Searching for the Tipping Point: Scaling Up Public School Choice Spurs Citywide Gains

TRESSA PANKOVITS
PREFACE BY WILL MARSHALL

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE

OCTOBER 2024

@ppi | @progressivepolicyinstitute | /progressive-policy-institute

Preface

SEIZING ON SUCCESS

As the 2024 presidential election enters the final stretch, public concerns about the cost of living, immigration, abortion, and U.S. foreign policy have been crowding out other pressing national issues.

One that deserves a lot more attention than it's getting is the state of America's elementary and secondary public schools. That's not unusual, since public schools are mostly a state and local responsibility.

But our pre-K-12 schools are also vital national institutions. Public education is the chief way America makes good on its promise of equal opportunity for all citizens. And by teaching children what it means to be an American, our schools fortify the shared ideals that define the common bond of citizenship in our amazingly diverse democracy.

If our schools aren't doing their job, inequality and civic disunity result. Especially hurt are low-income families, rural Americans, Black and Hispanic parents, and children of immigrants who see better schools as their best hope for social mobility and a shot at achieving their American dreams.

Past presidents understood this: Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama all made reforming our outdated K-12 model to reduce inequality and raise academic standards for all students a top priority. More recently, however, our national leaders have taken their eye off the ball.

Meanwhile, long school closings and deep learning losses during the Covid pandemic; the outbreak of culture war battles over race and gender; wide achievement gaps along race and class lines; and U.S. students' lackluster performance on international tests of proficiency in reading, math, and science are feeding the public's growing dissatisfaction with their public schools.

Just over half of U.S. voters (51%) say the country's public pre-K-12 education system is headed in the wrong direction. Only 16% express satisfaction with public schools, and 32% say they aren't sure.[1]

To put it mildly, leaders of neither political party are responding with alacrity to public demands for change, reduced inequality, increased academic rigor, and greater parental voice in their public schools.

On the contrary, many Republicans seem to be giving up on public schools altogether. In recent years, red states have passed laws expanding "universal voucher" bills, education savings accounts, and tax credits that allow even the wealthiest families to redirect public dollars to private schooling.

Republican support for vouchers isn't new. In the past, however, conservatives at least pretended to be concerned about low-income and minority parents whose children are too often trapped in bad urban schools. Now it's clear their idea of "school choice" is to give conservative parents strong financial incentives to move their kids to private schools.

This is not a popular position, even among working-class voters (defined as those without a college degree) who tend to vote Republican. In a survey of these voters' attitudes commissioned by the Progressive Policy Institute earlier this year, six in 10 voters say "tax dollars should go to funding high-quality public schools, while parents should have to pay for private and religious schools if they choose to enroll their child in one."[2] Just one-third support letting parents use "tax dollars to put their kids in private or religious schools."

If Republicans are going all-in for school privatization, Democrats nationally appear to have outsourced their K-12 policy to teachers' unions fighting rearguard actions to defend a status quo urgently in need of reform and modernization.

Many of the working Americans we surveyed don't believe their voices count when it comes to how their schools are run and their children are taught. When asked what groups public schools serve most today, six in 10 say "political activists" and "teachers unions" compared to four in 10 who say "students" and "parents."[3]

There's a tragic irony here: The parties' abandonment of public school reform and modernization comes amid stunning new evidence that public school choice is reducing inequality by lifting the performance of low-income and minority students.

A third comprehensive study by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes finds that compared with traditional district schools, charter schools "produce superior student gains despite enrolling a more challenging student population."

Most encouragingly, that study concludes that autonomous public charter schools, which operate independently of central districts and union contracts, are closing America's stubborn achievement gaps:

"The real surprise of the study is the number of charter schools that have achieved educational equity for their students: we call them the 'gap-busting' schools."

This new PPI report adds a critically important dimension to the growing body of research documenting the positive impact of charters and other forms of innovative public schools of choice. Written by Tressa Pankovits, co-director of our Reinventing Public Schools project, it enlarges the focus to illuminate the impact of choice on the kids who remain in legacy district schools.

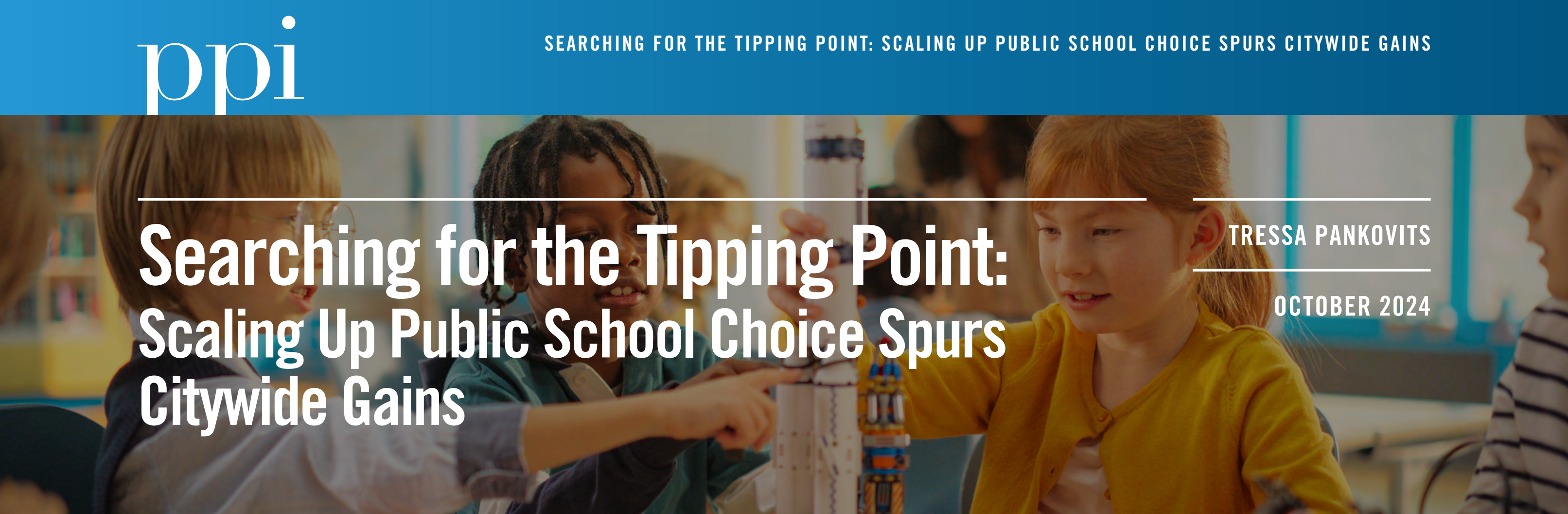
Our report belies the oft-heard but unfounded criticism that charters somehow drain legacy schools of the "best" students and resources, to the detriment of those left behind.

Pankovits examined the U.S. cities where charters have reached a "critical mass" in terms of student enrollment, defined as 33% or more. In all 10 of those cities, overall student performance improved citywide, narrowing the gap with the statewide average of performance.

Evidently, the growth of enrollment in charter schools creates a positive competitive dynamic with the traditional district schools, which have to up their game to attract parents and students. This is a complicated phenomenon that invites further research and study. But this report should bolster our growing confidence that we can fix underperforming schools and provide excellent learning environments to all children in low-income communities. The winning formula goes like this: Expand the supply of innovative and rigorous schools of choice to meet the demand of parents languishing on waiting lists; subject them to strong oversight by a public board that can close them if they fail; shift decisions from central bureaucracies to the autonomous school leaders on-site; and, encourage customized curricula and instruction tailored to students' different ways of learning.

We know what success looks like. The critical question now is whether the nation's elected leaders will seize on that success to reinvent America's factory-style public school model for the 21st century.

Will Marshall is president and founder of the Progressive Policy Institute.



Searching for the Tipping Point: Scaling Up Public School Choice Spurs Citywide Gains

TRESSA PANKOVITS

OCTOBER 2024

INTRODUCTION

Charter schools are public schools, free and open to all. Like traditional public schools, charter schools are prohibited from charging tuition, must not discriminate in admissions or be religious in their operation or affiliation, and are overseen by a public entity.[4]

Much has transpired since the first charter school law was approved in 1991 by the state of Minnesota. Today, 46 charter laws have created about 8,000 schools and campuses.[5] Cumulatively, they enroll 3.7 million students (around 7.5% of all public school students), according to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools' (NAPCS) Data Dashboard. NAPCS also reports that charter schools employ around 251,000 teachers. Around six out of 10 (58.1%) schools are in urban areas, with the others in suburbs (24.9%), rural areas (11.4%), or smaller towns (5.6%).

While there are many nuances, the primary difference between public charter schools and traditional district schools is their governance model. In addition to oversight from a charter school authorizer accredited by state statute, public charter schools are governed by their own nonprofit boards. Board members are normally selected for their strong community connections and their commitment to advancing the particular mission of their school or network of schools.

In contrast to the traditional school district one-size-fits-all model, public charter schools are free to innovate to meet the needs of the children and parents who choose to attend them, whether it's a unique curriculum, a unique school calendar, an emphasis on project-based learning, access to specific career pathways, or something else.

Decision-making in public charter schools, unlike traditional schools with central district offices, happens far closer to the students and the families who enroll them — in the vast majority of cases, by the teachers and school leaders who interact with students on a daily basis.

In states with strong charter school laws, charter schools are held to higher accountability standards than traditional district schools, which are rarely closed for poor performance.

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law — in force from 2002-2015 — was designed to scale up the federal role in holding schools accountable for student outcomes.[6] NCLB is now frequently criticized for being too punitive, but even under its aggressive restructuring requirements, only 3% of very low-performing traditional public schools were taken over by state departments of education, and only 1% were reopened as charter schools.[7]

Charter schools, on the other hand, commit to obtaining specific educational objectives in return for a charter to operate a school.[8] A school's charter is reviewed periodically by the entity that granted it and can be revoked if the conditions of the charter are not met. In New Orleans, for example, the Education Research Alliance at Tulane University (ERA) found that the replacement of underperforming schools with higher performing schools was the single most important factor in the system's rapid improvement.[9] ERA's 2016 report, "The Effects of Performance-Based School Closure and Charter Takeover on Student Performance," stated, "If policymakers can identify and intervene in the lowest performing schools (however they choose to define it), and ensure that students will end up in better schools afterward, then the evidence here suggests that school closure and takeover can have large positive effects and be a meaningful contributor to school improvement efforts."[10]

A new University of Colorado study released in September 2024 on the Denver reform "era" (2008-2019) found that most students who left closed Denver schools and attended new ones saw their test scores go up, with greater gains for English learners and students with disabilities.[11] Student achievement also went up districtwide, which study authors attribute to years-long efforts to give school leaders more autonomy, hold them accountable for results, and make it easier for families to choose among a range of schools.[12]

Decades of empirical research supports what ERA found in 2016 and what University of Colorado learned last month: When thoughtfully implemented with strong accountability measures, innovative, autonomous public schools move the needle for thousands of students, especially children from low-income households in urban areas.

Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) has undertaken many local studies and, in 2023, released its third major national report in a series spread out over the past 30 years.[13] In that massive study, CREDO researchers assessed the performance of students at 6,200 charter schools in 29 states between 2014 and 2019, confirming that charter-school students, on average, outperformed their peers in demographically-matched traditional public schools.

There have also been studies that find a "spillover effect." In other words, when a system has a mix of different types of public schools, including public charter schools, student learning increases for everyone. The Thomas B. Fordham Institute, an education-policy think tank, in 2024 found that "...average test scores for all publicly enrolled students in a geographic region rise when the number of charter schools increases."[14]

Of course, test scores are not the sole means of measuring school quality. Another indicator is parent demand. Most parents, if given a choice and — importantly — are provided the information needed to make informed choices, will naturally do what is best for their children's education. Every school year, hundreds of thousands of families nationwide demand increased access to high-quality public school choices like charter schools, as evidenced by data from waiting lists for over-subscribed charter school seats. For example: In North Carolina alone, more than 85,000 students were on waiting lists for the 2024-25 school year.[15]

Minority parents nationally are the most enthusiastic charter school users. According to the NAPCS' Data Dashboard,[16] charter schools have consistently enrolled more students of color and students from low-income families than traditional district schools. Currently, seven out of 10 (70.7%) charter students are students of color compared to around half (53.8%) of district students, with six out of 10 charter students receiving free and reduced lunch compared to half (50.3%) in district schools.[17] An opinion poll released in May 2024 by Democrats for Education Reform found that 77% of parents, including 80% of Black and 71% of Hispanic parents, had a favorable view of public charter schools.[18]

The student performance data in this new report adds an important dimension to the growing body of research highlighting the superior performance benefits of growing well-designed portfolio systems that include a mix of both traditional and charter public schools.

Importantly, this analysis looks at correlation, not causation. There are many theories about the cause of this spillover effect. Our findings add credence to the long-stated supposition that public charter schools create a competitive dynamic that compels traditional district schools to upgrade their teaching and learning to maintain enrollment,[19] so that conditions improve for all children. Another common explanation, as charter schools uncover better ways of motivating learning, other schools in that same geography then adopt those innovative practices. Or, an increase in school options to make it more common for parents to find a school that is the optimum fit for unlocking their child's potential.

While more research on these theories is required, the existing evidence of positive spillover effects bolsters the case for making public school choice a key element of a national policy. We call on the nation's elected leaders to embrace policies aimed at expanding high-quality autonomous schools so that more cities can strive for the gains we describe here.

The report concludes with recommendations for further research into why increased public school choice lifts school quality and how cities that currently have even a small share of public charter school students can strengthen their gap-narrowing capacity.

KEY FINDINGS

The major findings of this report are as follows:

1. Over the last decade, cities that have aggressively expanded high-quality public school choices available to students have seen a true rising tide: Low-income students across these cities — whether they attend a public charter or district-operated school — have started to catch up to statewide student performance levels.

2. This is particularly true when at least one-third of a city's students are enrolled in a public charter school or charter-like school: Outcomes improve citywide over time.

3. In the 10 U.S. cities serving majority low-income students with at least one-third enrolled in charter schools, low-income students citywide have made meaningful progress toward achieving on par with students statewide.

THE URBAN SCHOOL CHALLENGE

In nearly every large U.S. city, a significant majority of children live in economically disadvantaged households, as measured by the percentage who qualify for a free or reduced-price school lunch (FRL).[20] FRL eligibility is the method by which the U.S. Department of Education measures the number of low-income students in a given school district.

