

They Said It...

"[M]ost charter schools don't take the hardest-to-teach kids, or, if they do, they don't keep them"¹

HILLARY CLINTON

"Charters are also known for pushing out low-performing students. These actions give the false appearance of charter 'success.'"²

DIANE RAVITCH

Reality Check

Enrollment data confirm that charters retain difficult-to-educate students at rates comparable with, or better than, those of traditional public schools.

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Charter Schools Are Better at Retaining Hard-to-Educate Students

Marcus A. Winters

In Reality

America's charter schools are proving that education reform can work with even the hardest-to-educate students: students with disabilities and students learning English are more likely to remain in charters than in traditional public schools; low-performing students, as measured by standardized tests, are as likely to remain in charters as in traditional public schools. Charters enroll fewer students from disadvantaged groups because such students are less likely to apply to charters.

Key Findings

- **Students with disabilities are more likely to remain in their school if it is a charter than if it is a traditional public school.**
 - ◆ In Denver, four years after entry into kindergarten, 65 percent of students with disabilities remained in their charter, compared with 37 percent of such students in traditional public schools.
 - ◆ In New York City, America's largest public school district, 74 percent of students with disabilities who originally enrolled in charters remained there, compared with 69 percent of such students in traditional public schools.
- **Students learning English are more likely to remain in their school if it is a charter than if it is a traditional public school.**
 - ◆ Among students classified as English-language learners, 82 percent who originally enrolled in charters for kindergarten remained in their schools four years later, compared with 70 percent of such students in traditional public schools.
- **Students with low test scores are as likely to remain in charters as they are to remain in traditional public schools.**
 - ◆ This result was found in Denver, New York City, and an anonymous urban school district in the Midwest.

On the Record

Empirical research contradicts the popular myth that charter schools systematically push out their most difficult-to-educate students. Research from multiple urban school systems demonstrates that low-performing and otherwise difficult-to-educate students are at least as likely to remain in charters as they are to remain in traditional public schools.

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Charter schools are revolutionizing U.S. urban education. According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, as of the 2013–14 school year, there were 43 school districts—including New Orleans, Detroit, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Houston—in which at least 20 percent of students were enrolled in charters.³ Relative to the schools to which they would have otherwise been assigned, students typically make large academic improvements when they attend urban charter schools.⁴

Critics often assert that charters post higher test scores than surrounding traditional public schools because they systematically remove their most difficult-to-educate students. To substantiate this claim, critics note that smaller percentages of charter students are enrolled in special education or are classified as English-language learners (ELL) than in traditional public schools.⁵ Critics also cite various anti-charter anecdotes supplied by disgruntled parents of former charter students.

If, indeed, charters systematically pushed out their lowest-performing students to boost test-score rankings, one would expect such students to be more likely to exit charters than traditional public schools. Yet analysis of enrollment and test-score data from New York City⁶ and Denver,⁷ as well as from an anonymous urban school district in the Midwest,⁸ found that low-performing students are just as likely to exit traditional public schools as they are to exit charters.

Empirical research from Denver and New York City also finds that students with disabilities are *more* likely to remain in charters than in traditional public schools: in Denver, four years after entry into kindergarten, 65 percent of students with disabilities remain in charters, compared with 37 percent of such students in traditional public schools;⁹ in New York City, 74 percent of students with disabilities who originally enrolled in charters remained, compared with 69 percent of such students in traditional public schools.¹⁰

Analysis of New York City charter school enrollment data by the city's Independent Budget Office,¹¹ as well as by the Manhattan Institute,¹² found that ELL students are more likely to remain in charters than in traditional public schools. The Manhattan Institute found that 82 percent of ELL students who originally enrolled in charters for kindergarten remained four years later, compared with 70 percent of such students in traditional public schools.

These empirical findings do not disprove the possibility that certain charters have inappropriately pressured students to leave. But to the extent that such behavior exists, the enrollment data confirm that it is the exception, not the norm: charters retain difficult-to-educate students at rates comparable with, or better than, those of traditional public schools. If difficult-to-educate students are less likely to exit charters than traditional public schools, why do charters enroll smaller percentages of such students? The answer is straightforward: difficult-to-educate students are significantly less likely to apply to charters than other students.¹³ Efforts to boost charter-enrollment rates among the former should thus focus on encouraging more applications to charter schools.¹⁴

If difficult-to-educate students are *less* likely to exit charters than traditional public schools, why do charters enroll smaller percentages of such students? The answer is straightforward: difficult-to-educate students are significantly less likely to apply to charters than other students.

Endnotes

- ¹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2015/11/08/hillary-clinton-most-charter-schools-dont-take-the-hardest-to-teach-kids-or-if-they-do-they-dont-keep-them>.
- ² See <http://www.independentsourcepac.com/diane-ravitch-letter-to-new-mexico-legislature.html>.
- ³ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, "A Growing Movement: America's Largest Charter School Communities," Washington, D.C., 2014.
- ⁴ CREDO, "Urban Charter School Study: Report on 41 Regions," Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2015; and Joshua D. Angrist, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters, "Explaining Charter School Effectiveness," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 5, no. 4 (2013): 1–27.
- ⁵ Government Accountability Office, *Charter Schools: Additional Federal Attention Needed to Help Protect Access for Students with Disabilities* (Washington, D.C., 2012); idem, *Education Needs to Further Examine Data Collection on English Language Learners in Charter Schools*. (Washington, D.C., 2013).
- ⁶ M. A. Winters, "Pushed Out? Low-Performing Students and New York City Charter Schools," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2015.
- ⁷ Marcus A. Winters, Dick Carpenter, and Grant Clayton, "Heading for the Exits: Comparing Characteristics of Leavers from Charter Schools to Traditional Public Schools in Denver Public Schools," 2015, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2627443> or http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2627443.
- ⁸ R. W. Zimmer and C. M. Guarino, "Is There Evidence That Charter Schools 'Push Out' Low-Performing Students?," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 35, no. 4 (2013): 461–80.
- ⁹ M. A. Winters, "Understanding the Gap in Special Education Enrollments Between Charter and Traditional Public Schools: Evidence from Denver, Colorado," *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 4 (2015): 228–36.
- ¹⁰ M. A. Winters, "Why the Gap? Special Education and New York City Charter Schools," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2013. Similar results in New York City were found in a report conducted by the Independent Budget Office (2015), http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2015charter_schools_public_schools_attrition.html.
- ¹¹ Independent Budget Office, "Staying or Going? Comparing Student Attrition Rates at Charter Schools with Nearby Traditional Public Schools," 2014, <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2014attritioncharterpublic.html>.
- ¹² M. A. Winters, "Why the Gap? English Language Learners and New York City Charter Schools," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2014.
- ¹³ Ibid.; idem, "Understanding the Gap."
- ¹⁴ M. A. Winters, "Narrowing the Charter-Enrollment Gap: Denver's Common-Enrollment System," Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, 2015.