hiring priorities, recruitment strategies, and personnel practices used by charter schools in comparison with traditional public schools, exploring whether hiring officials in charter schools recognize the challenges they face and the strategies they may use to overcome these challenges.

Viewed through the lens of a labor market segmentation framework, the data in this study suggest that institutional structures and informal boundaries between charter and traditional public schools are contributing to a segmented labor market. A labor market segmentation framework highlights how jobs in a lower paid, less unionized sector are less preferred but easier to get than jobs in a higher paid sector (Dickens & Lang, 1992; Reid & Rubin, 2003), which was consistent with the evidence in this study. This finding points to the potentially limited impact that charter schools may have on the overall teacher labor market, even in areas with a substantial charter school sector. Increasing the numbers of charter schools that compete with traditional school districts for teachers could possibly affect employment practices throughout the teacher labor market. Yet if most teachers avoid charter schools—as the evidence presented here suggests—and a segmented

labor market develops, then charter schools would have a more marginal impact on teacher hiring and staffing patterns. This paper is a first step in understanding these patterns in teacher career decisions. Additional research should examine these patterns more closely and explore the amount of movement between these sectors to gauge the size of the institutional and informal boundaries identified in this paper. Research in other labor markets and policy contexts also is needed to see how the findings from this study in Michigan extend to other locales.

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### **National Center on School Choice**

Box 459 GPC, 230 Appleton Place  
Nashville, TN 37203  
Phone: 615-322-8107

Website: <http://www.vanderbilt.edu/schoolchoice/>



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