Charter School Authorizing: Understanding the Differences Among Authorizers and School Performance

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Charter schools are an integral part of the public school systems across America, but understanding these complex organizations has proved challenging. One unique attribute of charter school organizational structure is the charter school authorizer. These oversight agencies have a unique role in overseeing, and holding accountable, the schools they authorize. Yet, there is limited empirical research around charter school authorizing practices and their outcomes. In this study, I examined the differences between Michigan charter school outcomes, both academic and operational, by authorizer type. The results of this study indicate a statistically significant difference among authorizers, based on student proficiency, growth, overall performance, and fiscal performance, and student demand. Moreover, the findings suggest that schools authorized by intermediate school districts had the highest student performance of all charter schools in Michigan, followed by schools authorized by higher education institutions (e.g., colleges and universities). Local education authorities (LEA) had consistently, and significantly, lower student performance than schools authorized by other types. Conversely, schools authorized by LEAs had the highest Demand and overall fiscal performance.

Keywords: Charter schools, authorizing, authorizer, school performance, student outcomes

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Charter schools began as an experiment to improve public education in the United States of America (Weil, 2000). The theory was that these schools would operate outside of conventional public schools and free of the oversight and regulatory requirements constraining the current educational systems in exchange for increased accountability and performance (Weil, 2009; Roland, 2014). These new educational programs would become incubators of innovation and spawn new educational methods, addressing conventional public schools' challenges (Fryer, 2014; Wilson, 2016; Gleason, 2019).

While charter school enrollment nationally is still a small fraction of all students who attend public schools (4.6%), their influence on the broader conversation about education is paramount (NCES, 2016). Communities such as Detroit, Michigan, now have more than 50% of their student population attending charter schools, putting them in the spotlight. Various stakeholders are interested in charter school performance and whether students attending charter schools benefit from their programs (Gleason, 2019; Wilson, 2016; Buckley & Schneider, 2009). Over the years, numerous studies on charter school performance sought to determine whether charter schools perform better or worse than conventional public school districts (Betts & Hill, 2006; Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Ash, 2013). Some research purports that charter schools are a failed experiment and should be closed, suggesting that they are not performing and instead siphoning necessary resources away from the traditional education system (Miron, 2010; Buddin, 2012). Other studies show promise – that charter schools address decades of systemic underperformance in urban and high poverty communities, essentially serving the neediest of the neediest students (Merseth & Copper, 2009; Scollo, 2015).

Overall, however, researchers have been unable to isolate a singular conclusion about charter school performance; the determination of whether charter schools are successful is largely dependent upon one's ideological stance on the matter (Clark et al., 2011). Nevertheless, a reasonable conclusion from the current literature is that some charter schools perform better, others perform worse, and most perform similar to their conventional school counterparts (Jankens & Weiss, 2016).

Consequently, additional research around charter school performance and its impact on the greater educational field is necessary. Current studies that compare charter schools to regular public schools through common approaches fail to consider the uniqueness and complexity of the charter school phenomena (Davis, 2013; Duffy, 2014). More specifically, there is a gap in the research that looks at the distinctiveness of these quasi-public/private organizations and teases out variables that help illustrate the complete picture when evaluating them. Rarely is charter school performance associated directly with authorizers (Roch, 2015). Additionally, charter school authorizers have come under scrutiny in the past few years as contributing to the lack of performance and harboring failing schools (The Education Trust-Midwest, 2016).

While charter schools are generally associated with their authorizing agency (per the charter contract), there is a lack of literature that looks explicitly at charter authorizer performance and connects the authorizer to the performance of schools within their portfolio. Authorizers are in a unique position as they are not accountable to the oversight of the state boards of education or state education agencies. Therefore, they are autonomous and able to operate as they see fit under the law. Charter school opponents contend that this autonomy leads to a lack of oversight and, ultimately, low-performing schools (Buckley & Schneider, 2009).

Although charter schools must follow much of the same regulations of conventional public schools, including state and federal requirements, authorizers have no direct oversight; they are essentially, self-regulated. Charter school proponents argue that this autonomy provides the

flexibility needed to oversee these new and unique educational programs without intrusion from the traditional educational systems (Finn et al., 2000). In addition, they contend that the political pressures from state associations and agencies would undermine authorizer authority and limit their ability to be effective at chartering and overseeing the schools. Yet, there is no uniformity in the way they operate, implement their oversight and accountability practices, and authorizing activities – including granting charter contracts, reauthorizing practices, and closing of schools.

These differences make comparing charter schools to conventional schools problematic. To truly understand charter schools and hold the appropriate parties accountable for their performance, additional research is needed that looks at the uniqueness of these schools and accounts for the variations in organizational structure. Ultimately, there is a lack of literature on authorizers' performance in connection to charter school performance.

This research aims to explore charter school performance by looking closer at the organizations that oversee them, the authorizer. By isolating these organizations separately from the charter school districts themselves, this researcher seeks to draw additional conclusions and gain further insight into influences that impact charter school performance. This study will address the generalized approach most researchers on charter schools take when looking at whether these schools are performing, as well as the inconclusive results of most current research (Davis et al., 2013; Lake, 2013). Although charter schools are public schools, state legislation allows for some uniqueness that creates challenges when looking at their performance compared to other schools, specifically conventional public schools. Looking at the authorizer as a direct or indirect influence on student performance provides insight into the larger educational system and its impact on charter schools (Carlson, 2012).