In urban school districts with majority FRL-eligible students, academic performance typically lags significantly behind statewide averages. In 1996, a National Center for Education Statistics study, "Urban Schools The Challenge of Location and Poverty," found that "Students from urban public schools have less favorable outcomes on most of the areas examined, compared with students attending public schools elsewhere."[21]

This unfortunate fact remains true today, as measured by the biannual National Assessment of Educational Progress (*a.k.a*, the "Nation's Report Card"), most recently administered in 2022.[22]

The strong correlation between urbanicity, high poverty rates and low achievement means that students most in need of high-quality schools can never hope to catch up to their wealthier peers. As a result, children from low-income urban households are predestined to severe disadvantages when it comes to accessing key pathways to economic opportunity in adulthood.[23]

There have been decades of well-intentioned attempts to meaningfully improve urban schools, but most have failed.[24] Since 1970, 17-year-olds' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have barely budged — except on the first NAEP following the pandemic-era school closures, when they plummeted.[25] Too many reform efforts have run headlong into the limits of old, centralized systems: teachers who cannot be fired because of tenure; principals who cannot hire the teachers they want or control their school budgets, because those decisions are controlled by a central office; and districts that are too politically captive of unionized employees to close weak schools and replace them with something better.[26]

Exceptions to this pattern are typically short-term changes driven by a specific transformational leader[27] willing to embrace a fundamentally new model for organizing a school district.[28] Unfortunately, the positive results don't last much beyond the average five-year tenure of big-city school superintendents,[29] unless a majority of local stakeholders are willing to embrace and sustain a fundamentally new model for organizing a school district.[30] And, in an era when political leaders with the loudest megaphones engage in culture wars or pay scant attention to public education quality[31] — or the lack thereof — it's clear the government is not sending the cavalry anytime soon.[32]

After nearly four decades of efforts to improve and reform America's schools,[33] policymakers and civic leaders face a critical question: Is it actually possible to create true, lasting transformation that changes outcomes for public school students from low-income backgrounds?

There's good news: New evidence shows that it is. Over the last decade, cities that have aggressively expanded high-quality public school choices available to students have seen a true rising tide: Low-income students across these cities — whether they attend a public charter or district-operated school — have started to catch up to statewide student performance levels. This particular opportunity gap has begun to close.[34]

This first-of-its-kind analysis examines student performance data from cities across the country where a majority of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and where at least a third of students now attend a public charter or charter-like autonomous school.

WHAT ARE CHARTER-LIKE SCHOOLS?

"Charter-like schools" are autonomous schools exempt from the same district regulations public charter schools are exempt from, either in blanket form or by a waiver request. Most are operated by nonprofits under multi-year performance contracts with the district, and many occupy district buildings. If a nonprofit fails to fulfill the terms of its contract, the district can terminate it or refuse to renew it, but otherwise, it cannot interfere with the autonomies spelled out in the performance agreement negotiated by the parties. Charter-like schools are known by various names — most commonly, innovation, renaissance, or pilot schools — depending on location.[35]

The data in this report is an analysis of average standardized test scores from third through eighth grades, because these are the tested grades mandated by the federal Every Student Succeeds Act that allow the best cross-state comparison.

While one-third is not a guaranteed or proven tipping point, it is true that in every case where charter schools reached or exceeded that scale, academic growth rose across the entire city for all of a city's low-income students.

These results belie claims by charter school opponents that charter school growth ends up hurting those students remaining in traditional direct-run district schools.[36] In fact, the opposite happens: Students in low-income urban communities start catching up with the performance levels of all students statewide, regardless of the type of school they attend.

The strongest evidence of citywide academic transformation comes from New Orleans. The evolution of New Orleans' public school system, where nearly every student has attended a public charter school since 2005, has been studied many times since reforms began after Hurricane Katrina decimated the city's existing school system. Tulane University's Education Research Alliance (ERA), headed by Tulane Professor of Economics and Schlieder Foundation Chair in Public Education, Douglas N. Harris, is considered the foremost expert on New Orleans' experiment with (until this school year) a 100% charter school public education system.

ERA has produced a plethora of studies on the impact of chartering in New Orleans, including one that found high school graduation increased by 16-20 percentage points, going from close to the bottom of the state to nearly matching Louisiana's statewide average.[37] From 2005 to 2014, students in New Orleans improved their overall proficiency rate by 10 points relative to all students statewide and therefore closed 77% of the gap between city-level student performance and the Louisiana average.[38]

PPI has also taken a close look at what public school choice has wrought in NOLA.[39] For this reason, and because New Orleans dramatically increased its charter share more than a decade before most other cities, before the years analyzed in this study (2011-2023), we do not include it in this analysis of more typical cities.

Rather, we extend our inquiry to all 10 of the cities where high-quality public charter and charter-like school options available to families have reached critical mass, although none have yet replicated New Orleans' near 100% scale.

Crucially, this analysis examines *all* low-income students in these 10 cities — not just those attending public charter schools or charter-like public schools. This initial look confirms what other studies have seen: These school systems are creating a "rising tide" effect for all students.[40]

In all of these 10 cities, the data show that in the last decade (school years 2010-2011 through 2022-2023), low-income urban students closed the gap with statewide test score averages by 25-40%.

This raises an obvious question: How does this progress compare to cities where fewer than a third of students attend public charter schools or charter-like schools? An initial comparison with other cities — where data is available — indicates that the more access students have to public charters and similar schools of choice, the higher the performance gains of all urban students. Conversely, in cities with fewer charter schools, outcomes appear to be more stagnant over time compared to statewide results.[41]

PPI believes more comprehensive research is warranted to examine the correlation between public charter school share and citywide improvement and to validate the causes of the performance gains observed here.

THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE

As stated, this analysis examines U.S. cities with more than one-third of students enrolled in bricks-and-mortar charter or charter-like schools. It specifically focuses on the 10 of these cities that enroll more than 15,000 K-12 students and where more than half of students come from low-income households.[42] Over the last decade, low-income students in 100% of cities meeting these criteria have made meaningful progress toward achieving on par with students statewide.

In every one of these cities, students have significantly closed the gap in outcomes between low-income students and all students statewide between 2010-11 and 2022-23. Low-income students in four cities grew in proficiency by more than 10 points on a 100-point Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) scale, where the state average is represented at 50 points.[43]

Normalizing proficiency creates a consistent scale measured in NCE points. This allows us to make comparisons between states that use different standardized assessments to measure student learning — and even across years where the tests were changed. The proficiency measure used here is a composite of reading and math data that comes from state standardized testing for grades 3-8, again to ensure that we are able to effectively compare across states.

FIGURE 1: THE MORE A CITY HAS GROWN PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, THE MORE THAT CITY HAS CLOSED THE GAP IN OUTCOMES BETWEEN LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND ALL STUDENTS STATEWIDE

Enrollment share in public charter and charter-like public schools for each city, with how much (in points and percentages) cities have closed performance gaps between low-income students and all students statewide between 2010-11 and 2022-23.

STATE	SCHOOL DISTRICT	ENROLLMENT SHARE IN 2023	GAP CLOSURE (PROFICIENCY POINTS)	GAP CLOSURE (PERCENT)
NJ	Camden	68%	21.2	42%
IN	Indianapolis	58%	8.1	23%*
MO	Kansas City	46%	11.4	31%
D.C.	D.C.	45%	2.6	38%**
MI	Detroit	41%	2.9	9%*
MO	St. Louis	39%	12.3	30%
PA	Philadelphia	37%	4.8	18%
OH	Dayton	37%	4.9	13%
NJ	Newark	35%	11	45%
MN	St. Paul	33%	4.7	12%*

** Data disaggregated by student population was not available in Indiana for the full time period (2011-2023), so 23% represents how much Indianapolis closed the performance gap between the city's low-income students and all students statewide between 2014-2023. When looking more broadly at all students in Indianapolis (regardless of household income) from 2011-2023, they closed 34% of the gap, or 11.7 points. Data disaggregated by student population was not available in Michigan or Minnesota at the time of collection for the full time period (2011-2023), so these represent the gap closure from 2016-2023.*

*** We follow a different process for the District of Columbia, which lacks a natural "state average" for the sake of comparison. Here, we use NAEP data, which is already standardized and so does not need to be adjusted using the NCE process described above. We then created an aggregate of Maryland and Virginia to serve as a comparison "state," and then scaled the NAEP scores for DC and the MD/VA aggregate so that they would be on the same scale as the rest of cities and states.*

It's worth noting that while the data demonstrates majority low-income cities with larger-than-typical public charter school enrollment are making progress in catching up to statewide averages, proficiency may still be objectively low. Proficiency typically assesses students' mastery of a subject or lesson at a moment in time, usually measured against a statewide standard or other accepted benchmark.[44] Improvement over time, on the other hand, demonstrates student growth.[45] Proficiency achievement gaps between low-income students and their wealthier peers are stubborn and often seem impossible to erase.[46] If a vast majority of geographically and culturally diverse cities are

demonstrating growth against state averages while scaling up public school choice, researchers should study this correlation across cities with a range of charter share to validate the finding that increasing share improves student outcomes.

FIGURE 2: CHARTER ENROLLMENT GROWTH NARROWS LOW-INCOME URBAN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GAP WITH THE STATE AVERAGE

Change in academic performance averages of cities' low-income students relative to statewide performance averages from 2011-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points" in U.S. cities with at least 15,000 K-12 students, where at least 50% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, and where at least 33% of students are enrolled in public charter and/or charter-like schools

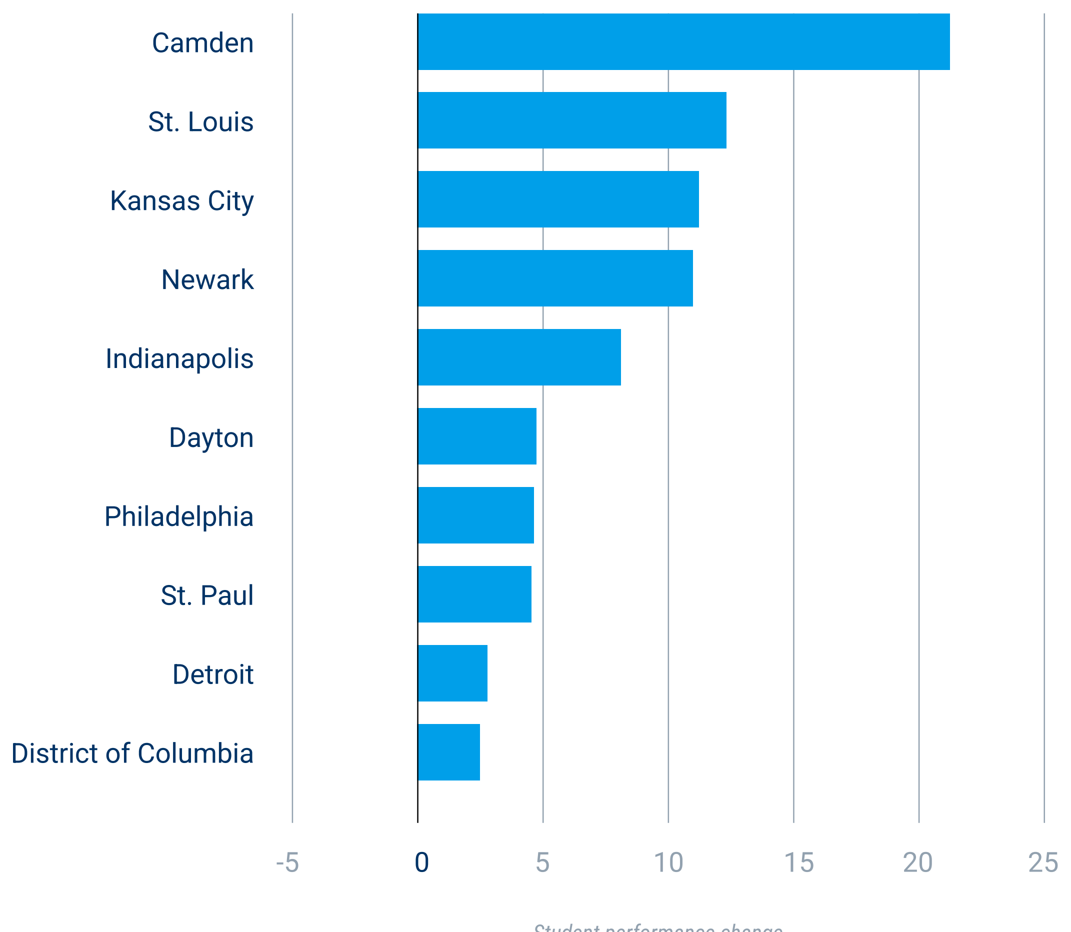


FIGURE 3: HIGH CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT SHRINKS LOW-INCOME URBAN STUDENT PERFORMANCE GAP WITH THE STATE AVERAGE

Closure of performance gap between cities' low-income students and all students statewide from 2011-2023, plotted against the percentage of a city's public school students enrolled in charter schools in 2023.

Note: For New Orleans, gap closure is measured from 2005-2014 in order to align with the timing of its charter school expansion. Additionally, the New Orleans analysis looked at the performance of all students instead of low-income students.

Legend: **Trend Line**

New Orleans
Newark
Camden
District of Columbia
Kansas City
St. Louis
Indianapolis
Philadelphia
St. Paul
Detroit
Dayton

80
60
40
20
0
-20

0
20
40
60
80
100

Percent of gap closed

Percent of students in public charter schools

FIGURE 4: CITIES WITH ONE-THIRD CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT SEE LOW-INCOME STUDENTS CATCH UP TO STATEWIDE PERFORMANCE LEVELS

Size and direction of change in academic performance of cities' low-income students relative to statewide performance from 2011-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points"

Time: Baseline (2011) End (2023)

State Average

50

0

Student proficiency change

Percent of Students Enrolled in Charter Schools

St. Paul
Newark
Dayton
Philadelphia
St. Louis
Detroit
District of Columbia
Kansas City
Indianapolis
Camden

Two cities stand out as exemplars for the growth of public charter enrollment yielding continued improvements for low-income students citywide: Camden, N.J., and Indianapolis, Ind.

In Camden, N.J., citywide proficiency among low-income students increased 21 points relative to all students statewide over the last 12 years. That amounts to closing 42% of the gap between low-income Camden students and the New Jersey statewide average. Looking more specifically at traditional district schools, low-income students closed 35% of the gap during the same window.

