

What Works Clearinghouse



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WWC Quick Review of the Report “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States”[†]

What is this study about?

The study examined the effect of charter school attendance on annual student achievement growth in math and reading.

The study analyzed data on a large sample of students in grades 1 through 12 who were attending charter schools and traditional public schools in 16 states.

The study authors matched charter school students to similar students based on grade level, baseline test scores, subsidized lunch status, special education status, and demographic characteristics. The authors were able to match 84 percent of charter school students.

The authors examined changes in standardized reading and math test scores from one school year to the next. They estimated effects by comparing the test score changes of charter school students to those of matched students attending traditional public schools.

What Two Groups of Students Were Contrasted?

In the pooled analysis, students attending charter schools nationwide were compared to similar students attending traditional public schools that had sent students to those charter schools.

In a more detailed analysis, students attending charter schools were compared only to similar students within the same education market, defined as all of the charter school students and all of their matched comparison records.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report is consistent with WWC evidence standards with reservations

Strengths: Matched charter school students to similar students in traditional public schools using demographic and academic characteristics.

Cautions: Although the study matched charter school students to traditional public school students based on demographic characteristics and test scores, it is possible that there were other differences between the two groups that were not accounted for in the analysis, and these differences could have influenced achievement growth.

What did the study authors report?

The study found that charter school students’ reading and math test score growth was slightly lower than the test score growth of similar students attending traditional public schools. These differences were small, equivalent to moving a student from the 50th to the 49th percentile in math and less than that in reading. The study also found substantial variability in charter school performance; students in nearly one-fifth of the charter schools had higher test scores than students in traditional schools in the same education market while students in nearly one-third of the charter schools had lower test scores than students in traditional schools in the same education market.

The WWC has reservations about these results because charter students may have been different from traditional public school students in ways not controlled for in the analysis.

[†]Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (June 2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: Author.