In addition to student achievement, this research will also include student growth, graduation rates, and overall school performance through Michigan's school accountability system. Financial comparisons and enrollment trends were also part of the data collection and analysis. This approach is unique to this research and will provide a holistic view of the broader activities around charter schools lacking in the literature.

Background

Charter schools, or Public School Academies (PSA) as they are formally known, are publicly funded independent schools serving primary and secondary students (kindergarten through grade 12). Across the United States, there are 3.3 million students attending 7,300 charter schools in 46 states and the District of Columbia (CER *a*, n.d.). In Michigan, charter schools account for approximately 10% of the state's student enrollment. During the 2018-2019 academic year, there were a total of 296 charter school organizations (classified as districts), operating 376 school buildings—two hundred forty-two of those operated a K-8 grade configuration, with 149 offering grades 9 through 12. Although charter schools operate across the state, in both the lower and upper peninsulas of Michigan, the predominant number are in urban areas like Detroit, Lansing, and Grand Rapids. For example, the three counties that occupy metro Detroit – Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb – represent 59% of all charter students (MDE, 2020). Additionally, the City of Detroit has the highest percentage of students attending charter schools, with 47% of all public school students enrolled in a charter school.

Charter School Funding

Charter schools vary in legislation and operation across the U.S., though they hold similar conceptual and practical constraints across all formats (Schwallie, 2015). Namely, charter schools are classified by law as being "public" entities. This means that they receive public resources and have restrictions on their organizational structure, operations, and accountability. The key benefit of being a public entity is financial support. Although most charter schools across the U.S. do not receive the same per-pupil funding as their conventional public-school counterparts, it is comparable and substantial compared to the average tuition private schools receive.

Additionally, being a public school also qualifies the charter school for federal assistance through title grants (e.g., Title I, Title II). These can increase revenue for additional services for special populations. The average operating revenue for Michigan charter schools was $9,560 per pupil as of 2018 (MDE, 2020). As a comparison, the average total operating revenue for conventional district schools was $10,097 per pupil. Nationally, the amount charters receive is considerably lower. On average, charter schools receive $6,585 per pupil compared to conventional district schools that receive $10,771 per pupil (CER *b*, n.d.).

Charter School Students

The students who attend these programs are diverse, with twice the minorities attending charter schools than conventional schools. In the U.S., 60% of charter school students were minority in 2018, with only 42% of all public school enrollment being minority (NCESa, 2021; NCESb, 2021). In Michigan, minorities made up 67% of the charter school's student enrollment in 2018-2019 compared to the state-wide average of 34% (MDE, 2020). Of the total charter school population, 50% of Michigan students were African-American, with only 25% nationally. Charter schools also serve a more significant low-income population, with 75% of charter school students qualifying for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch compared to the 50% state-wide average.

Authorizers

Charter schools are unique public schools in that they have an additional layer of oversight in a chartering agency (or authorizer). Unlike conventional public-school districts, charter schools need a sponsor to exist (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). An applicant must first secure a "charter" from an approved charter school authorizer to operate a charter school. The authorizer is not responsible for and does not participate in the school's operations but is responsible for oversight and accountability of the school they authorize. This additional component is intended to help ensure charter schools comply with all applicable laws and meet set educational goals. Which organizations can serve as a charter authorizer also varies by state. The typical organization may include a local education agency (LEA or conventional school district), intermediate school district (ISD) or regional school district (RESA), and higher education institution (HEI), which includes colleges and universities. Additionally, some states also allow designated nonprofit organizations, or Independent Chartering Boards (ICB), to issue charter school contracts typically established by a state or local government agency or state education agency (Weil, 2016).

In the State of Michigan, where this research is focused, state legislation has empowered educational organizations to charter or provide a license to an applicant to operate a school using public funds (Finn, Manno & Vanourek, 2000). The following entities can serve as a charter school

authorizer in Michigan (RSC §380.501(1)): Local Education Agency (LEA); Intermediate School District (ISD); Community College; State Public University; or a jointly through an interlocal agreement. In addition, 86% of charter schools are authorized by state universities, with the total student population in charter schools making up approximately 10% of all student enrollment (Price & Jankens, 2016).

Conceptual Framework

Although they vary state-by-state, most state charter school laws are materially similar, or the same, as what conventional public schools follow. Some exceptions may include different regulations on teacher or administrator certification and licensure (either increased or lessened restrictions), the ability to contract for educational services (most conventional public schools cannot outsource teachers or administrators), charter school boards are often appointed, not elected (most states require charter school board members to be public officials), and the ability to limit enrollment.

Therefore, the operations of charter schools look similar to that of conventional public schools. From their physical facilities and operations to their day/school year schedule and teaching and learning, charter schools are reasonably indistinguishable from conventional public schools. However, much of the practical differences are in the unique character of each charter school program. Unlike traditional districts, rooted in long-standing communities and their cultures, charter schools are novel, unique to their mission, vision, and educational model.

