

## **Research Says....About Charter Schools: The Good and the Bad, the Conflicting Evidence.**

There is a large body of existing research on various aspects of the charter school movement, including comparative analyses of charter school and traditional public school performance. Research conducted on charter schools' academic achievement generally falls into one of two categories: 1) change over time or 2) one or more points in time. Both approaches offer valuable insight into charter school performance.

The studies presented on this fact sheet use different methodologies with often very different outcomes, some positive and some negative about charter schools. These mixed outcomes do indicate that charter schools are different from traditional public schools, and are often different from one another. Charter schools serve different types of students with a variety of academic and sometimes behavioral challenges.

The research team at the Arizona Charter Schools Association is dedicated to conducting new and methodologically strong research on charter school quality. Headed by Rebecca Gau, the research team has several research projects already underway and will soon be contributing to the large body of research on charter schools in Arizona.

### **Growth Studies**

#### **Arizona**

- Charter school students, on average, begin with lower test scores than their traditional public school counterparts, and show overall annual achievement growth roughly three points higher than traditional public school counterparts. This study entails an examination of 158,000 test scores of more than 60,000 Arizona students attending both charter schools and traditional public schools statewide over a three year period. (Solmon and Goldschmidt 2004).
- High school achievement growth was found to be higher among traditional public high schools than charter schools because charter high schools generally serve students who want vocational training, are returning students, have learning or behavioral problems, or have been in the juvenile justice system. This study entails an examination of 158,000 test scores of more than 60,000 Arizona students attending both charter schools and traditional public schools statewide over a three year period. (Solmon and Goldschmidt 2004).
- No significant effects of charter schools on test performance were found in Arizona in 2003. In an examination of the SAT-9 and AIMS in Arizona, the

- findings on test performance were mixed, the magnitude was always small, and none of the results were statistically significant. (Greene, Forster, and Winters 2003).
- Students enrolled in a charter school for two-to-three consecutive years show an advantage in learning capabilities over students in traditional public schools for the same period of time. This study examined test scores of charter school students and district students in Arizona. (Solmon, Paark, and Garcia 2001).

### **Across the Nation**

- Charter schools in five states were shown to slightly outperform district schools by two-to-three percentage points. In this multi-state study of Arizona, California, North Carolina, Florida, and Texas, over a one-year period, charter schools in these states outperformed nearby public schools on math tests by 3% and on reading tests by 2% for a student starting in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile. (Greene, Forster and Winters 2003).
- Charter schools have lower test scores than district schools, but larger gains in scores across ten states with charter schools. This multi-state study compares changes in average charter school and district school test scores in ten states between 2000 and 2002. (Loveless 2003).
- For every year a charter school student in New York City spends in a charter school as opposed to a traditional public school, he or she gains 3.8 scale score points and 12% of a performance level in math and 1.6 scale score points and 3.5% of a performance level in reading. This New York City study compares the performance of students who are in and out of the lottery for New York City charter schools. (Hoxby and Muraka 2007).
- In the middle grades, charter school students are more likely to show larger learning gains than traditional public school students. In earlier grades, traditional public school students tend to experience larger learning gains than charter school students. This Florida study compares gains of charter school and district school students from the years 2001-2002 to the years 2005-2006. (Florida Department of Education 2006).
- Students who transfer from traditional public schools to charter schools have lower achievement scores in math and reading prior to moving than their peers who remain in a traditional public school. This study used California student-level data to examine students as they transfer from traditional public schools to charter schools. (Booker, Zimmer, and Buddin 2005).
- Charter school students lose ground initially when moving to a charter school, but steadily improve in performance in a charter school over time. Further, charter

school performance improves as charter schools progress beyond their first year. This Texas study compared average individual test score gains in charter schools and district schools using five cohorts of students. (Booker et al. 2004).

## **Point in Time Studies**

### **Student and School Performance**

- Charter school students are more likely to be proficient than students in nearby neighboring schools. The charter school advantage tends to be greater in charter schools that have been in business longer than shorter term charter schools, in areas with high poor or Hispanic populations, and in states with charter laws that provide more autonomy and funding. This nationwide study compared the percent of students proficient at charter schools with the percent of students proficient in the nearest district school and nearest racially similar district school. (Hoxby 2004).
- When controlling for race and income, charter schools' advantage is statistically insignificant in reading and math. This study reevaluated Hoxby's (2004) study using more controls for income and race and then breaking down achievement in each state. (Roy and Mishel 2005).
- No statistically significant differences were found in reading performance among charter school students and traditional public school students. Charter school students eligible for free lunch performed worse than district students, while charter school students with less experienced teachers performed worse than district students in reading and math. Charter school and district students within racial/ethnic groups performed comparably in reading and math. This study compared 2003 NAEP national reading and math scores for 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in charter and district schools. (U.S. Department of Education 2004).
- Charter school students in grades 3-8 performed better than district students. Charter school students in grades 9-10 performed worse than district students. Both of these findings come from a Colorado based study. (Colorado State Department of Education 2003).
- Charter school students outperformed traditional school students in elementary and middle school reading, performed about the same in elementary and middle school math, and underperformed in high school reading and math, in Florida. (Florida Department of Education 2006).

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- McDonogh 15, a charter school in the French Quarter of New Orleans, had 91% of their fourth graders pass their end-of-year tests compared to 51% of students in the city's public schools. (Jonsson 2007).
- Charter school mean scores in reading and mathematics were lower, on average, than those in traditional public schools. These findings come from comparing 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) national reading and math scores for 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in charter schools and district schools. (Braun, Jenkins, Grigg, and Tirre 2006).
- Charter school students had significantly lower achievement in 4<sup>th</sup> grade math and reading and 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading. Even controlling for family income and school location, charter school students still scored significantly lower in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. This study compared 2003 NAEP national reading and math scores for 4<sup>th</sup> grade and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in charter schools and district schools. (Nelson, Rosenberg, and Van Meter 2004).
- 62% of district schools with similar demographics outscored charter schools in 2002. This study compared average test scores in charter schools and district schools in ten states in 2002. (Loveless 2003).

### **School Leadership and Teaching**

- Charter and private schools are more likely to tie some portion of teachers' pay to performance and may offer higher salaries to hard-to-fill positions. Charter and private schools make greater use of non-financial rewards such as flexible leave policies and teacher-training programs than district schools to attract the best teachers. This study finds that charter schools and private schools make greater use of pay innovations than traditional charter schools. (Kowal et al. 2007).
- An emphasis on hiring teachers with full standard credentials has a positive effect in traditional public high schools, a negative effect in charter high schools, and no effect in middle and elementary charter or traditional public schools. These results come from a survey of charter schools and district schools in California. (Buddin and Zimmer 2005).
- Charter school teachers are more likely to participate in informal professional development than traditional public school teachers. Charter school teachers have less experience and fewer teaching credentials than those in public schools, according to a California based study. (Zimmer et al. 2003).
- Charter school principals have greater control over their schools than do traditional public school principals. Charter school principals, particularly in

startup schools report receiving less funding per student than do traditional public school principals, according to a California based study. (Zimmer et al. 2003).

### **Racial Background of Charter School Students**

- Charter schools serve a higher proportion of black and white students, but fewer Hispanics and lower income students. (Roy and Mishel 2005).
- Black students are much more likely than white students to choose to attend a charter school, Hispanic students are slightly more likely than white students to choose to attend a charter school, while Asian students are no more or less likely than white students to choose to attend a charter school, a California based study shows. (Booker, Zimmer, and Buddin 2005).

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