FIGURE 5: IN CAMDEN, STATE AND LOCAL LEADERS ACTED TO INCREASE ACCESS TO PUBLIC CHARTER AND CHARTER-LIKE SCHOOLS

Percentage of Camden public school students enrolled in charter schools over time

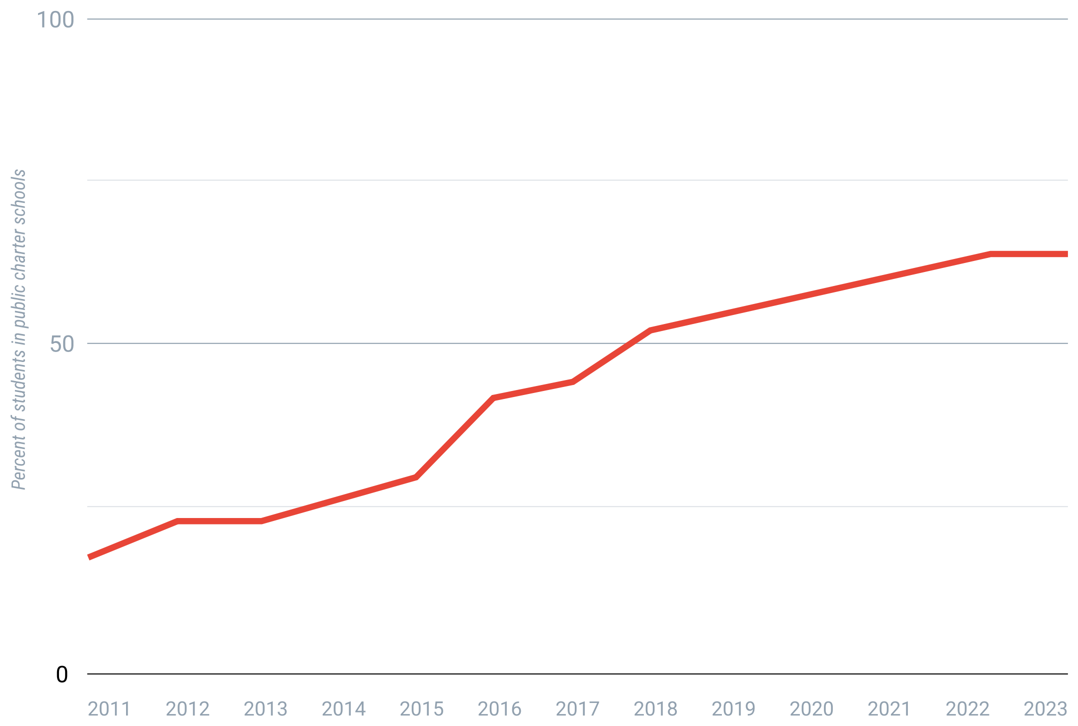


FIGURE 6: CAMDEN NARROWS PERFORMANCE GAP BETWEEN LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND ALL NEW JERSEY STUDENTS

Change in academic performance of Camden's low-income students relative to statewide performance from 2011-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points." Shading depicts the performance gap between low-income Camden students and all New Jersey students.

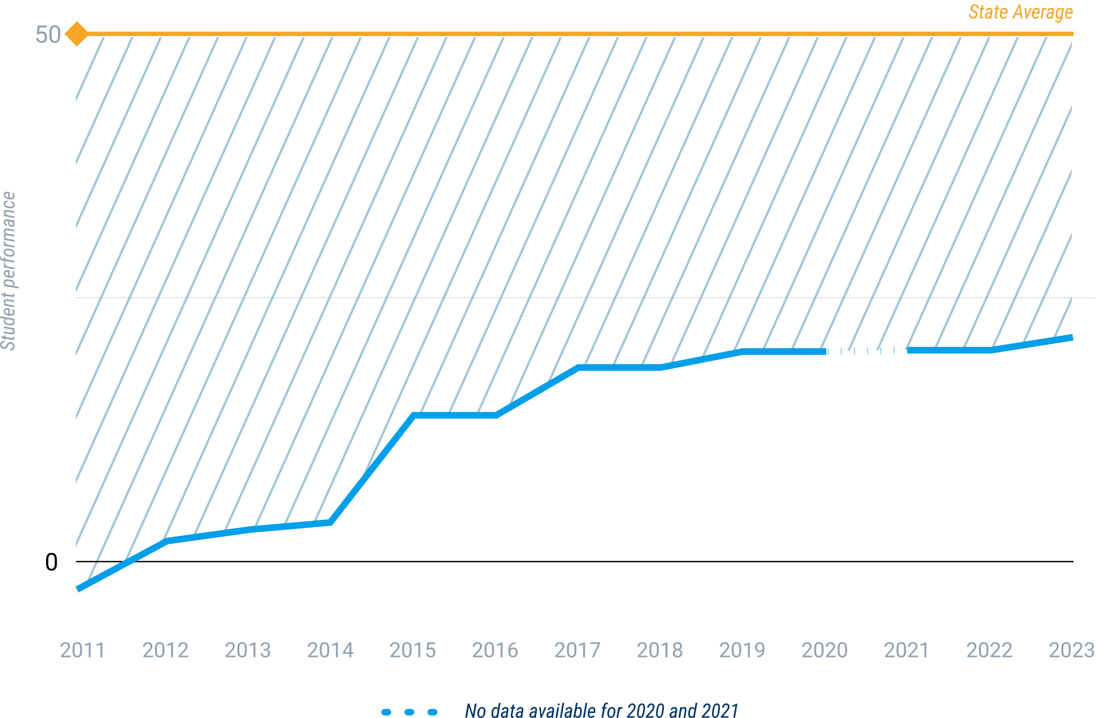
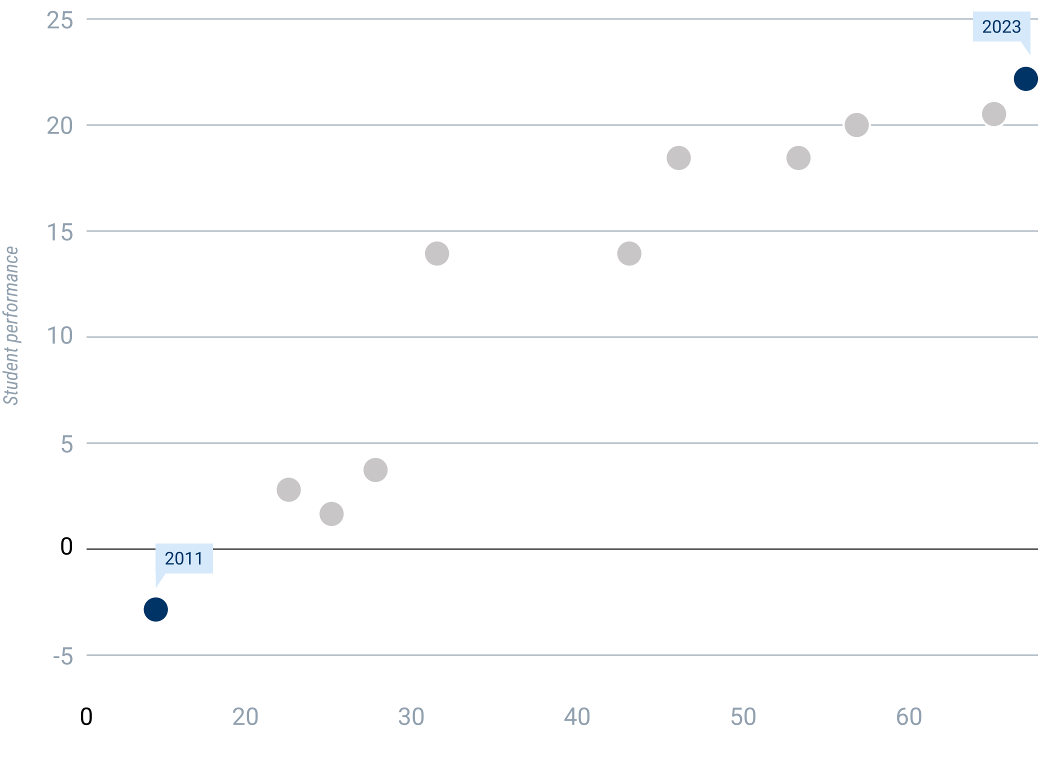


FIGURE 7: INCREASED CHARTER ENROLLMENT IN CAMDEN BOOSTS LOW-INCOME STUDENT PROGRESS TOWARD STATEWIDE PERFORMANCE LEVELS

Academic performance of Camden's low-income students relative to statewide performance from 2011-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points," plotted against the percentage of the city's public school students enrolled in charter schools over time.

Note: The years 2020 and 2021 are not represented, as there is no testing data from those years due to COVID.



CASE STUDY: CAMDEN'S URBAN HOPE RENAISSANCE SCHOOLS

THE GREATEST NEED: BIGGEST IMPROVEMENT

It is gratifying that Camden, N.J. saw the largest proficiency point increase amongst the cities analyzed for this report, because it started significantly further behind the others. (figure 3). For years known as the "poorest city in America," perhaps nowhere in the U.S. were children more academically in need — or public schools more overripe — for meaningful improvement.

> **Camden is proving that slow and steady might just win the race. Students citywide have made a remarkably consistent — if incremental — climb year after year for more than a decade.**

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when low-income students lost significant academic ground in cities nationwide, Camden's outcomes relative to the state of New Jersey slipped only a single point.

In spite of an established local public charter school sector, Camden City School District (CCSD) in 2011 had nowhere to go but up. As originally reported in 2016 by The 74 Million:

> **"The district's poverty and trauma — Governor Chris Christie called it a "human catastrophe" — translated into low performance on every marker of student achievement. In 2012, 23 of 26 Camden schools — 90% — performed in the lowest-achieving 5% in the state and included the three worst performers. Its four-year graduation rate in 2012 was 49% — compared to 86% statewide. Fewer than 20% (of students) could read at grade level and only 30% were at grade level in math."[47]**

Two seminal events started Camden on a path to improve outcomes for the city's long-struggling children.

On March 25, 2013, then-Governor Christie announced that the State Board of education was taking over the CCSD, consolidating authority at the state level and casting the locally-elected school board into an advisory role. Most state takeovers of school districts don't improve outcomes, as reported by The 74 Million education magazine, in its coverage of a national study from Brown University, which analyzed state takeovers of school districts from 2011-2016.[48] The reason is that most state takeovers don't shift to a charter and choice strategy; they stick with district-operated schools.

Under transformational new leadership, Camden was about to buck the trend.

State-appointed Superintendent Paymon Rouhanifard took the reins at CCSD in August 2013. Using state incentives provided by a 2012 New Jersey statute called the "Urban Hope Act," Rouhanifard built on an existing but fledgling effort to transform the district's lowest-performing schools into "renaissance schools."[49]

Renaissance schools are charter-like schools that are independently operated by an education nonprofit with a good track record. Usually, the nonprofit is an established charter school network. In Camden, KIPP, Uncommon Schools, and Mastery Schools (which has a large footprint just across the river from Camden in Philadelphia) were selected to run the city's renaissance schools.

Like all public charter schools, renaissance schools are free public schools. Unlike typical public charter schools, which are open to all — required by law to accept any student in the district, or even the region — Camden's renaissance schools are required to enroll the same neighborhood students who originally attended the failing traditional schools being replaced. If seats remain open after the local catchment area is fully enrolled, renaissance schools can open their doors districtwide.

One of Camden's first renaissance schools to open was Camden Prep, operated by Uncommon Schools. After educating students in a Baptist church during its first year of operation, Uncommon Schools in 2015 became one of five nonprofit public charter schools that CCSD selected as partners to transform chronically underperforming district schools in an effort to dramatically improve student outcomes. Virtually overnight, CCSD's Henry L. Bonsall school became Uncommon Schools' Camden Prep.

Maurquay Moody was starting fourth grade at Bonsall when it reopened as Camden Prep. One initial difference: At Camden Prep all of the classrooms were named after a college. Maurquay's classroom was "The College of New Jersey" (TCNJ) and his cohort adopted TCNJ mascot, the Lions, for the duration of their Camden Prep careers.

In August 2024, Maurquay began his freshman year at TCNJ. At Camden Prep's college signing day celebration, his proud mother shared a short video that left nary a dry eye in the house.[50] In it, his mother declared, "In fourth grade, you were a The College of New Jersey cub, but now you will be a lion there!"

Maurqay Moody

"The teachers at Bonsall weren't bad, but they didn't assign homework, and when school was over, they just left," Maurquay remembered. "Camden Prep is more organized, but it came down to teachers helping — really going out of their way. For example, I had Mr. Ritchie for math since my freshman year; I do not like math whatsoever, but I love Mr. Ritchie."

Despite his contempt for math, Maurquay took — and passed — many Advanced Placement (AP) courses and completed a leadership internship with the American Bankers Association. "I became a certified bank teller at 17, and I also took a course at the Federal Reserve in Philadelphia," he proudly recounted.

As a fourth grader, Maurquay had worried that the big changes at his school meant he would lose friends and the community he was accustomed to. In fact, the opposite occurred.

"Camden Prep is a family," he said. "My peers today, I have been with since 2014. We've had sleepovers, I know their parents, and because we are a minority community, it helped us to share our experiences at school."

Around the time the state took over CCSD, violent crime in Camden was the highest in the nation among cities its size — 55% higher than the next most violent city.[51] Its murder rate was nearly twice as high as any other city its size. On a per-capita basis, ". . . it put us somewhere between Honduras and Somalia," said then-Police Chief J. Scott Thomson.[52] An estimated 175 open-air drug markets were in operation, moving a quarter of a billion dollars in dope every year.[53]

It's not lost on Maurquay that Camden Prep saved his mom a lot of worry over the years. "Remember, my mom was working, sometimes nights, sometimes she would get off late — she felt better that I was always in Camden Prep's afterschool programs, somewhere safe, in an environment she could trust."

Now, he is a first-generation college student, and he says his mom and dad tell him every day how proud they are. "It's not necessary, but I appreciate the clarification," he said.

He is attending TCNJ with all costs paid through the state's Educational Opportunity Fund, which provides additional financial support for New Jersey students to attend an institution of higher education in New Jersey. The fund is designed to meet Maurquay's full cost to attend TCNJ, including on-campus residency.

As for Paymon Rouhanifard, he ultimately opened seven renaissance schools — as well as creating new positions in all district schools, including family-focused staff and teachers devoted to social and emotional learning[54] — before departing the district at the end of the 2018 school year. His legacy includes a legion of success stories like Maurquay's. Rouhanifard's deputy superintendent, Katrina T. McCombs, took over where he left off and has kept the momentum going. In 2018, she introduced a new strategic plan for traditional district schools, titled "Putting Students First."[55] It emphasizes accelerating achievement for every student, putting high-quality teachers in every classroom, and focusing on school safety, among other initiatives.