Each charter school is distinctive in its approach to the organizational structure, which is driven by a combination of the board and the administration, whether self-managed or supported through a management company or educational service provider (ESP). Whether it is a single site program that is autonomous in design (management company), or a multi-site corporate structure, such as Academica (a for-profit management organization), the KIPP Foundation (a not-for-profit educational management organization), or K12, inc. (a for-profit online educational management organization), each organizational style defines the experience students receive.

Before charter schools, public schools across the U.S. all operated under the same operational structure, a stand-alone autonomous school district. Though the size and specific staffing structures differed among districts and states, they were based on a direct employment structure. The board of education was the employer for all teachers, administration, and staff. If the district contracted for services, they were limited to non-academic activities, such as transportation, food, or janitorial services. This model connects the academic outcomes directly to the school board through the teachers, administrators, and school staff.

In contrast, charter schools can contract academic services, which creates an indirect path from the board to the academic outcomes. Because most charter schools elect to contract educational services, they transfer some responsibility through the contract to the management company. Therefore, the management company is responsible, at least in part, for the academic outcomes of the program. Additionally, a third component to the charter school structure is the relationship between the school board and the charter authorizer. This relationship is codified through the charter contract, which is the document that officially documents the authorizer's expectations and educational goals for the school.

Because the charter school model has two additional elements that conventional districts don't have – the authorizer and management company – their organizational structure is unique to conventional public schools. Rather than all the accountability placed on the shoulders of the

school and district administrators and board members of a conventional district, charter school accountability extends to the management companies and authorizers. The field of charter schools is still working this out in practice, as most of the accountability is still shouldered by the school itself (the board, students, and families). However, the outcomes of these programs are linked to the activities surrounding the authorizers and the school's management (Lubienski & Weitzel, 2010). Although authorizers do not directly operate the schools, they play a critical role in initial charter contract approval, continual oversight, and re-authorization.

Authorizer Performance

Since authorizers are not involved in the day-to-day operations of the charter schools they authorize, they have a limited connection to the specific performance outcomes of the program. They are not engaged in the teaching and learning process, hiring faculty or staff, or any of the school activities. However, they are involved in the key elements of approving the school's charter contract, which contains the educational approach, school design, operational and management structure, and the assessment plan, and the specific educational goals. Furthermore, they are responsible for evaluating the school's performance and responding to any lack of performance. Authorizers have the oversight responsibility that requires them to hold the charter school (specifically the board) accountable for their performance (Vergari, 2001). However, few management companies address low school performance or only do for egregious or long-standing offenders of low performance. As a result, many authorizers have low-performing schools in their portfolios (Vergari, 2001) habitually.

Most of the decision of when and how to address low performance is based on the authorizer staff's decision. Unless pressed by either state officials, parents or community members, or sometimes the media, they typically don't act on the low performance. When they do, it typically translates into school closure. Because authorizers cannot directly interact with the school's teachers and staff, their recourse is either influence through the board (who their contract is with), or closure. A review of school closure in Michigan found that the typical reason for charter schools closing is either financial or non-renewal of the charter contract, not for academic performance (MDE, 2020). Interestingly, most of the closures were initiated by the boards of those charter schools, not the authorizer. Additionally, Alison Consoletti (2011) study from the Center of Education Reform noted that 66% of charter school closures are due to financial reasons, a lack of funds, or mismanagement.

Overall, more research is needed to inform how authorizers are connected to charter school performance and if individual authorizer practices impact charter school performance. Though authorizers do not directly operate the schools they charter, they are the most significant outside influence on their decisions and actions. Understanding this relationship will assist educators, authorizers, charter schools, and legislators who shape policy and practice to continue maximizing public resources in the quest for improved performance.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of authorizing practices on charter school performance. Using Michigan charter schools as the unit of analysis, this research examined charter school performance by authorizer type. By looking specifically at authorizers, new conclusions were made about performance patterns and how charter schools are doing across

various authorizers. To fully explore the variables around the topic of charter school performance in relation to their authorizers, the following questions were used to guide this research project:

Research Question 1: What effect does Authorizer type have on student and school performance?

Sub-questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and student achievement, as measured by the Proficiency Index?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and student growth in English Language Arts?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and student growth in Math?
4. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and the Growth Index?
5. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and graduation rate?
6. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and the Overall Index?

Research Question 2: What effect does Authorizer type have on fiscal and operational performance?

Sub-questions:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and Financial Performance, as measured by the fund balance as a percent of expenditures?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between authorizer type and Demand, as measured by enrollment trend?

Research Question 3: How do charter schools authorized by an LEA compare to their authorizer district (conventional public schools)?

The following null hypotheses were used to further test Research Question 1:

Hypotheses (Null):

H_1 There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and student achievement, as measured by the Proficiency Index.

H_2: There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and student growth in English Language Arts.

H_3: There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and student growth in Math.

H_4: There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and the Growth Index.

H_5: There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and graduation rate.

H_6: There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and the Overall (composite) Index.

The following null hypotheses were used to test Research Question 2 further:

Hypotheses (Null):

H_7 There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and financial performance, as measured by the fund balance as a percent of expenditures?

H_8 There is no statistically significant difference between authorizer type and Demand, as measured by enrollment trend?

