

Charter Schools that Work:

Economically Integrated Schools with Teacher Voice

Charter schools, publicly funded institutions that are given autonomy to experiment, have become a major part of the public school reform agenda in recent years. First proposed by teacher union leader Albert Shanker in 1988 as a way to give creative teachers a forum to try new ideas, the charter school model has morphed over the years, as charters have grown to educate 1.6 million students by the 2009–10 school year.¹ Enthusiastically embraced by conservatives, in part because most charters have non-unionized teachers, the charter school model also has received major backing from the Obama administration, most notably as a solution to the problem of persistently failing, high-poverty public schools. With so much emphasis being placed on the potential of charter schools, it is important to have an accurate assessment of their performance. How well are charter schools working? And how might they be restructured to work better?

The Growing Momentum behind Charter Schools

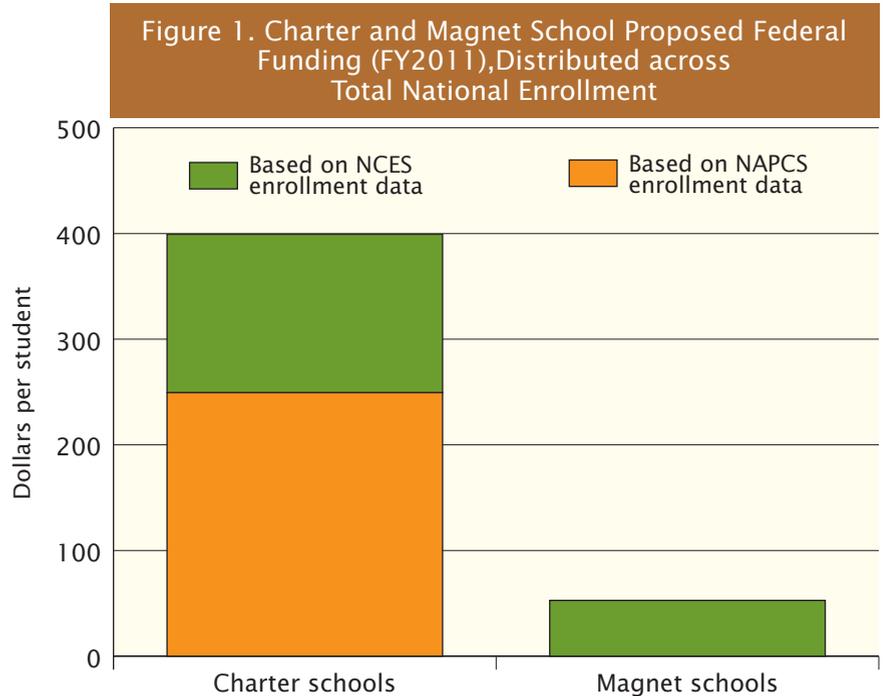
Liberals and conservatives for the most part have supported different theories about why high-poverty public schools fail and what sort of alternatives should be provided to students stuck in them. Liberals have argued that concentrations of poverty and segregation make for bad schools and have supported magnet schools as an option that can break up poverty concentrations and allow students from different backgrounds to come together to learn in strong schools. Conservatives, meanwhile, have argued that collective bargaining contracts in public schools stifle innovation and believe that charter schools, which generally are free of teacher union representation, can provide the right governance structure to make high-poverty schools work.

On this fundamental issue, the Obama administration has sided with conservatives, giving far stronger rhetorical, financial, and policy support to charter schools rather than magnet schools. The administration's Race to the Top Fund rewards states that lift caps on the number of charter schools that can be created in a state, but provides no incentives for integration or magnet schools. The administration's "turn-around schools" initiative encourages school districts to close struggling public schools and have charter school operators open new schools, but gives no role to magnets. And, as can be seen in Figure 1, the Obama administration has proposed federal funding of charter schools that dwarfs that provided to magnet schools.