In 2024, the Camden Education Fund reported,

> **"Camden has created one of the most innovative school systems in our region over the last 10 years, with the combination of traditional district, renaissance, and charter schools coming together to create an education system that is responsive to student and family needs.[56]**

Evidence of that can be seen in Camden's public school enrollment. Contrary to most public systems experiencing declines,[57] Camden has remained steady, with the renaissance schools seeing a 10% enrollment increase since the onset of the pandemic. A combination of state,[58] local and philanthropic[59] dollars totaling $600 million has been invested in new or renovated school facilities over the past decade.[60] Half of Camden's public school students now spend their days in modern buildings that were nearly unimaginable at the start of the reforms.

Everyone in Camden acknowledges that the city has much more work ahead. CCSD is still operating under state takeover. Four out of five students citywide are not reading at grade level.[61] Chronic absenteeism rates are unacceptable.[62] Budget shortfalls are worrisome[63]

Yet, it feels like Camden is finally turning the page after failing generations of public school

students. Local education stakeholders can see that the city's holistic approach is moving the needle, even in the wake of the pandemic, with Camden students citywide recovering lost learning at the same pace on average as students statewide.[64] It's becoming ever more established that the type of public school a student attends is irrelevant if the result is an improved, equitable, education ecosystem accessible to all city students.

Indianapolis is the second city that stands out as an exemplar for the growth of public charter enrollment yielding continued improvements for low-income students citywide.

In Indianapolis, citywide low-income student proficiency increased 8 points relative to all students statewide over the last nine years, closing 23% of the gap with Indiana. In that same timespan, low-income students attending traditional district schools closed 22% of the gap. Taking a slightly longer view — expansion of public charter schools began earlier in Indianapolis than in many other cities — all students in Indianapolis closed 34% of the gap over an 11-year period.

FIGURE 8: INDIANAPOLIS CHARTER AND DISTRICT LEADERS COLLABORATED TO INCREASE ACCESS TO PUBLIC CHARTER AND CHARTER-LIKE SCHOOLS

Percentage of Indianapolis public school students enrolled in charter schools over time

Note: The state of Indiana did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2014. Our analysis for this city therefore starts in 2014 rather than in 2011. which is our baseline for the other cities.

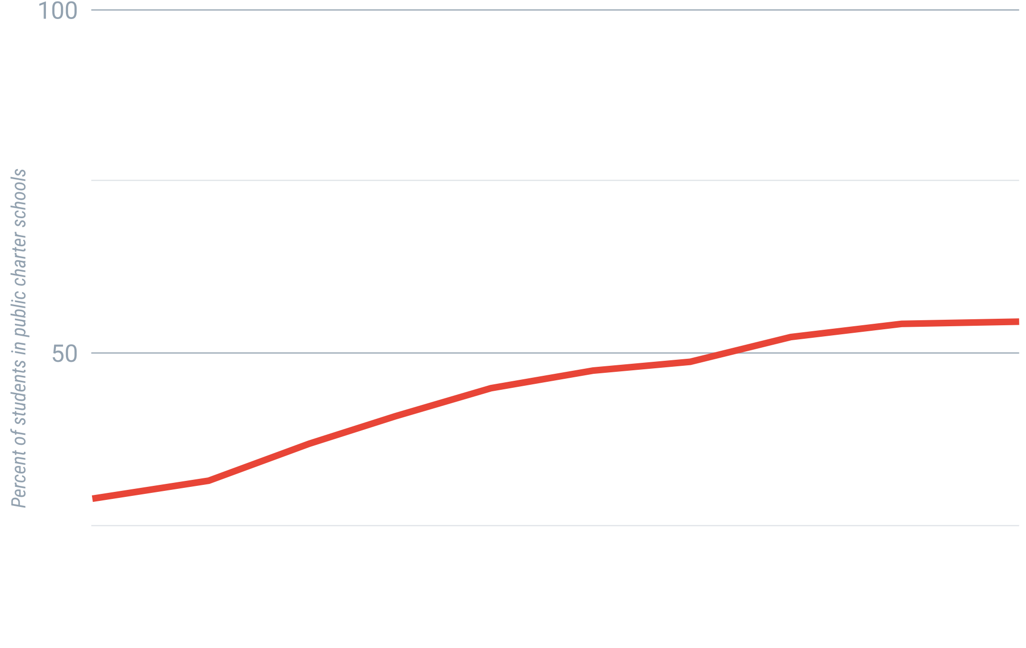


FIGURE 9: INDIANAPOLIS NARROWS PERFORMANCE GAP BETWEEN LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND ALL INDIANA STUDENTS

Change in academic performance of Indianapolis' low-income students relative to statewide performance from 2014-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points." Shading depicts the performance gap between low-income Indianapolis students and all Indiana students.

Note: The state of Indiana did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2014. Our analysis for this city starts in 2014 rather than in 2011, which is our baseline for the other cities.

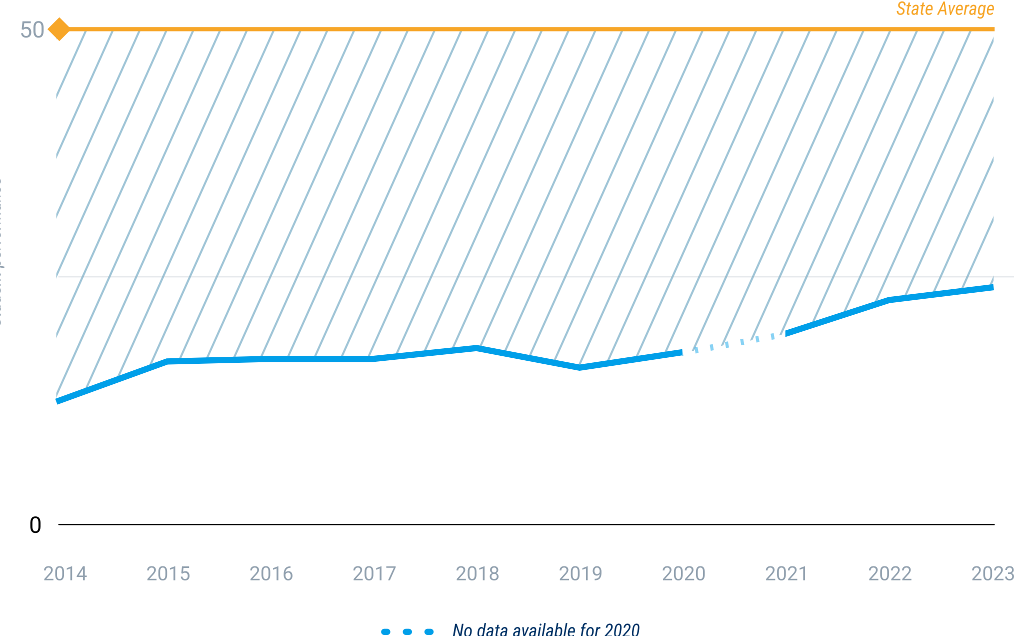
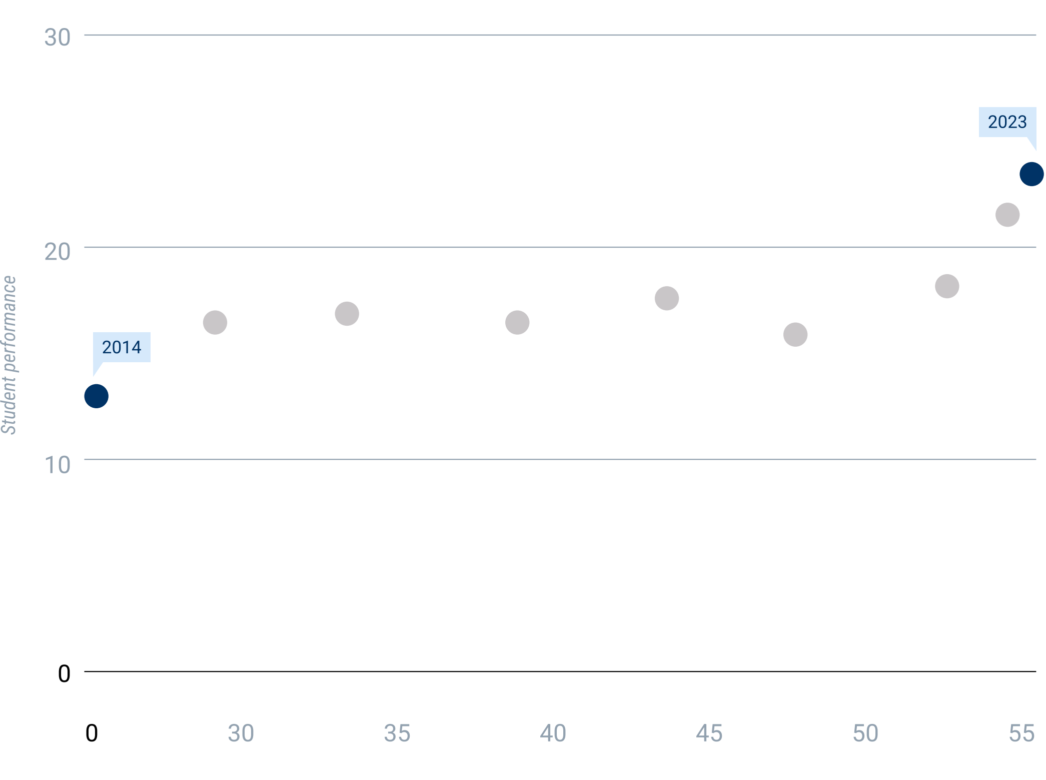


FIGURE 10: INCREASED CHARTER ENROLLMENT IN INDIANAPOLIS BOOSTS LOW-INCOME STUDENT PROGRESS TOWARD STATEWIDE PERFORMANCE LEVELS

Academic performance of Indianapolis' low-income students relative to statewide performance from 2014-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points," plotted against the percentage of the city's public school students enrolled in charter schools over time

Note: The state of Indiana did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2014. Our analysis for this city starts in 2014 rather than in 2011, which is our baseline for the other cities. The year 2020 is not represented, as there is no testing data available due to COVID.



CASE STUDY: INDIANAPOLIS TRIES A THIRD WAY
SUPERIOR DISTRICT–INDEPENDENT SECTOR COOPERATION

Not all state charter school laws are created equal. Periodically, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) measures each state's charter school law against a model — or "ideal" — charter school statute.[65] The NAPCS considers 21 components of a strong charter school law, which are weighted based on their importance to effective chartering. Elements include the transparency of the charter application and decision-making processes, mandatory performance-based contracts, equitable access to state and federal funding, automatic exemption from district regulations and collective bargaining agreements, a lack of caps on charter school numbers, and so on. The rankings change as states amend their charter school statutes, for better or for worse.

Charter schools in Indiana started with a bipartisan effort. In the late 1990s, Indianapolis was struggling to keep its middle class. Its Democratic mayor, Bart Peterson, knew that improved public schools were part of the solution, so he campaigned for a charter school law. It finally passed in 2001 with help from a Republican sponsor.[66]

For years Indiana has been ranked No. 1 for the quality of its charter school statute, so it's little surprise that Indianapolis is known for the generally high quality of its charter schools and has one of the largest charter enrollment shares analyzed for this report.

What is lesser known is Indianapolis' other autonomous nonprofit school model. Created by statute in 2014, "Innovation Network" (IN) schools are an important part of the Indianapolis Public Schools' (IPS) portfolio. As of the 2023-2024 school year, 58.7% of Indianapolis students attended a nontraditional IN or public charter school, while just 41.2% of students were enrolled in IPS' direct-run schools.[67] Of all 66 independent nonprofit schools in the city, 28 are INs.[68]

IN schools offer a "third way" between traditional district-operated schools and independent charters. In short, they combine the advantages of autonomous schools with the financial support and services IPS can provide. While charters operate on a performance contract with their authorizer, IN schools operate on performance contracts with the IPS school board. As such, there is a high level of cooperation between the district and the IN school because each party stands to gain when an IN school's success is realized. The IN school gets its contract renewed and continues to operate or even expand, while IPS benefits from improved student outcomes for state reporting purposes and increased bandwidth to devote to its remaining direct-run schools.

IPS' innovation network schools are the brainchild of a local education nonprofit, The Mind Trust, which in 2011 developed a strategy for the city's public schools to be more responsive to demands from the community that they become more innovative and increase the chance that every student has the opportunity to enroll in a great school.[69] It advocated that the mayor and city council appoint the superintendent and urged that, over time, all Indianapolis public schools be converted to "opportunity schools," which would receive autonomy in exchange for accountability and operate on a performance contract with the district.[70]

It wasn't until 2014, after reformers gained control over the IPS board of education and the state had taken over three IPS traditional schools, that the legislature codified The Mind Trust's vision. The new law allowed select Indiana school districts to partner with a carefully vetted nonprofit operator to help turn around struggling schools.[71]

What started as a school improvement strategy soon gained enormous popularity. High-performing IPS schools, seeking the autonomies enjoyed by IN schools, petitioned the district for the right to those same autonomies. Some charters, seeking supports and resources available from IPS, petitioned the district to allow them to join the district as an IN school.

Today, there are five pathways to becoming an IN school in Indianapolis.[72] The district created a Portfolio Office to support and liaise with the district's IN schools.[73] The Portfolio Office also acts as a resource for parents, ensuring they are aware of their choices and are connected to schools that meet their child's unique needs.

Over time there has been a profound culture change at IPS. Whether it is directly running a school or merely acting as a IN school's contracting partner, IPS considers every student in its jurisdiction as one of its own, regardless of where that student goes to school or how their school is governed.

One example of the type of intentional, mission-driven school choice now available in Indianapolis is Purdue Polytechnic High School (PPHS).[74] PPHS was born out of Purdue University's desire to increase diversity on its college campus.[75] With Purdue enrolling, on average, fewer than eight minority IPS graduates each year, its leaders were also frustrated by the educational inequities that were keeping local students of color from preparing for careers with Indiana's leading industries. For example, from 2014-18, IPS graduated approximately 6,400 students of color. During that five-year period, exactly 38 of them qualified for admission to Purdue University.

PPHS's founders worked with leaders from Purdue to create an innovative high school that would send more students of color to the university. "We agreed that the decades of tinkering around the edges of the one-size-fits-all high school was never going to work," co-founder Scott Bess said. "The numbers are proof. We needed to blow up the model altogether and completely start over."