Methods

Research Approach

Charter schools are complex organizations that are in partnership with their authorizer. To understand the factors contributing to charter school performance, a review of authorizing and its impact on charter schools is appropriate. This study used a quantitative research design to examine the authorizer type variables associated with charter school performance. These variables included student performance outcomes (achievement and growth), comparison data (state and district), and operational performance (fund balance and enrollment). Data was collected from the Michigan Department of Education's public database www.mischooldata.org; Michigan's official education data source. Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of the schools and management companies, with specific inferential statistics used to test stated research questions and hypotheses. Specifically, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the variables in Research Question 1 and 2 and associated null hypotheses. An additional Research Question explored the performance of LEA authorizers and their charter schools and compared index scores.

Data and Sample

Only schools designated as "general education" by the Michigan Department of Education were used in this study, including Schools of Excellence (SOE) and cyber schools. Although cyber schools are unique to brick-and-mortar charter schools, they were included in this study as they follow the exact schooling requirements and assessment administration, and thus the data is comparable. Schools designated as Alternative Education, Special Education, and Vocational/CTE programs were removed. Schools designated as Strict Discipline Academies (SDA) were also removed from the study.

There were 279 charter school organizations (classified as a district), with a total of 365 individual school sites in operation in Michigan for the 2018-2019 academic year. Therefore, a total of 314 schools met the criteria for a general education charter school, with 295 schools offering grades 3, 8, or 11, having posted scores, and were in operation for at least two years. Below is a breakdown of the sample:

- 42 authorizers
- 42 ISD/RESAs
- 15 Cyber Schools
- 206 Elementary (K-8)
- 59 Elementary and high schools (some configuration of both primary and secondary)
- 30 High school only (grades 9-12)

Forty-two different authorizers authorized the schools in this study: 14 LEA districts authorized 23 schools, six intermediate school districts authorized seven schools, and 11 community colleges or universities authorized the remaining 252 schools.

Table 1
Sample by Authorizer Type

Authorizer Type	Schools	Enrollment
University and Community College (HEI)	256	64,234
Intermediate School Districts (ISD)	7	1,356
Local Education Authority (LEA)	23	7,269

Variables

The independent variable used for Research Questions 1 and 2 was authorizer type, including LEA, ISD, HEA. The dependent variables for Research Question 1included the Proficiency Index, ELA Growth scores, Math Growth scores, the Composite Index, Growth Index, Graduation Index, and the School Quality Index. The dependent variables for Research Question 2 included Financial Performance, as measured by fund balance as a percent of expenditures, and the variable of Demand, which was measured by the percent of enrollment change (MDE designated).

Table 2
Breakdown of Variables

Variable	Independent or Dependent	Variable Type
Authorizer Type	Independent	Categorical
Proficiency Index	Dependent	Continuous
ELA Growth	Dependent	Continuous
Math Growth	Dependent	Continuous
Composite Index	Dependent	Continuous
Growth Index	Dependent	Continuous
Graduation Index	Dependent	Continuous
School Quality Index	Dependent	Continuous
Financial Performance	Dependent	Continuous
Demand	Dependent	Continuous

Data Analyses

First, I organized the data for schools around the various authorizers to compare school performance across the dependent variables. This provided a clearer picture of how the schools fell by authorizer type. Next, a series of one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess group differences among the various hypotheses. Research Question 1 was investigated through six subsequent hypotheses, with each focusing on the difference between authorizer type and a specific student or school performance measure. An ANOVA was performed on each null hypothesis to determine the variance between the independent variable authorizer (LEA, ISD, or HEI), and student performance, serving as the dependent variable. Research Question 2 investigated an additional two hypotheses, with each focusing on the difference between authorizer

type and operational performance. An ANOVA was performed on each null hypothesis to determine the variance between the independent variable authorizer (LEA, ISD, or HEI), and fiscal performance and student demand, serving as the dependent variables.

Research Question 3 was analyzed through descriptive statistics, as an adequate sample was unavailable for inferential statistics. A review of data was performed to provide context for comparing charter schools authorized by an LEA to their associated LEA district's performance. Additional data and analysis are needed to perform statistically significant results.

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 3 presents the results of descriptive statistics for Research Questions 1 and 2. The n size and mean, standards deviation, and minimum and maximum scores were calculated. The mean results for the four dependent variables of Proficiency, Growth Index, Graduation Index, and overall School Quality Index were highest among ISD authorized schools, except the Graduation Index, which was highest for HEI. Higher education institution authorizers followed on the other three variables, with LEAs trailing in overall performance on all variables. Although ISDs did not have the highest Graduation Index, the minimum score was significantly higher than that of other authorizers.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics

	n	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Proficiency Score					
HEI	265	47.02	25.68	3.20	100.00
ISD	7	62.92	30.57	8.34	100.00
LEA	23	29.94	23.82	3.91	98.93
Conv.		65.92	25.59	0.00	100.00
Growth Index					
HEI	265	48.84	24.76	2.37	100.00
ISD	7	52.61	29.40	13.29	100.00
LEA	23	30.05	23.64	3.31	92.71
Conv.		64.85	26.01	0.00	100.00
Graduation Index					
HEI	65	87.67	16.65	12.95	100.00
ISD	5	77.72	19.28	55.10	98.83
LEA	6	56.13	27.21	27.05	97.79
Conv.		85.17	22.26	0.00	100.00
Overall Index					
HEI	265	55.04	22.15	22.50	99.06
ISD	7	63.31	25.21	22.13	99.31
LEA	23	38.93	19.93	16.98	94.34
Conv.		70.25	22.15	1.48	100.00