The Obama administration's support for charter schools has been backed by glowing reports on the success of certain high-profile charter schools or reports on charter schools in certain cities. Among the claims are these:

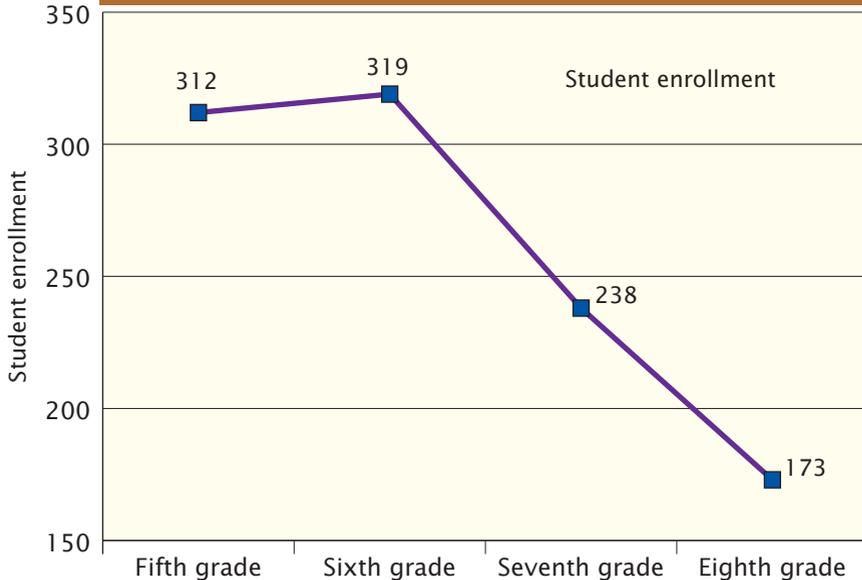
- ◆ *Washington Post* reporter Jay Mathews wrote in 2009 that the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP) charter schools have increased test scores of low-income students faster than anywhere else.²
- ◆ *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, citing the work of Harvard's Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, Jr., wrote that a Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) charter middle school had, by the eighth grade, "eliminated the achievement gap between its black students and the city average for white students."³

- ◆ Harvard economist Thomas Kane and colleagues, in a 2009 report for the Boston Foundation, found that students who applied for and won the lottery to attend charter schools in Boston significantly outperformed students who lost the lottery and attended regular public schools.⁴
- ◆ Stanford Professor Caroline Hoxby, in a 2009 study of New York City charter schools, purported to find that, for students who attended charter schools from kindergarten through eighth grade, these charter schools could close the “Scarsdale-Harlem gap”—the gap between affluent suburban Scarsdale and low-income Harlem students—by 86 percent in math.⁵



Source: Federal funding data for the 2011 fiscal year proposed budget from Mary Ann Zehr, “Backers of Magnet Schools Question Charter Push,” *Education Week*, February 24, 2010 (\$400 million for charter schools; \$110 million for magnet schools). The most recent NCES enrollment data (for the 2005–06 school year) from Erica Frankenberg and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, “The Forgotten Choice? Rethinking Magnet Schools in a Changing Landscape: A Report to Magnet Schools of America,” UCLA Civil Rights Project, Los Angeles, California, November 2008, 15 (1,001,637 charter school students; 2,083,280 magnet school students). A more current estimate of charter school enrollment numbers is suggested by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) 2009–10 National Students Overview Data (1,603,484 students). The graph shows federal funding per pupil for national enrollment, but the figure’s values do not reflect specific per-pupil expenditures allotted by the federal government as federal spending for both charter schools and magnet schools is not distributed uniformly across all students.

Figure 2. Bay Area KIPP Net Student Enrollment by Grade Level, from 2003–04 to 2006–07



Note: Although 24 percent of the original fifth grade cohort left during or immediately after the school year, roughly 82 new students entered in sixth grade, a common year for making the transition from elementary to middle school.

Source: Katrina R. Woodworth, Jane L. David, Roneeta Guha, Haiwen Wang, and Alejandra Lopez-Torkos, “San Francisco Bay Area KIPP Schools: A Study of Early Implementation and Achievement: Final Report,” Center for Education Policy, SRI International, Menlo Park, California, 2008, 12–15, esp. see Exhibit 2–3, on p. 13. The study cites data from the California Department of Education. Four of the five Bay Area KIPP schools are included in this graph; enrollment numbers from the Heartwood Academy are excluded because it began a year later than the other schools and, accordingly, does not have a 2003 cohort of students progressing through these grades in the same time frame.