PPHS's mission to create a pipeline of minority graduates accepted to Purdue required some chess-level strategizing. If PPHS merely operated as a public charter school, state law would've required PPHS to admit any student in Indiana who applied. But as an IPS innovation network school, PPHS could keep its charter and the autonomies that come with it, but IPS would have the right to limit applications to those who reside within IPS boundaries, so PPHS's enrollment would more likely mirror the district's demographics, which was the goal.[76]

Attracted by that mission, and the idea of a partnership with one of the most prestigious universities in the state, IPS gave Purdue and Bess carte blanche, allowing the new charter school to join the district as an innovation school free from district mandates. PPHS's independent board of directors — not the district — designed an entirely new kind of high school that guarantees admission to Purdue for students who perform well.

As a result, Purdue accepted 39 PPHS class of 2022 seniors, and 41 class of 2023 seniors, most of whom are students of color. That's more each year than the 38 accepted from 2014-2018!

PPHS CEO Keeanna Warren says that's what it looks like when a school is faithful to its mission of empowering students to create the future they envision, with the number one priority being to prepare students for the academic rigors of universities like Purdue. "We are passionate about making sure we have the absolute best adults in front of students every day," she told WISH-TV.[77] "And I stand by that."

Increased college enrollment is one measure of a school's success, but there are others. The Indiana Department of Education periodically releases reports on the earnings of high school graduates five years post-graduation. Another strong Indianapolis IN school, Christel House Indianapolis (CHI), was delighted to learn in April that its alumni are the second-highest income earners statewide, and the top among Marion County public schools serving a high percentage of students from low-income backgrounds.[78]

Zicri Williams, a 2017 Christel House alumna, could be a poster child for the type of student the school serves and the success they achieve. She was excited to share her story for this report, describing her journey from an undocumented child with parents who spoke no English, to a successful executive in her own right. What she spoke most passionately about is her parents' pride in her college diploma.

Zicri's parents enrolled her in CHI beginning in third grade. When it came time to think about college, the school's support was invaluable, as her parents lacked the capacity to help her navigate challenging application and financial aid processes. More than once, she was eager to apply for a scholarship she was confident she could win, only to have her hopes dashed when her undocumented status was disqualifying. Add to that her inability to get a driver's license to get herself to college, or a bank account to deposit meager college savings… she gave up.

"It was all down the drain. As much as I wanted it, as much as my parents wanted it for me, I just knew it wasn't for me," Zicri said.

But her CHI counselor wouldn't give up. She kept connecting Zicri to programs and internships to help advance her cause as college material. "Finally, she told me, 'Just apply to Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) and see what happens,'" Zicri said.

IUPUI accepted Zicri. CHI helped with tuition and books. Because her parents insisted on working double time to help pay her way, Zicri doubled her efforts, too, graduating in just three years.

Zicri Williams

Her parents, as she put it, “Were ecstatic.”

Now, she has her green card, she’s married, and she has a career she loves. As the executive director of Indiana Latino Expo,[79] she is busy staging three signature events each year that introduce all kinds of resources to the Hispanic community and to new arrivals.

“I just see myself here,” she said. “I hope I can continually create new programs and provide the types of resources that my parents needed but didn’t have, whether it’s education, breast cancer screening, language classes — I hope I am giving back to my community.”

Reflecting on the impact CHI had on her life, she observed, “I work with a ton of schools now, and they tell me about the good they hear coming out of certain schools in Indianapolis. They say, ‘These kids are having better outcomes after graduation — what are they doing?’ And they want to mimic that.”

Jeff Edge, leader of one of PPHS’s micro campuses, says that’s tough to do in a traditional district.[80] “Being part of a great big system is so overwhelming — sometimes in a good way because being part of this big team can feel rewarding, but there are issues,” he said. “The amount of transformational groundbreaking work is limited when it’s the same thing, the same lesson plans handed to you — the repetition is monotonous, for teachers and kids. After 11 years in the classroom, I am doing my best work now in a charter school, where I can build projects around my kids. I can bring them ‘real world’ scenarios tailored to their learning needs.”

Jeff Edge

To learn more about innovation school best practices and model legislation for creating them, please see PPI’s report, “The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools.”[81]

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Camden and Indianapolis are two very different cities. With regard to education reform, what they have in common is innovative public school officials who have adopted a more integrative and collaborative approach to charter schools. While school district leaders in some cities view charters as a competitive threat, officials in Indianapolis and Camden have to a greater extent embraced charter and charter-like models as part of a diverse and holistic approach to ensuring every family has access to a school that meets their child's needs.

For illustrative purposes, an unempirical sample of cities with varying percentages of students enrolled in charter or charter-like schools finds a relationship between the proportion of a city’s enrollment and its progress toward closing

performance gaps between low-income students and all students statewide. The scatterplot below examines how each city's low-income students performed relative to their state over the last 12 years (2010-11 through 2022-23) compared to the share of students attending a charter school. The greater a city's public charter enrollment, the more that city shrank the gap in outcomes between low-income students and all students statewide. As described in the "Additional Research" section, we think this promising initial analysis warrants further research.

FIGURE 11: CITIES WITH HIGHER CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT SHRINK LOW-INCOME STUDENTS PERFORMANCE GAP WITH THE STATE AVERAGE

Change in academic performance of cities' low-income students relative to statewide performance from 2011-2023 measured in Normalized Curve Equivalent (NCE) proficiency "points," plotted against the percentage of a city's public school students enrolled in charter schools in 2023

Note: For New Orleans, gap closure is measured from 2005-2014 in order to align with the timing of its charter school expansion. Additionally, the New Orleans analysis looked at the performance of all students instead of low-income students.

Legend: Trend Line

80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
-10
-20
-30

Percent of gap closed

New Orleans
Newark
District of Columbia
Providence
St. Louis
Kansas City
Camden
Indianapolis
Philadelphia
St. Paul
Detroit
Boston
Dayton
Richmond
Chicago
Springfield
Fort Wayne

0
20
40
60
80
100

Percent of students in public charter schools

Cities where low-income students have made the most progress appear to have done so, at least in part, because charter schools prompted traditional districts to change things for the better. Indianapolis is a great example of this. In the 1960s IPS had more than 100,000 students; by 2016, it was down to about 29,000. The city's charters educated about 14,000 students, nearly a third of all public school students in the district in 2016-17.[82] If IPS hadn't made significant changes, such as embracing charter-like innovation schools, it likely would have kept shrinking. In 2023-2024, IPS enrolled just over 32,000 students in direct-run and INS schools combined,[83] what it calls its "family of schools"[84] The district's raw student numbers were larger than in 2016-2017, despite enrolling a smaller share of the city's students in 2023 — around 52% versus around two-thirds in 2016-2017.

Indianapolis is also an excellent example of high-quality charter authorizing. When Indiana passed its charter school law, it became the first state in the country to give authorizing authority to a city mayor.[85]

Then-Mayor of Indianapolis, Bart Peterson (2000-2008), a Democrat, put in place a rigorous process to approve charters. As reported by Osborne in his 2017 book, *"Reinventing America's Schools,"* mayoral authorizing has turned out to be a surprisingly stable and effective strategy, enduring through three mayors from both parties. The mayor's office is highly regarded as a charter authorizer, employing several governance and academic performance analysts.[86] It tracks 27 different performance measures on its schools, does qualitative evaluations, and has closed about 15 schools, often replacing them with a new school run by a stronger operator.[87] Over the years, it has rejected many more applications than it has accepted. Currently, charter schools authorized by the mayor serve about 18,000 students.[88]

While this analysis focuses on public charter school enrollment share, it must be noted that many cities realizing improved outcomes for low-income students have also implemented other complementary reforms. Aside from 33%+ charter enrollment, these highly innovative school systems have several things in common, including a focus on building innovative new school models tailored to respond to the specific needs of local families; robust school accountability systems that ensure the best schools grow while chronically low-performing schools either improve or have their management replaced — involuntarily if necessary — by more skilled school leadership; high-impact tutoring programs; improved support for classroom teachers; a corps of exceptional school leaders; and nonprofit leaders driving a shared citywide vision with a diverse coalition.

Charter schools and charter-like schools are a public school choice strategy. Yet, the presence of public charter schools in and of themselves does not necessarily guarantee a *competitive* school choice ecosystem designed to benefit all students, regardless of the type of school they attend. Universal enrollment systems that make it easy for parents to choose the schools that best suit their children and ensure funding follows students to their school of choice are two reforms that create the type of system where everyone has a more equal opportunity to win.

CASE STUDY: PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS IN KANSAS CITY
TWO CHARTER SCHOOLS, TWO TYPES OF SUCCESS

Executive Director Sean Stalling leads a Kansas City public charter high school that was previously an "alternative school." Since the 1970s, Delasalle Education Center was burdened by the negative stigma that comes with that label.[89] Now, Delasalle enrolls students who Stalling characterizes as being "brand new," while still serving a significant number of kids who have "been put out or dropped out," or who are over-age for their grade level and need to recover 2-3 additional credits each year (on top of a normal course load) in order to earn their diploma.

A few miles south of Delasalle, Superintendent Rebecca Gudde leads University Academy K-12 charter school, which has long been known as one of the "shining stars" in Kansas City's constellation of public charter schools. So strong is its reputation and so tight-knit is the University Academy community, the school is now serving children — and even grandchildren, not to mention cousins, nieces, and nephews — of some of its founding students.

Superintendent Rebecca Gudde

Both Stalling and Gudde come to the charter school sector, having previously worked in traditional school systems. Gudde taught and administered in rural schools in Texas and Missouri before landing in Kansas City. Stalling, the son and grandson of Chicago Public School teachers, cut his teeth in that vast district. He rose to the position of Southside High School Network Chief, overseeing 14,000 students before taking on Delasalle. Both Stalling and Gudde have great respect for traditional public schools. In fact, Stalling emphasizes that the Chicago Teachers Union has been a positive force in his life because it provides protection for teachers, including his family members.

> **"The school is now serving children — and even grandchildren, not to mention cousins, nieces, and nephews — of some of its founding students."**

However, both Stalling and Gudde recognize the value of the autonomy they now enjoy as leaders of independent public charter schools. Gudde said, "My board sets and entrusts me with very high expectations, then leaves me alone to run my school."

Stalling, with three types of students under one roof, notes that one-size-fits-all district curriculum and bell schedules can't easily be tailored to meet the needs of different subsets of students. The bedrock of Delasalle's personalized learning experience is found in real-world programs like internships and

Executive Director Sean Stalling

industry credentialing programs, along with dual enrollment in community college to prepare students for college or a career. Because he is free from district rules and bureaucracy, Stalling can allow his students to "slip" the class and bell schedule to earn needed extra credits by participating in internships or taking college courses, whereas the district's schedule would restrict those opportunities. He calls it refreshing to have the flexibility to "be able to do the thing that will work for my students," without having to appeal to central office bureaucrats for a waiver from district rules.

> **"One-size-fits-all district curriculum and bell schedules can't easily be tailored to meet the needs of different subsets of students."**

Stalling's strategy is getting results. Last year, Delasalle started with 64 seniors who were short of the credits they needed to graduate by the end of the school year. After a lot of hard work by both the school and the students, last spring, 62 of 64 earned the right to don their caps and gowns and walk across the graduation stage. Even more impressive, 40 of the 62 new graduates — 65% — were accepted into a two- or four-year college, while two more enlisted in the military. The college-bound graduates earned a combined total of $600,000 in scholarship awards.

"People simply would not believe that Delasalle, labeled as an alternative school, with the connotation that it handled the "throw away kids," could do this, but after years of building out this program, the class of 2024 proves our credit recovery system is working," Stallings said. "Our kids may be different but they are not deficient, so we had hope, their parents had hope, and they set a whole new tone for what we are doing as a school."

> **"Our kids may be different but they are not deficient, so we had hope, their parents had hope, and they set a whole new tone for what we are doing as a school."**

While their interviews were conducted separately, Gudde seemed to echo Stalling. "Our kids at University Academy are the same exact kids you could find anywhere in this district," she said. "The only difference here is they are afforded opportunity."

More specifically, Barnett and Shirley Helzberg of Helzberg Diamonds and Tom Block of tax preparer H&R Block, had a defined mission when they joined forces to help establish the public charter school. They wanted the school's low-income, African American, pre-K to 12 student population to have everything a private school would offer. Hence, the school has a theater where the Kansas City Symphony gives free performances for UA families. There are sleepover camps in middle school and opportunities to study abroad for high school juniors and seniors. The school is blanketed with a stunning — yet subtle — level of security. But overlaying all else is academic rigor.

Like Delasalle, UA also engages "in real-world learning" so students gain at least one "market value asset" (*a.k.a.,* a skill worthy of a paycheck), earn industry-recognized credentials, and complete a capstone project that involves devising solutions to a real-world problem. Perhaps most importantly, students must obtain four college acceptances by graduation. According to Gudde, UA class of 2024 had a 100% college acceptance rate and was offered roughly $215,000 per student in scholarship awards.

"I truly did not know what a charter school was when I set foot in the building," Gudde said. "What impressed me the most was the unwavering commitment to the students; that's my passion and I find it so rewarding."

As superintendent she demonstrates her commitment by being highly visible: walking the halls, popping into classrooms, and getting to know students. "These kids are no different, but as students of color in poverty, they need stability," she said. "They need to know, 'I will always show up for you, I'm here, and I'm always coming back.'"

And some of her students come back, as well. Bernadette Looney, a UA graduate who attended Harvard on scholarship, and then earned her master's at Stanford, surprised Gudde by asking to come back to UA to teach.[90] Gudde couldn't say "yes" fast enough.

"Bernadette is one of 10 or 11 siblings," she said. "Now, she teaches third grade under the principal who was her own second-grade teacher — she is the poster child for what we're trying to do."

Bernadette isn't the only one. Jeremiah, who is autistic, also graduated from University Academy. Now, he is a leader in the maintenance department. "He runs our entire HVAC system from his phone," Gudde marvels. "He is a product of a system that gave him a chance — imagine if all schools did that."

Staller is right there with Gudde. "We need to stop sorting kids and consciously serve all kids, and we do that at Delasalle using strong research-based practices," he said. "That's what marks the charter school experience, and we need to grow that in both district systems and charter schools."

> **"There's a misconception that charter schools aren't public schools, but they are."**

"There's a misconception that charter schools aren't public schools, but they are," said Staller. "We need to do everything in our power as charter schools to do right by teachers and gain their trust, but at the same time, the two sectors [district and charter] need to move to the middle, because we have more in common than we don't, and we all have the same hopes and aspirations for our kids."

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Several research studies provide additional support to these initial findings. To date, we've seen city results validated by three separate studies showing major breakthroughs in three cities: New Orleans,[91] Washington, D.C.,[92] and Denver[93] (which just missed the 33% charter school enrollment parameter for this study, even when counting its autonomous innovation zone schools).