Research Question 1

Hypothesis 1 investigated the difference between authorizer type and student achievement, as measured by the Michigan Proficiency Index. A statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types was found, $F(2,288)=5.87$, $p=0.00$ ($r=.04$). Student achievement was highest for schools authorized by ISDs (M = 61.16, SD = 10.16), followed by schools authorized by HEI (M = 47.02, SD = 1.58), with schools being authorized by LEA's having the lowest student achievement (M = 29.94, SD = 4.97). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 4.

Table 4
Achievement Index

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	8044.40	2.00	4022.20	6.03***	0.00	3.03
Within Groups	192328.28	293.00	656.41			
Total	200372.67	295.00				

***p < 0.01

Hypothesis 2 investigated the difference between authorizer type and student growth in English Language Arts, as measured by the Michigan ELA Growth Index. The results show a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types, $F(2,293)=6.13$, $p=0.00$ ($r=.04$). Student's ELA growth was highest for schools authorized by ISDs (M = 64.26, SD = 9.09), followed by schools authorized by HEI (M = 54.97, SD = 1.51), with schools being authorized by LEA's having the lowest student ELA growth (M = 37.83, SD = 5.23). Subsequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. Results of the analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
ELA Growth Index

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	6994.22	2.00	3497.11	5.86***	0.00	3.03
Within Groups	171720.58	288.00	596.25			
Total	178714.80	290.00				

***p < 0.01

Hypothesis 3 investigated the difference between authorizer type and student growth in Mathematics, as measured by the Michigan Math Growth Index. A statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types was also found, $F(2,122)=4.18$, $p=0.02$ ($r=.06$). Student's Math growth was highest for schools authorized by ISDs (M = 40.97, SD = 13.41) and schools authorized by HEI (M = 40.80, SD = 2.85), with schools being authorized by

LEA's having about half the Math growth (M = 22.49, SD = 4.83). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Results of the analysis are presented in Table 6.

Table 6
Math Index

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	6299.79	2.00	3149.89	4.18***	0.02	3.07
Within Groups	92027.23	122.00	754.32			
Total	98327.02	124.00				

***p < 0.05

Hypothesis 4 investigated the overall differences in School Growth Indexes between authorizer types, as measured by the Michigan Growth Index. A statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types was found, $F(2,292)=6.24$, p=0.00 (r=.04). Similar to that of the subject matter growth results, the Growth Index scores were highest for schools authorized by ISDs (M = 52.61, SD = 11.11) and schools authorized by HEI (M = 50.69, SD = 3.15), with schools being authorized by LEA's having a lower overall index (M = 30.05, SD = 4.93). The null hypothesis was rejected. Results of the analysis are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Composite Growth Index

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	7663.53	2.00	3831.77	6.24***	0.00	3.03
Within Groups	179267.57	292.00	613.93			
Total	186931.10	294.00				

***p < 0.01

Looking specifically at charter schools with high school programs, Hypothesis 5 investigated the difference between authorizer types and graduation rate, as measured by the Michigan Graduation Index. The results show a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types, $F(2,73)=9.09$, p=0.00 (r=.20). Schools authorized by HEI had the highest graduation rates (M = 87.67, SD = 2.07), followed by schools authorized by ISDs (M = 77.72, SD = 8.62), with schools being authorized by LEA's having the lowest graduation rate (M = 56.13, SD = 11.11). Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 8.

Table 8
Graduation Index

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	5713.03	2.00	2856.52	9.09***	0.00	3.12
Within Groups	22936.31	73.00	314.20			
Total	28649.35	75.00				

***p < 0.01

Hypothesis 6 investigated the overall composite index scores between the authorizer type and the Michigan overall School Quality Index. The analysis shows a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types, $F(2,292)=6.90$, p=0.00 (r=.05). The School Quality Index was highest for schools authorized by ISDs (M = 63.31, SD = 9.53) and schools authorized by HEI (M = 56.92, SD = 2.75), with schools being authorized by LEA's having a considerably lower Overall Index (M = 38.93, SD = 4.16). This null hypothesis was also rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 9.

Table 9
Overall Index

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	6115.68	2.00	3057.84	6.90***	0.00	3.03
Within Groups	129323.69	292.00	442.89			
Total	135439.37	294.00				

***p < 0.01

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 investigated the financial and operational elements of charter school performance by authorizer. Specifically, Hypothesis 7 analyzed Fiscal Performance between authorizer type and fund balance as a percent of expenditures. An analysis was conducted with results showing a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types was found, $F(2,232)=3.50$, p=0.03 (r=.03). The fund balances as a percent of expenditures were highest for LEA authorized schools (M = 38.25, SD = 50.22), with schools authorized by ISDs (M = 21.80, SD = 10.08) and schools authorized by HEI (M = 19.24, SD = 26.49) having a much lower, but similar fund balance percentages. It should be noted that the variability of this measure was severe for both LEA and HEI authorized programs, with the greatest variability for LEA authorized schools (minimum = -2.54, maximum 167.21, n=17), followed by HEI authorized schools (minimum = -132.61, maximum 173.81, n=212). The results of the null hypothesis were rejected. A presentation of the analysis is presented in Table 10.