In New Orleans, school reforms increased citywide student achievement, in addition to increasing graduation, college entry, and college completion rates. In Washington, D.C., school reforms that increased access to charter and charter-like schools substantially improved math and reading test scores. In Denver, increasing the percentage of students in charter and charter-like schools by 10 percentage points caused an increase in both reading and math scores and in graduation rates citywide. Broadly, the impact of these reforms improved student performance by a margin equivalent to students getting an additional year of learning.[94]

In 2023, Tulane University researchers published yet another study, this time in the *Journal of Public Economics*. It examined school district data from 1995 to 2016, analyzing the effects of charter schools on standardized tests and graduation rates, including the impact on students attending nearby public schools.[95] Its main finding was that districts growing charter schools' market share by 10% increased math and reading scores and high school graduation rates for all students, not just one particular student group. This outcome is partly attributable to the competitive effects of charter schools, including replacing underperforming traditional district schools with better-performing charter schools.

"Charter schooling has been arguably the most influential school reform effort of the past several decades," the authors concluded.[96]

David Osborne also contributed to this research with his 2016 reports on Denver, *"A 21st Century School System in the Mile High City*,[97] and "*An Educational Revolution in Indianapolis*,"[98] as well as his 2015 report on D.C., *"A Tale of Two Systems: Education Reform in Washington D.C."*[99]

This report's preliminary analysis, while exciting, admittedly has clear limitations. An important one: It does not exhaustingly examine student performance data from the long list of U.S. cities where *fewer* than a third of students attend charters. We think understanding achievement trends across all majority-low-income districts warrants further research. We are aware of some studies already underway and encourage other researchers to look at this further as well.

On our part, we still have much more to unpack and learn. We'd like to understand better:

- Do the gains observed in this analysis have a ceiling — is there a point at which improvement among low-income students will level off even as a city's charter enrollment continues growing?

- How can policymakers and school leaders best ensure academic gains measured on state achievement tests translate into improved life outcomes?
- Which specific elements of school choice growth and governance reforms have the biggest impact on student performance citywide?

The data presented here shows a correlation between charter school share and citywide academic growth; it doesn't reach the question of causation. A deeper inquiry into the mechanisms at work in high charter share districts seeing citywide student performance gains is a logical next step.

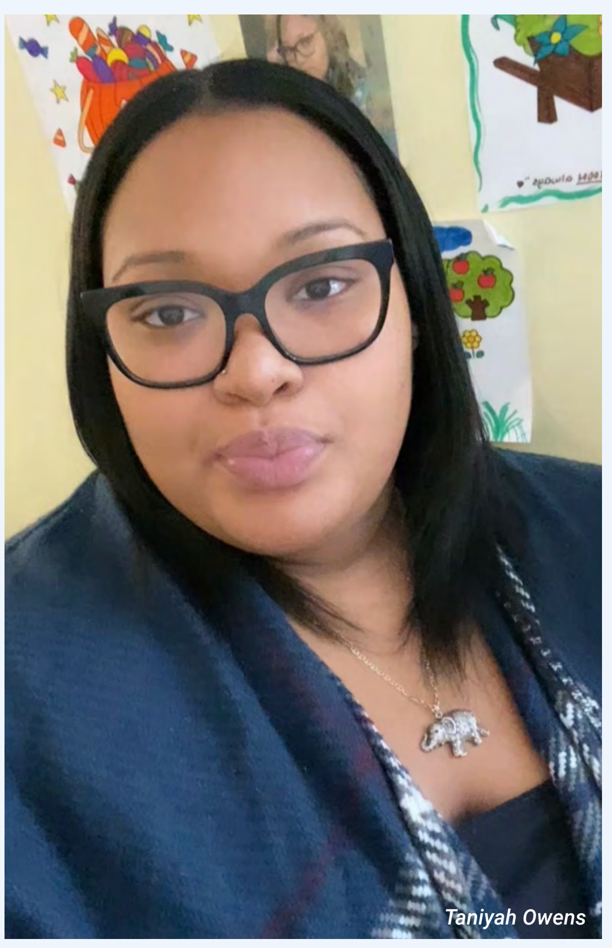
CASE STUDY: NEWARK'S AUTONOMOUS SCHOOLS

CHARTER SCHOOL SUCCESS SETTING AN EXAMPLE

Building on reforms begun in 2006, by 2018 Newark, New Jersey had successfully created a citywide system of schools where kids were learning more than they had during previous years of tumultuous reform efforts.

Long denied equitable access to good public schools, African American students in Newark in 2018 were four times more likely to attend a high-quality school, beating the state average than they were in 2006, according to the New Jersey Children's Foundation.[100] While 15,000 students were still enrolled in 25 schools with low growth and proficiency rates — well below the average for demographically similar cities and towns — Newark's citywide public school system climbed from the bottom to the top performance ranks of other high-poverty school districts in New Jersey. Test scores, graduation rates, and student growth rates improved at both traditional district and public charter schools, even with minor year-over-year fluctuations.

Taniyah Owens is one example of a Newark student who benefitted from the diversity of school models now available in that city. She says that she grew up in "a family that didn't really have it together." Primarily raised by her grandmother, Taniyah's mother gave birth to her at a young age, while her father was incarcerated for most of her childhood. She described her upbringing as "a lot of bouncing back and forth."



Taniyah Owens

It's no wonder Taniyah believes that people can't really understand what it's like for urban children, with the exception of educators who come from an urban background themselves. She says, "Some other teachers might try 'to get it,' but if they grew up with 'everything peaches and cream,' they just can't understand."

"In some cases," Taniyah continued, "it can seem like teachers are essentially telling urban students to 'suck it up' rather than to 'sit down' so we can have a conversation. It's a lot for them to try to relate to," she said.

Taniyah found the urban teachers who helped her thrive when her mother transferred her out of a traditional public school to Great Oaks Legacy Charter School in seventh grade. She is proud that she was part of Great Oaks' very first class ever. That's when her life, as she puts it, "Went from no college to all college."

Taniyah describes herself as always having been "all about my books," but when she arrived at Great Oaks, she had to work hard to make honor roll. Great Oaks provided field trips to tour colleges and staged "professional skills days" where students put on business attire and learned how to navigate job interviews and hone other soft skills.

Exposure to academic rigor, combined with Great Oaks' college-going culture helped Taniyah see herself, "for the first time ever," as actually going to college. And, with continuing support from Great Oaks, she is now a first-generation college graduate pursuing a master's degree in clinical social work. She's simultaneously serving in an administrative role as an AmeriCorps-sponsored fellow — right back at Great Oaks, working alongside some of the teachers she grew up with.

"When I was in a [traditional] public school, I was just thrown into the crowd; I had to make my own way. Once I got to Great Oaks, I had people in my corner to advocate for me, and as an only child, I found mentors who became like older siblings."

Taniyah has since encouraged those who she counts as her younger siblings — her cousins — to enroll in Great Oaks, but not all of them. Noting that the educational landscape is changing in Newark, she encouraged one cousin to enroll in Essex County Donald M. Payne Senior School of Technology, which opened in the city's West Ward in 2018. A selective-enrollment traditional public school serving a student population that is 98% minority and 83% economically disadvantaged,[101] the school offers robust programs in environmental science, robotics, music technology, and computers.

Taniyah summed it up, "I found myself motivating my cousin to go to Payne Tech, because it's new and spacious, and it's one of the schools that now want to be aligned and are synchronizing their learning material for students, like we've always experienced at Great Oaks."

Payne has a 91% four-year graduation rate, matches the state average in the number of students enrolling in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, and overperforms the state average in the number of students enrolled in college coursework during high school.[102] Named for New Jersey's first Black congressman, Payne Tech describes itself as "a catalyst jumpstarting young minds preparing for the future and energizing rebirth and growth in the community."[103]

CONCLUSION

The data analyzed in this study are conclusive: All 10 U.S. cities with 33% or higher enrollment in public charter and charter-like schools, like New Orleans with its 100% share, uniformly narrowed gaps in academic outcomes between low-income students and all students statewide over the past decade. The data further suggest that this gap-closure effect increases as local charter enrollment share increases.

As such, these findings may provide a clear policy prescription for improving outcomes in low-income urban communities that have long struggled with school improvement and substandard student achievement.

However, while the search to learn the true tipping point — if there is a single one — should certainly continue; there is no reason to wait. Places where politics makes it possible to grow charter school enrollment should certainly consider doing that, so that both traditional district students and public charter students are afforded at least the opportunity to begin to catch up to their statewide peers.

Cities that currently have a substantial share of public charter school students can strengthen their gap-narrowing capacity by:

- Adopting policies to further strengthen public charter schools. This could include advocacy for measures to narrow existing district–charter school funding gaps, removing enrollment caps, and lengthening high-performing charter school's contracts and renewal periods to promote stability.

- Improve authorizer quality. Authorizers are the entities that decide who can start a new public charter school, set academic and operational expectations, and oversee school performance. They also decide whether a charter should remain open or cease operations at the end of its contract. Thus, the importance of high quality charter school authorizing and authorizing policies cannot be understated. PPI's David Osborne favors one strong authorizer per city, in addition to the local school board, with schools being able to appeal its decisions to a higher authority like a state charter authorizing board. He believes one good authorizer can steer quality far more effectively than having several who may have different standards for performance. He cites D.C., Denver, and New Orleans as examples. Policymakers should also avail themselves of the resources available from the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, which researches and disseminates charter authorizing best practices.[104]

- Adopting or strengthening an existing unified enrollment system. Many places now use a single application, oftentimes online or accessed through an app. Evolving technology designed to improve access equity should be deployed as soon as possible.

- Develop a pipeline of talented school leaders. Giving schools autonomy will not improve student achievement if their leaders don't know how to use it to maximum effect. Whether a city has an established or a fledging charter and/or charter-like sector, policymakers should understand that leading an autonomous school is a very different proposition than just dropping a school principal into an already up and running school, where they are expected to follow central office directives. In other words, with great autonomy comes great responsibility, and it's best to ensure that the community has school leaders available to handle it.

- Intentionally increasing interactions between district schools and charter schools so that traditional districts can discover charter school attributes to embrace.

- Increasing outreach to parents to ensure every parent in the community is aware of their choices and that they understand the enrollment system and application deadlines, so that children citywide have the opportunity to attend a school that is a good fit.

- Encourage the formation of organizations that can incubate strong charters and innovation schools. The Mind Trust, mentioned above in the Indianapolis case study, is one such organization. “New Schools for New Orleans” is another example. These organizations can be invaluable resources, not only for the schools they help create and the leaders they train to lead them; they can also serve as a resource for all types struggling local schools. Additionally, they are ambassadors for school reform. They can play an important role in bringing awareness to the community about challenges and potential solutions for improving the quality of schools, and helping to get stakeholder buy in.

Methodology Notes

1. How were high public charter share cities identified for this analysis?

We identified cities with a high share of public charter and charter-like public schools from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools' publicly available data set.[105] Of the 19 school districts that the National Alliance reports have more than 33% of students enrolled in public charters, we excluded cities with fewer than 15,000 total public school students, specialized districts that enroll only high school students, and those serving fewer than 50% low-income students (as defined by federal qualifications for free or reduced-price school meals). We also made adjustments to the NAPCS enrollment data based on a slightly different definition of which schools qualify as "public charter schools." Specifically:

- Removed because they had fewer than 15,000 total public school students enrolled (six districts)
  - Inglewood, California
  - Porterville, California
  - Edgewood, Texas
  - Maricopa, Arizona
  - Harrison, Colorado
  - Western Placer, California
- Removed because they were specialized districts that enroll only high school students (two districts)
  - Petaluma Joint Union High
  - Campbell Union High
- Removed because they do not serve predominantly low-income students (F/R lunch < 50%) (two districts)
  - Queen Creek, Arizona
  - Higley, Arizona
- Removed because the district's share of students who attend charter or charter-like schools is under 33% once we remove schools that do not meet our working definition of "charter or charter-like" and schools that do not primarily serve the district's students (for details on our city and school selection process, please see Methodology note #3) (two districts)
  - Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (National Alliance count includes students enrolled in virtual charters who do not primarily live in the Oklahoma City Public School District)
  - Pueblo, Colorado (National Alliance count includes students enrolled in virtual charters who do not primarily live in the Pueblo School District 60)
  - San Antonio, Texas (National Alliance count includes "1882" schools, which vary in structure and autonomy but do not consistently maintain the characteristics of charter or charter-like schools (e.g., lack of full staffing autonomy; lack of curriculum autonomy, etc.)

The 10 high-public-charter-share districts included in this analysis are below:

STATE	SCHOOL DISTRICT	ENROLLMENT SHARE
NJ	Camden	65%
IN	Indianapolis	55%
MO	Kansas City	46%
D.C.	D.C.	45%
MI	Detroit	41%
MO	St. Louis	39%
OH	Dayton	37%
PA	Philadelphia	37%
NJ	Newark	35%
MN	St. Paul	33%

2. How were the lower-public-charter-share cities selected for this analysis?

To further examine the relationship between a city's enrollment share in public charter and charter-like public schools and its gap closure with all students statewide, this analysis takes a high-level look at performance in a comparable set of cities with lower charter school enrollment. These comparison cities were selected as counterfactuals for high-share cities, based on data availability. They all serve predominantly low-income students, and have demographic similarities to the high-share cities. These cities have varying share of students enrolled in public charter or charter-like schools (between 0% and 32%). This initial analysis points to a relationship between charter school enrollment and student performance.

STATE	COMPARISON CITIES	COMPARISON CITY ENROLLMENT SHARE	SIMILAR CITIES IN PRIMARY ANALYSIS WITH CHARTER ENROLLMENT >33%
MA	Boston	24%	Philadelphia
RI	Providence	19%	Camden, Newark
IL	Chicago	17%	Detroit, St. Paul
IN	Fort Wayne	1%	Indianapolis, Dayton
VA	Richmond	1%	District of Columbia
MO	Springfield	0%	Kansas City, St. Louis

3. How did we handle charter-like schools that were not captured in the original data set from NAPCS?

This report investigates the relationship between the share of students in a city who attend public charter or charter-like public schools (i.e., renaissance schools and innovation zone schools) and the performance of low-income students across the city. Several cities and states have hybrid schools that are neither traditional district-operated schools nor purely public charter schools. The key factors we used to determine whether to include these hybrid schools are whether they (1) serve predominantly city students; (2) are governed by an independent nonprofit board; and (3) have significant operational autonomy from the local district.