Table 10
Fiscal Performance

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	5694.06	2.00	2847.03	3.50***	0.03	3.03
Within Groups	188924.45	232.00	814.33			
Total	194618.50	234.00				

***p < 0.05

Hypothesis 8 analyzed the variable of Demand between authorizer type, as measured by student enrollment trend. The results show a statistically significant difference between the means of the three authorizer types was found, $F(2,232)=3.61$, $p=0.03$ ($r=.03$). The enrollment trend (positive) was the greatest for LEA-authorized schools (M = 16.98, SD = 40.19), with schools authorized by HEI (M = 2.48, SD = 20.82) having a much lower but positive enrollment trend. Schools authorized by ISDs saw a negative enrollment trend (M = -4.65, SD = 3.79). Therefore, the null hypothesis was also rejected. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 11.

Table 11
Demand

Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between Groups	3698.09	2.00	1849.05	3.61***	0.03	3.03
Within Groups	118733.24	232.00	511.78			
Total	122431.34	234.00				

***p < 0.01

Research Question 3

To analyze the comparison between charter schools that are authorized by an LEA and the LEA's own performance, additional descriptive statistics were used. First, an average index score was calculated for each LEA, using the associated measures for all schools in operation for that LEA district. This score was then compared to the average index score for the charter schools authorized by that LEA. A difference in the index scores was also calculated.

Table 12

Comparison between LEA Authorizers and the Schools they Charter

	Proficiency Index			Growth Index			Graduation Index			School Quality Index		
	LEA	**Chart.**	**Diff.**	**LEA**	**Chart.**	**Diff.**	**LEA**	**Chart.**	**Diff.**	**LEA**	**Chart.**	**Diff.**
LEA 1	27.34	38.17	10.83	28.24	37.23	8.99	86.27	40.12	-46.15	45.11	73.39	28.28
LEA 2	71.52	7.06	-64.46	62.07	7.90	-54.17	90.04	78.51	-11.53	82.52	29.98	-52.54
LEA 3	81.32	3.91	-77.41	79.92	3.31	-76.61	86.60	-	-	84.05	58.39	-25.66
LEA 4	42.18	8.41	-33.77	42.77	11.16	-31.61	90.63	-	-	79.06	56.60	-22.46
LEA 5	34.89	47.69	12.80	34.89	35.61	0.72	84.94	-	-	71.03	54.58	-16.45
LEA 6	10.15	32.15	22.00	14.98	29.66	14.68	-	59.32	-	45.70	61.57	15.87
LEA 7	61.27	42.21	-19.06	59.58	41.07	-18.50	95.65	78.55	-17.10	81.74	70.79	-10.95
LEA 8	66.95	19.07	-47.88	63.76	14.89	-48.87	86.00	-	-	74.45	75.80	1.35
LEA 9	63.41	29.80	-33.61	62.53	30.78	-31.75	90.03	-	-	74.79	70.55	-4.24
LEA 10	-	25.44	-	-	27.41	-	-	88.17	-	42.41	65.41	23.00
LEA 11	85.63	33.05	-52.58	83.86	40.31	-43.55	98.67	-	-	82.23	52.51	-29.72
LEA 12	85.48	8.91	-76.57	82.09	14.78	-67.31	96.74	-	-	90.41	61.11	-29.30
LEA 13	86.97	25.18	-61.79	75.77	24.19	-51.58	100.00	-	-	87.41	73.63	-13.78
LEA 14	67.80	31.61	-36.19	74.53	29.95	-44.58	96.90	-	-	87.13	84.84	-2.29
Average	**60.38**	**25.19**	**-35.21**	**58.84**	**24.88**	**-34.16**	**91.87**	**68.93**	**-24.92**	**73.43**	**63.51**	**-9.92**

Of the 14 LEA districts authorizing charter schools during the 2018-2019 academic year, the average Proficiency Index for LEAs was 60.38, with the charter school they authorize having an average Proficiency Index of 25.19 (Table 12). A difference of 35.21 points. The growth results were also considerably different, with the average LEA Growth Index being 58.84, and the average related charter school Growth Index is 24.88. A difference of 34.16 points. Only three LEA school districts had graduation rates to compare between the LEA and charter schools. Of the three LEA districts, the average Graduation Index was 91.87, while the average charter school Graduation Index was 68.93. A difference of 24.92 points. The overall School Quality Index was not as prominent, with the average LEA School Quality Index being 73.43 and the average charter school School Quality Index being 63.51. A difference of 9.92 points.

An observation of the data is that the lower performing LEA districts had some of the higher charter school performance. Conversely, some of the higher-performing LEA districts had some of the lowest charter school performance. An additional observation was that charter school performance across all LEAs was low. This is consistent with the prior inferential analyses in Research Questions 1 and 2. Schools authorized by LEA districts in Michigan perform considerably lower than their authorizer's district, other charter schools, and the state averages.

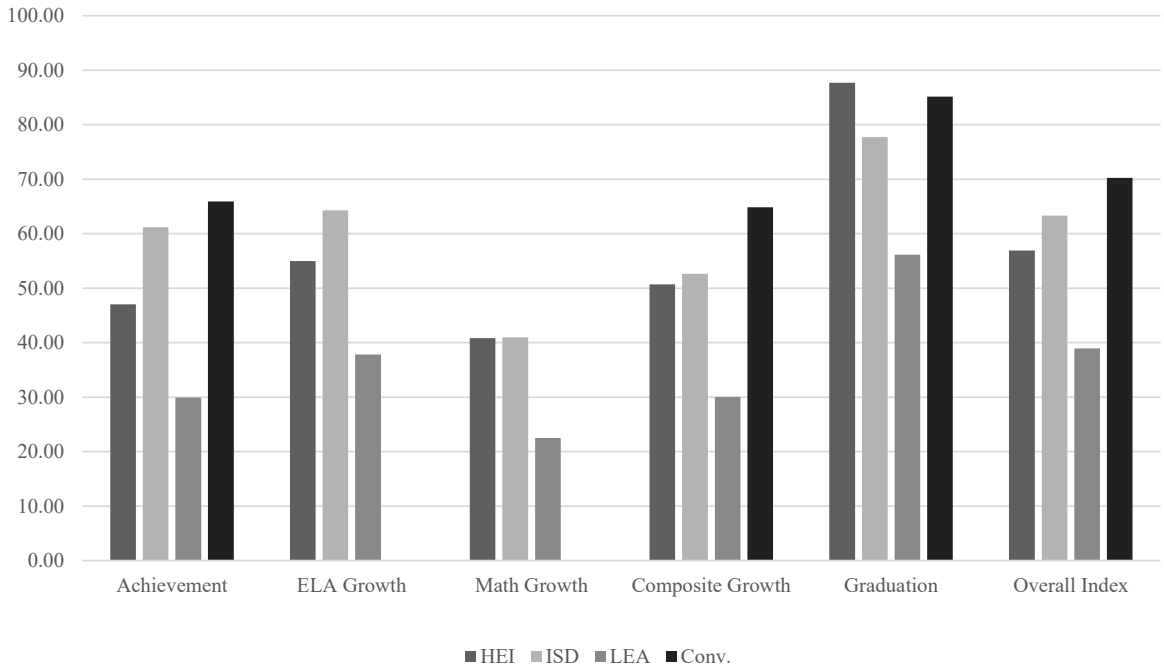
Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate the various types of authorizers that oversee Michigan's charter schools and explore the variables associated with school performance. Although state law allows different organizations to issue charters, does the type of authorizer influence charter school performance? This research concludes that there is a statistically

significant difference in authorizer type and charter school performance in Michigan. Specifically, ISDs performed the best among all authorizer types. While HEI authorized schools did not perform as well as ISD authorized schools, their results were similar across most variables, with graduation rates being higher for HEI. Overall, schools chartered by ISDs and HEAs had measurably higher academic performance than did schools authorized by their local districts (LEAs). The mean differences in scores for each authorizer are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

2018-2019 Mean Difference in Charter School Index by Authorizer



An intriguing finding from the analysis was the variation among authorizer type and conventional public schools. Of all public schools in Michigan with Overall Index results for 2018-2019 (both conventional schools and charter schools), the mean Overall Index score was 64.7. However, the schools chartered by LEAs had an Overall Index of 66.5, while HEI and ISD chartered schools Overall Index was 71.9 and 74.1, respectively. Additionally, when only looking at the LEAs who chartered the schools in this study, they had an Overall Index of 61.5. Therefore, combined LEA authorized charter schools did better than their district in all measured categories and performed higher than the state average, though schools chartered by LEAs had the overall lowest performance across all variables. Most, about half that of ISD-authorized schools.

Considering the historic adversarial relationship between conventional districts and charter schools, this is a particularly intriguing outcome. Did LEA performance play a role in the performance of the schools they authorize? Although the LEA charter schools performed better than their authorizer, did authorizing practices play a role in their overall reduced performance? Do LEAs who authorize charter schools have less oversight of their charter programs than do ISDs and HEIs? Are there fewer resources provided to these charter schools, as the district prioritizes the conventional schools? Do these LEAs not perform as well, overall, impacting the performance of the charter schools they authorize? Although the last question does not appear to be the case,

according to the observations of Research Question 3, additional research is needed to fully understand this phenomenon.