CITY	SCHOOL TYPE	DESCRIPTION	HOW WE "COUNTED" THEM IN THIS DATA ANALYSIS
CAMDEN	Renaissance Schools	• Enabled by 2012 legislation[106] • Operate under an agreement with the Camden school district • Governed by independent non profit boards	We include these 3 school networks in the Camden "charter" share, bringing it to 65%.
INDIANAPOLIS	Innovation Network Schools	• Enabled by 2014 Urban Hope legislation[107] • Authorized by Indianapolis school district • Governed by independent non profit boards • By law, have "full operational autonomy"	We included these 28 schools in Indianapolis' "charter" share, bringing it to 55%.

4. What is Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE), and why did we use it?

Under federal law, each state determines for itself which standardized achievement test it will use to measure learning outcomes in public schools. With some exceptions, most states administer a unique test that isn't used anywhere else. Sometimes, states change tests from year to year. This complicates the process of comparing student performance from state to state and over time.

Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) scores were developed by the U.S. Department of Education as a fair way to compare how well different groups of students do on tests, even if the tests or the groups are different.

The technique offers several benefits for analysis:

- We are able to compare progress across states on a consistent scale.
- NCE locks state average proficiency at 50 on a 100-point scale, providing a consistent comparison point across years and locations.
- Trends are more stable and interpretable across state-level test changes.

- NCE proficiency is an equal-interval scale. This means the difference between any two numbers on the scale means the same thing, regardless of location on the scale. So, for example, the difference between 10 and 20 would be the same as the difference between 50 and 60 on this scale. Unlike percentiles, numbers on this scale can be averaged and aggregated.

5. How are NCE scores calculated?
To calculate NCEs, we first look at the state's overall average proficiency and how much proficiency varies across the state. The state's overall average proficiency is always the middle of the 0-100 scale — it is always 50.

We can then compare the proficiency of a student, group of students, or city to the state average. This difference shows where performance would fall on the 0-100 scale. For example, if a city's low-income students are performing much worse than the state average, their NCE will fall closer to 0. If a city's low-income students are performing better than the state average, their NCE will be above 50.

The specific calculation of NCEs is based on z-scores using the formula $NCE = 50 + 21.063 \times z$, which distributes scores across the 0-100 scale with the state average held at 50.

We follow a different process for the District of Columbia, which lacks a natural "state average" for the sake of comparison. Here, we use NAEP data, which is already standardized and so does not need to be adjusted using the NCE process described above. We then created an aggregate of Maryland and Virginia to serve as a comparison "state," and then scaled the NAEP scores for DC and the MD/VA aggregate so that they would be on the same scale as the rest of cities and states.

6. What does "gap closure" mean in this analysis?
The primary finding of this analysis is that cities with higher rates of charter school enrollment are closing academic performance gaps between low-income students and statewide average performance of all students.

However, this "gap closure" is not a reference to what is commonly referred to as "the achievement gap." Typically, the term "achievement gap" is used to reference differences in academic performance between a given group of historically disadvantaged students (e.g., students from low-income households) and another group (e.g., students from middle and high-income households). Most often, achievement gaps are considered within the same body of students (e.g., comparing performance between Black and white students in the same city).

This analysis also looks at differences in academic performance, but differently: How are low-income students in a city progressing relative to the state as a whole? To answer this question, we follow these steps:

1. Calculate the NCE proficiency for the average of low-income students in the city for two baseline years (2010-2011 and 2011-2012 unless otherwise noted) and two end years (2021-2022 and 2022-2023). We create a rolling average of the baseline years and end years to identify where low-income students in the city started and ended.
2. Determine the change in NCE points from the baseline to the end years, which allows us to see how much low-income students in the city have grown relative to the state. For example, a city might improve from 10 to 20 NCE points over time, a 10-point gain. This means low-income students are gaining proficiency faster than the average student statewide.
3. Use the baseline average to identify the starting gap between all students statewide

and the city's low-income students. We can then evaluate how much of this gap has been closed by the end years. In the case of the city's low-income students improving from 10 to 20 NCE points, we would identify the starting gap as 40 points. The 10 points out of the initial 40-point gap indicate that 25% of the gap has been closed.

7. Where did the data come from?

Proficiency data and data about schools' locations and characteristics come from state data reporting, either downloaded through the EDFacts Data Initiative,[108] or directly from state-run public data portals. We use this data to identify state averages. We also use this data to identify which schools — traditional district-run public schools, public charter schools, and charter-like public schools — are located within the school districts we explore here.

We rely on state-selected measures of economic disadvantage to identify the proficiency for low-income students. Most states use eligibility for free and reduced-price lunch to define the "low-income" group.

Where necessary, we combine 3-8 ELA and math proficiency to create an average composite proficiency and/or combine individual grade-level data to create a 3-8 aggregate proficiency. We then aggregate school-level data, including subgroup data for low-income students, into a weighted average proficiency for the city. We use this raw proficiency data to convert it into NCE proficiency, as discussed above.

Share data and district size data come from NAPCS. Where we have adjusted it, we did so based on state-provided data about school characteristics (for example, with Camden's renaissance schools) or based on manual research (for example, with the statewide virtual schools that are geographically located in Oklahoma City).

8. Where were there limitations to the availability of data and how did we handle this?

CITY	DATA LIMITATION	IMPLICATIONS FOR ANALYSIS
PHILADELPHIA	The state of Pennsylvania did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2021.	We used the aggregate student population in Philadelphia instead of only low-income students in our analysis.
INDIANAPOLIS	The state of Indiana did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2014.	Our analysis for this city starts in 2014 rather than in 2011, which is our baseline for the other cities.
DETROIT	The state of Michigan did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2016.	Our analysis for this city starts in 2016 rather than in 2011, which is our baseline for the other cities.
ST. PAUL	The state of Minnesota did not disaggregate student performance data by economic status before the year 2016.	Our analysis starts in 2016 rather than in 2011, which is our baseline for the other cities.

9. Other notes about the data

This analysis does not compare student performance between different school sectors. Rather, we were interested in learning how *all low-income* students in a city were impacted when more of a city's students were enrolled in public charter schools.

Under federal law, states are given autonomy to select a standardized achievement test to measure learning outcomes in public schools, and to set and label performance levels representing various levels of student knowledge and ability. The below table explains which state-specific labels we used to identify the student performance levels we label as "proficient" in this analysis.

STATE	PROFICIENCY CUTOFF
DC	2011-2022: used adjusted NAEP scores
IL	2011-2014: "Exceeds or Meets" 2015-2023: "Exceeded Expectations" and "Met Expectations"
IN	2011-2023: "At Proficiency" or "Above Proficiency"
LA	2011-2023: "Advanced" or "Mastery"
MA	2011-2016: "Advanced" or "Proficient" 2017-2023: "Exceeding expectations" or "Meeting Expectations
MI	2016-2023: "Proficient" or "Advanced"
MN	2016-2023: "Meets" or "Exceeds"
MO	2011-2023: "Proficient" or "Advanced"
NJ	2011-2014: "Proficient" or "Advanced Proficient" 2015-2023: "Meeting Expectations" or "Exceeding Expectations"
PA	2011-2023: "Proficient" or "Advanced"
RI	2011-2014: "Proficient" or "Proficient with Distinction" 2015-2017: "Met Expectations" or "Exceeded Expectations" 2018-2023: "Meeting Expectations" or "Exceeding Expectations"
VA	2011-2023: "Proficient" or "Advanced"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tressa Pankovits is the Co-Director of Reinventing America's Schools project at Progressive Policy institute, which researches innovations needed to create a 21st century model for public education that is geared to the knowledge economy. A lawyer with more than 10 years of experience in domestic and international education policy, management, and operations, Tressa is a national thought leader and passionate advocate for autonomous school models that increase educational equity. In addition to guiding the project's strategic plan, Tressa's research and advocacy have appeared in the Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Hill, Real Clear Education, The 74Million, and other publications. She has published numerous white papers and model legislation.

Notes and References

All quotations without endnotes are from interviews with the author.

1 Rachel Minkin, "About Half of Americans Say Public K-12 Education Is Going in the Wrong Direction," Pew Research Center, September 18, 2024, https://pewrsr.ch/3J5yGfJ.

2 Will Marshall, “Winning Back Working America,” Progressive Policy Institute, November 2023, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/PPI-Winning-Back-Working-America-Poll.pdf

3 Marshall, “Winning Back Working.”

4 Corey A. DeAngelis et al., “Charter School Funding: Inequity Surges in the Cities,” School Choice Demonstration Project (Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas), November 2020, https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/wordpressua.uark.edu/dist/9/544/files/2018/10/charter-school-funding-inequity-surges-in-the-cities.pdf.

5 Bruno V. Manno, “Charter Schools Are Learning Communities and Sources of Community Rebirth,” *Forbes,* May 22, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/brunomanno/2024/05/15/charter-schools-are-learning-communities-and-sources-of-community-rebirth/?sh=728121f04496.

6 Alyson Klein, “No Child Left Behind: An Overview,” *Education Week,* April 10, 2015, https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/no-child-left-behind-an-overview/2015/04.

7 Whitney Bross, Douglas N. Harris, and Lihan Liu, “The Effects of Performance-Based School Closure and Charter Takeover on Student Performance,” Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (Tulane University), October 17, 2016, 2, https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/Bross-Harris-Liu-The-Effects-of-Performance-Based-School-Closure-and-Charter-Takeover-on-Student-Performance.pdf.

8 "What Is a Charter School?" National Charter School Resource Center, accessed September 2024, https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/what-charter-school#:~:text=A%20charter%20school%20is%20a,terms%20and%20definitions%20(PDF).

9 Jay P. Greene, “The Finlandization of New Orleans,” *Education Next,* August 2020, https://www.educationnext.org/finlandization-of-new-orleans-book-review-charter-school-city-harris/.

10 Harris, Bross and Liu, “Effects of Performance-Based Closure,” 39.

11 Parker Baxter et al., “Systemwide and Intervention-Specific Effects of Denver Public Schools’ Portfolio District Strategy on Individual Student Achievement,” Center for Education Policy Analysis (University of Colorado Denver), September 2024, https://publicaffairs.ucdenver.edu/docs/librariesprovider36/default-document-library/denver_systemwide_and_intervention-effects-technical-report-september-2024.pdf?sfvrsn=f4236b.

12 Erica Meltzer, Closing Struggling Schools Helped Student Achievement in Denver, Study Finds,” *Chalkbeat Colorado*, September 27, 2024, https://www.chalkbeat.org/colorado/2024/09/28/denver-study-finds-closing-schools-improved-student-test-scores/.

13 “As A Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes (Stanford University), 2023, https://credo.stanford.edu/reports/item/national-charter-school-study-iii/.

14 "Does Competition from Charter Schools Help or Hurt Traditional Public Schools?" Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 29, 2024, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/does-competition-charter-schools-help-or-hurt-traditional-public-schools.

15 David Bass, "NC Charter Waitlist Extends to Over 85,000 Students," *Carolina Journal,* May 23, 2024, https://www.carolinajournal.com/nc-charter-waitlist-extends-to-over-85000-students/.

16 "Charter Schools Data Dashboard," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, accessed September 2024, https://data.publiccharters.org/.

17 Manno, "Charter Schools Are Learning Communities."

18 "Public Charter Schools," Democrats for Education Reform, May 8, 2023, https://dfer.org/tag/public-charter-schools/.

19 Erin Hinrichs, "'A New Way We Can Organize the Public School System': A Q&A with Reform Expert David Osborne," *MinnPost,* November 1, 2017, https://www.minnpost.com/education/2017/11/new-way-we-can-organize-public-school-system-qa-reform-expert-david-osborne/.

20 "How Many US Children Receive a Free or Reduced-Price School Lunch?" USAFacts, October 26, 2023, https://usafacts.org/articles/how-many-us-children-receive-a-free-or-reduced-price-school-lunch/#:~:text=In%20federal%20fiscal%20year%202022,School%20Lunch%20Program%20(NSLP).

21 Laura Lippman, Shelley Burns, and Edith McArthur, "Urban Schools: The Challenge of Location and Poverty," U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, June 1996, 20, https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/96184.pdf.

22 "Data Tools," National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Center for Education Statistics), accessed September 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/data/.

23 "Ind. Code § 20-25.7-4: Establishment of Innovation Network Schools," Indiana Code, accessed September 2024, https://casetext.com/statute/indiana-code/title-20-education/article-257-innovation-network-schools/chapter-4-establishment-of-innovation-network-schools.

24 Mike Schmoker, "Education Reform Hasn't Failed ... Yet. 3 Overlooked Instructional Strategies," *Education Week,* June 8, 2023, corrected June 12, 2023, https://www.edweek.org/leadership/opinion-education-reform-hasnt-failed-yet-3-overlooked-instructional-strategies/2023/06.

25 Kevin Mahnken, "NAEP Scores 'Flashing Red' After a Lost Generation of Learning for 13-Year-Olds," *The 74 Million,* June 21, 2023, https://www.the74million.org/article/naep-scores-flashing-red-after-a-lost-generation-of-learning-for-13-year-olds/.

26 David Osborne and Will Marshall, "To Reduce Inequality, Reinvent Public Schools," Progressive Policy Institute, March 9, 2016, 4, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2016.03.09-Osborne_Marshall-Memo-to-Presidential-Candidates_Education-Policy-2.pdf.

27 Tiffany Lee, "Leadership Lessons from Veteran Superintendent Paul Vallas: Turnaround Expert Shares His Philosophy on Success with Facilities Leaders," *K12 Facilities Forum,* September 5, 2019, https://info.k12facilitiesforum.com/blog/leadership-lessons-from-veteran-superintendent-paul-vallas.

28 David Osborne and Will Marshall, "To Reduce Inequality, Reinvent Public Schools: A Memo to Presidential Candidates," Progressive Policy Institute, March 9, 2016, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2016.03.09-Osborne_Marshall-Memo-to-Presidential-Candidates_Education-Policy-2.pdf.

29 Daniel A. Domenech, "Extending Superintendents' Tenures," School Administrator, AASA, The School Superintendents Association, December 1, 2019, https://www.aasa.org/resources/resource/extending-superintendents-tenures.

30 David Osborne and Will Marshall, "To Reduce Inequality, Reinvent Public Schools: A Memo to Presidential Candidates," Progressive Policy Institute, March 9, 2016, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/2016.03.09-Osborne_Marshall-Memo-to-Presidential-Candidates_Education-Policy-2.pdf.

31 Russell Contreras, "Public Education Reform Missing from 2024 Presidential Platforms," *Axios*, August 31, 2024, https://www.axios.com/2024/08/31/public-education-2024-presidential-election.