When accounting for fiscal and operational performance, however, there is a different story. Schools authorized by LEAs had the highest performance in both fiscal and operational areas. LEA-authorized schools, on average, had nearly twice the fund balance as a percent of expenditures than ISD and HEI-authorized schools. Additionally, LEA authorized schools had the highest, positive enrollment trend, seeing an average increase of 16.98 students from the prior year. Reflecting on the discussion around school performance, enrollment trends were highest among LEA authorized schools. Still, they had the lowest growth, suggesting that school choice is more complex than just selecting a school based on performance.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The legitimacy of charter schools and their long-term success across the education field in the United States is still debated. Although, after nearly 30 years, they have become a mainstay in many communities throughout the country, their legality and right to exist are continuously being questioned. One factor, and possibly the most crucial factor, is the performance of these experimental public school programs. Although research is still shedding light on charter schools and their performance, a reasonable conclusion is that charter school performance varies widely as does the types of charter schools in existence. One factor that plays a role in this is the contributions of the charter school authorizer. The results of this study clearly illustrate that charter schools perform differently by authorizer. Therefore, the next step in the evolution of charter school performance is to understand better why and which factors contribute to higher-performing charter schools to learn from these programs so all schools can improve.

Recommendations for Policy

As the results of this study indicate, the quality of authorizing varies across authorizer types. Legislators and policymakers need to consider this phenomenon when reviewing charter school performance and looking at variables that impact school performance. Lumping all charter schools into the same category ignores the nuances that distinguish the uniqueness of these programs. Additionally, because charter schools typically have less oversight from state education agencies, the additional focus should be placed on the quality of authorizing practices due to the nature of the authorizing relationship. The policies, practices, and staff makeup of authorizers should be reviewed. If there is such a stark difference between outcomes of charter schools by authorizer type, it would be appropriate to assume that the activities around oversight and accountability of authorizers are also different. Policies that address quality authorizing practices, such as budgets, staffing ratios, and even accreditation, might address the variation among authorizers.

Recommendations for Practice

The authorizer has both a unique and vital role to play in the quality element of charter schooling. As this study's outcomes suggest, not all authorizer practices are consistent per the association between authorizer type and the results of the schools they oversee. Organizations, such as the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA), provide both a community for charter school authorizers and training, professional development, and best practices for their staff.

Many states that allow charter schools to operate also have state-level associations. The Michigan Council of Charter School Authorizers (or Council) is one example. Members of the Council meet regularly to discuss charter school topics and authorizing practices, and the element of quality oversight. Charter school authorizers should engage with professional organizations holding quality discussions and offering insight into quality authorizing practices. NACSA and state authorizer organizations can be resources to assist authorizer staff in improving their oversight activities, improving their school's performance. If we want better charter school outcomes, we need better authorizing practices.

Study Limitations

I examined the variables surrounding charter school performance by authorizer type. The scope of this study was intentionally limited to allow for a focused analysis of authorizer type and specific school performance factors in Michigan. There are many additional variables associated with school performance and charter school performance that were not used within this study, including geography and size of the schools, student gender, race and ethnicity (e.g., minority status), socioeconomic status, special education, or alternative types of school programs (e.g., strict discipline academies, alternative educational or special education focus, career tech only programs). This study was also limited to data collected by the state department of education. Aggregated, publicly available performance scores were used. This analysis did not consider the school size as a factor. This study was also limited by the data around LEA authorizing performance. No student-level data was used, which would have yielded additional options for analysis when comparing LEA district outcomes and outcomes of the schools they authorize. Another limitation of this study was its focus on outcomes as the dependent variable rather than actual authorizing practices.

Future Research

Due to the lack of literature specifically focused on charter school authorizing practices, this study sought to inform whether differences exist between authorizer types. Based on the evidence that the performance of charter schools does differ among authorizer types, a logical progression of this work would be the investigation around authorizer practices. What specific behaviors contribute to charter school performance? Are specific policies attributed to higher performance, or lower performance, of charter schools? This study was also limited in analyzing the differences between LEA performance and the schools they authorize. Additional research in this area would shed light on this relationship that could inform both policy and practice. This study was Michigan-centric in nature. Though Michigan has a large charter school population, additional research into other states would be appropriate. This could also increase the sample size, helping to substantiate the results of this study. Also, a more focused look at the additional variables associated with charter school performance would add additional results to this topic of authorizer performance. Specifically, race and other demographic factors, such as urban, rural, and low SES, would inform the nuances among authorizing practices and the uniqueness of the schools they charter. And finally, a broader investigation into closed charter schools and the relationship to authorizing practices may illuminate behaviors of authorizer staff and the decision-making process.

Conclusions

Charter schools are unique public school entities, autonomous from conventional district school programs. Their organizational structure includes other influencers to the overall performance of their programs, not found with conventional schools, through educational service providers and authorizers. Charter schools are interconnected to their authorizer, but little is known about how authorizing policies and practices impact them. The authorizer is a critical piece in determining the quality of the schools they oversee, so understanding their practices and outcomes is essential to improving the overall quality of public schools.

The findings of this study show that a statistically significant difference exists between various authorizing types throughout key performance measures; academic and operational. These results infer that authorizing plays a role in student performance and overall program outcomes. Therefore, the policies and practices impacting authorizing are an element in the school quality quotient and should be considered when drafting policies and oversight activities. Although this study did not analyze the qualitative aspects of authorizing practice, it substantiates the differences in outcomes of charter schools by authorizer types, which may be more than solely the difference of the schools. Additional work to unpack the specific behaviors and attributes of authorizing would be appropriate to understand authorizers and their impact further. Ultimately, however, these outcomes are a step in understanding the link between authorizers and the schools they oversee.

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