32 Contreras, "Public Education Reform."

33 "A Nation at Risk," Wikipedia, last modified May 23, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Nation_at_Risk.

34 It's difficult to overstate the emphasis on "public school choices." Even the most apolitical among us, even with a mere passing interest in America's schools, would likely have some awareness of the universal school voucher trend that has swept many red states since the onset of the pandemic. These cynical, in many cases politically-driven, efforts to siphon public taxpayer dollars into private religious schools have no part in this discussion. Rather, this report puts a laser focus on nonprofit schools that are public, tuition-free, and open to all students.

35 David Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools: An Abridged Version,* Progressive Policy Institute, (June 2019), https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/PPI_Reinventing-Americas-Schools-V7.pdf.

36 "Do Charter Schools and School Vouchers Hurt Public Schools?" Network for Public Education, January 2019, https://networkforpubliceducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Do-charter-schools-and-school-vouchers-hurt-public-schools%C6%92.pdf.

37 Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen, "The Effects of the New Orleans Post-Katrina Market-Based School Reforms," Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (Tulane University), last updated August 2019, https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/files/publications/Harris-Larsen-Reform-Effects-2019-08-01.pdf

38 Harris and Larsen, "Effects of New Orleans Post-Katrina."

39 Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools.*

40 David Griffith and Heena Kuwayama, "Does Competition From Charter Schools Help or Hurt Traditional Public Schools?," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, August 29, 2024, https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/does-competition-charter-schools-help-or-hurt-traditional-public-schools.

41 See Methodology Note #2 for comparable cities.

42 See Methodology Note #3 for a complete definition of "charter and charter-like" schools for the purpose of this analysis.

43 See the Methodology Notes #4 and #5 for a detailed explanation of what NCE is and how it is calculated.

44 Matt Barnum, "The Growth vs. Proficiency Debate and Why Al Franken Raised a Boring but Critical Issue," *The 74 Million*, January 18, 2017, https://www.the74million.org/article/barnum-the-growth-vs-proficiency-debate-and-why-al-franken-raised-a-boring-but-critical-issue/.

45 Barnum, "Growth vs. Proficiency Debate."

46 Eric A. Hanushek, Paul E. Peterson, and Laura M. Talpey, "The Achievement Gap Fails to Close," *Education Next* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2024), https://www.educationnext.org/achievement-gap-fails-close-half-century-testing-shows-persistent-divide/.

47 Naomi Nix, "Jersey Roar: Schools Make a Comeback in Camden, the Nation's Most Distressed City," *The 74 Million*, July 11, 2016, https://www.the74million.org/article/jersey-roar-schools-make-a-comeback-in-camden-the-nations-most-distressed-city/.

48 Laura Waters, "How Is Camden's Innovative School System Moving the Needle for New Jersey Students?" *The 74 Million,* May 23, 2024, https://www.the74million.org/article/how-is-camdens-innovative-school-system-moving-the-needle-for-new-jersey-students/.

49 *Urban Hope Act,* L.2011, c.176, s.1, New Jersey Statutes, https://www.nj.gov/education/chartsch/renaissance/docs/2014UHA.pdf.

50 @uncommon_camdenprep, “It Takes a Village...Families Are Our Best Collaborators!,” *Instagram*, June 11, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/reel/C8F155xIrP0/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D.

51 Nix, "Jersey Roar: Schools Make.”

52 Matt Taibbi, "Apocalypse, New Jersey: A Dispatch from America’s Most Desperate Town," *Rolling Stone*, December 11, 2013, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/apocalypse-new-jersey-a-dispatch-from-americas-most-desperate-town-56174/.

53 Taibbi, "Apocalypse, New Jersey.”

54 Paul Hill, “An Interview with Paymon Rouhanifard: Charting Camden’s Path to Improvement,” CRPE, June 2018, https://crpe.org/an-interview-with-paymon-rouhanifard-charting-camdens-path-to-improvement/.

55 Katrina T. McCombs, “Putting Students First: Camden City School District’s Strategic Plan,” Camden City School District, September 2018, https://camdencityschools.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Putting-Students-First-EN.pdf.

56 Giana Campbell, “Can Camden Students Continue the Comeback?,” Camden Education Fund, 2024, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60c6f0153a00f25466a9dd83/t/6625c4cb9bd8b54266bfa3fd/1713751244669/CEF+Brief+2024+v7.pdf.

57 Catherine Allen, "Public School Enrollment Falling Nationwide, Data Shows," *NBC News,* April 21, 2024, https://www.nbcnews.com/data-graphics/public-school-enrollment-us-states-map-chart-rcna119262.

58 Brandon Goldner, "Eastside High School in Camden to Get New Building Thanks to $105 Million Investment," *CBS Philadelphia*, September 18, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/eastside-camden-high-school-investment/.

59 Phaedra Trethan, "New Fund to Offer Capital for Renaissance Schools in Camden," *Courier-Post,* September 1, 2016, https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/news/2016/09/01/new-fund-offer-capital-renaissance-schools-camden/89711928/.

60 Victor Carstarphan and Giana Campbell, "Camden Children and Families Require an Equitable Future. There's More Work to Do," *Courier-Post,* October 23, 2023, https://www.courierpostonline.com/story/opinion/2023/10/23/camden-nj-schools-new-facilities-provide-equitable-future/71233020007/.

61 Laura Waters, "How Is Camden’s Innovative School System Moving the Needle for New Jersey Students?" *The 74 Million,* May 23, 2024, https://www.the74million.org/article/how-is-camdens-innovative-school-system-moving-the-needle-for-new-jersey-students/.

62 Waters, "Camden’s Innovative School System."

63 Campbell, “Can Camden Students Continue.”

64 Campbell, “Can Camden Students Continue.”

65 Todd Ziebarth, “Measuring Up to the Model: A Ranking of State Public Charter School Laws, 2022,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, January 25, 2022, https://publiccharters.org/news/measuring-up-to-the-model-a-ranking-of-state-public-charter-school-laws-2022/.

66 Osborne, *Reinventing America’s Schools,* 42.

67 "Indianapolis Public Charter School Enrollment Continues to Increase," The Mind Trust, January 2, 2024, https://www.themindtrust.org/blog/2024/01/02/indianapolis-public-charter-school-enrollment-continues-to-increase/.

68 “Innovation Network Schools,” Indianapolis Public Schools, 2024, https://myips.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Innovation-Explained-_FINAL_-Updated-7.2024.pdf.

69 “Creating Opportunity Schools: A Bold Plan to Transform Indianapolis Public Schools, Executive Summary,” The Mind Trust, December 2011, https://www.themindtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/opportunity-schools-executive-summary-mediaresourcesmediakit5.pdf.

70 Osborne, *Reinventing America’s Schools,* 44.

71 Osborne, *Reinventing America’s Schools,* 45.

72 “Innovation Network Schools,” Indianapolis Public Schools, 2024, https://myips.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Innovation-Explained-_FINAL_-Updated-7.2024.pdf.

73 “Creating Opportunity Schools: A Bold Plan to Transform Indianapolis Public Schools, Executive Summary,” The Mind Trust, December 2011, https://www.themindtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/opportunity-schools-executive-summary-mediaresourcesmediakit5.pdf.

74 "Purdue Polytechnic High School," accessed September 17, 2024, https://www.pphs.purdue.edu/.

75 Tressa Pankovits and David Osborne, *The Third Way: A Guide to Implementing Innovation Schools,* Progressive Policy Institute (October 2020), 18, https://www.progressivepolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PPI_ReinventingAmericasSchoolsInnovationGuide.pdf.

76 Pankovits and Osborne, *The Third Way,* 39.

77 Divine Triplett, "Purdue Polytechnic High Schools Building a Future for Students," *WISH-TV,* May 20, 2024, https://www.wishtv.com/lifestylelive/purdue-polytechnic-high-schools-building-a-future-for-students/.

78 "Christel House International," accessed September 2024, https://christelhouse.org/.

79 "Indiana Latino Expo," accessed September 2024, https://www.indianalatinoexpo.org/.

80 Aleksandra Appleton, "Inside a Unique Public Microschool in Indianapolis," *WFYI,* April 17, 2024, https://www.wfyi.org/news/articles/inside-a-unique-public-microschool-in-indianapolis.

81 Pankovits and Osborne, *The Third Way.*

82 Osborne, *Reinventing America’s Schools*, 43.

83 Amelia Pak-Harvey, "IPS Enrollment Declines Slightly in 2023-24 While Charter School Enrollment Keeps Growing," *Chalkbeat Indiana*, January 5, 2024, https://www.chalkbeat.org/indiana/2024/01/05/indianapolis-public-schools-enrollment-stable-despite-school-closures/.

84 "Rebuilding Stronger 2023 Capital Referendum," Indianapolis Public Schools, accessed September 2024, https://myips.org/2023referendum/ips-momentum/#:~:text=IPS%20is%20the%20largest%20school,schools%20and%2011%20high%20schools.

85 Osborne, *Reinventing America's Schools,* 42.

86 The Office of Education Innovation Team," City of Indianapolis, accessed September 2024, https://www.indy.gov/activity/the-office-of-education-innovation-team.

87 "Find a Mayor-Sponsored Charter School (MSCS)," City of Indianapolis, accessed September 2024, https://www.indy.gov/activity/find-a-mayor-sponsored-charter-school-mscs.

88 "Find a Mayor-Sponsored."

89 Alexandra S. Kokkinakis, "Stigmatization and Self Perception in Alternative School Students Who Have Transferred from a Traditional High School: A Qualitative Study in Chico, California," California State University, Chico, (2013), https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/concern/theses/z890rt88b?locale=de.

90 Caroline Hogan, "A Full Circle Moment: Kansas City Teacher Prepares for 1st Day of School at Her Alma Mater," *KSHB*, August 14, 2024, https://www.kshb.com/news/local-news/a-full-circle-moment-kansas-city-teacher-prepares-for-1st-day-of-school-at-her-alma-mater.

91 Douglas N. Harris and Matthew F. Larsen, "What Effect Did the New Orleans School Reforms Have on Student Achievement, High School Graduation, and College Outcomes?," Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (Tulane University), July 15, 2018, https://educationresearchalliancenola.org/publications/what-effect-did-the-new-orleans-school-reforms-have-on-student-achievement-high-school-graduation-and-college-outcomes.

92 Dallas Dotter, Duncan Chaplin, and Maria Bartlett, "Impacts of School Reforms in Washington, DC on Student Achievement," Mathematica, August 12, 2021, https://www.mathematica.org/publications/impacts-of-school-reforms-in-washington-dc-on-student-achievement.

93 Parker Baxter, "The System-Level Effects of Denver's Portfolio Strategy on Student Academic Outcomes," University of Colorado Denver, December 5, 2022, https://publicaffairs.ucdenver.edu/docs/librariesprovider36/research-projects-documents/center-for-education-policy-analysis/denver-report---study-summary-emarboe-final.pdf?sfvrsn=629745bb_2.

94 Michael Hansen et al., "Have We Made Progress on Achievement Gaps? Looking at Evidence from the New NAEP Results," Brookings, April 17, 2018, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/04/17/have-we-made-progress-on-achievement-gaps-looking-at-evidence-from-the-new-naep-results/.

95 Feng Chen and Douglas N. Harris, "The Market-Level Effects of Charter Schools on Student Outcomes: A National Analysis of School Districts," *Journal of Public Economics* 228 (December 2023): 105015, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0047272723001974.

96 Chen and Harris, "Market-Level Effects."

97 David Osborne, "A 21st Century School System in the Mile-High City," Progressive Policy Institute, May 2016, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED570147.pdf.

98 David Osborne, "An Educational Revolution in Indianapolis," Progressive Policy Institute, December 2016, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED591133.

99 David Osborne, "A Tale of Two Systems: Education Reform in Washington D.C.," Progressive Policy Institute, 2015, https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED570145.

100 Jesse Margolis and Eli Groves, "A New Baseline: Progress in Newark's District and Charter Schools from 2006 to 2018," New Jersey Children's Foundation, June 2019, https://njchildren.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/A-New-Baseline-in-Newark.pdf.

101 "Search for Public Schools: Essex County Donald M. Payne Sr. School of Technology," Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics), accessed September 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?Search=1&DistrictID=3404800&ID=340480002074. "Search for Public Schools: Essex County Donald M. Payne Sr. School of Technology," Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics), accessed September 2024, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?Search=1&DistrictID=3404800&ID=340480002074.

102 "NJ School Performance Report: Essex County Donald M. Payne, Sr. School of Technology (13-1390-050)," Essex County Schools of Technology, accessed September 2024, https://www.essextech.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/1003/2024/04/Summary-PT-Performance-Report-2022-23.pdf.

103 "Essex County Schools of Technology," accessed September 2024, https://www.essextech.org/

104 "What Is Charter School Authorizing?" National Association of Charter School Authorizers, accessed September 2024, https://qualitycharters.org/authorizingmatters/.

105 "School District Enrollment Share," National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, December 19, 2023, https://data.publiccharters.org/digest/tables-and-figures/school-district-enrollment-share/.

106 "N.J.A.C. 6A:31, Renaissance Schools: Chapter 31. Renaissance Schools," New Jersey Department of Education, accessed September 2024, https://www.nj.gov/education/code/current/title6a/chap31.pdf.

107 "Ind. Code § 20-25.7-4: Establishment of Innovation Network Schools," Indiana Code, accessed September 2024, https://casetext.com/statute/indiana-code/title-20-education/article-257-innovation-network-schools/chapter-4-establishment-of-innovation-network-schools.

108 "The EDFacts Initiative," U.S. Department of Education, accessed September 2024, https://www.ed.gov/data/edfacts-initiative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Reinventing America's Schools author would like to thank the people who provided their knowledge and personal stories for this report. Many of them are quoted in the narrative.

We gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the Walton Family Foundation, City Fund, and Bloomberg Philanthropies for their commitment to helping advance the Progressive Policy Institute's Reinventing America's Schools initiative. Their contributions make it possible for us to continue promoting innovative, evidence-based strategies that improve education for all students. Thank you for your invaluable partnership.

ppi

The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

Founded in 1989, PPI started as the intellectual home of the New Democrats and earned a reputation as President Bill Clinton's "idea mill." Many of its mold-breaking ideas have been translated into public policy and law and have influenced international efforts to modernize progressive politics.

Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

© 2024
PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

PROGRESSIVE POLICY INSTITUTE
1919 M Street NW,
Suite 300,
Washington, DC 20036

Tel 202.525.3926
Fax 202.525.3941

info@ppionline.org
progressivepolicy.org