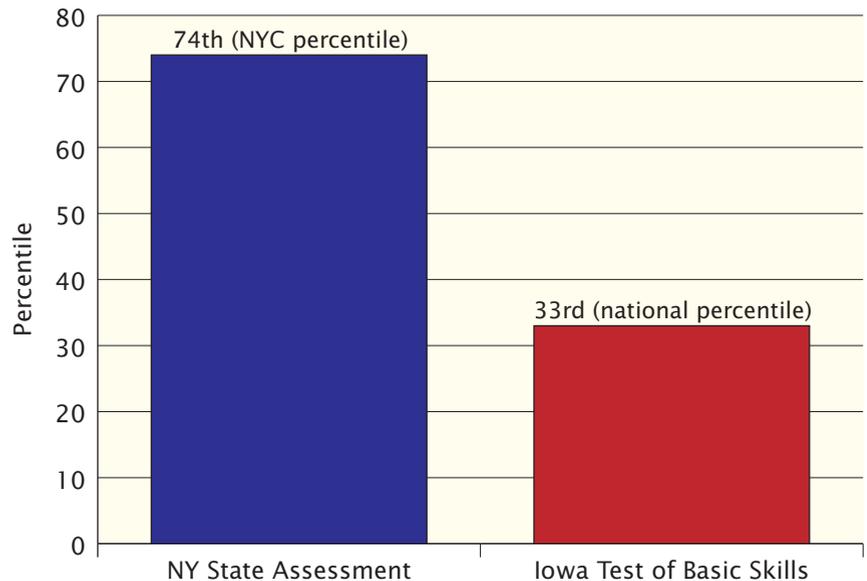
The Reality of Mediocre Achievement in Most Charter Schools

Upon close examination, claims of widespread charter school success do not hold up to scrutiny, and, indeed, the general performance of charter schools nationally has been largely disappointing.

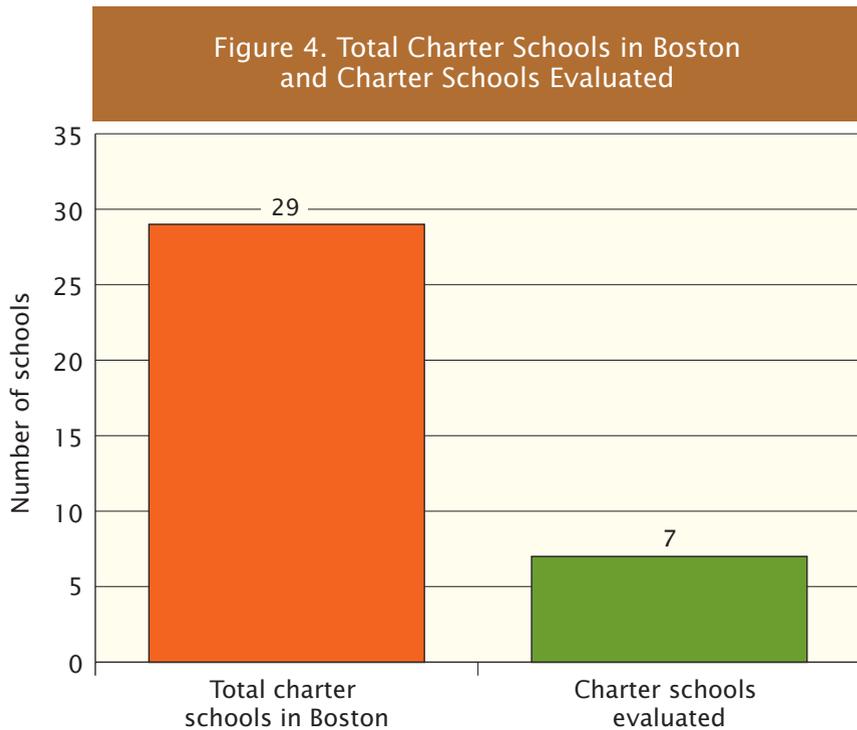
KIPP schools, with their emphasis on “tough love”—a longer school day and school year, more homework, and the explicit teaching of middle-class habits and norms—have achieved impressive results, but only with a subset of low-income students: those who have the skills and the drive to survive the program. As Figure 2 indicates, the attrition rate in KIPP schools can be quite high.⁶ It could be argued that KIPP’s rigorous program essentially is “creaming” high-functioning students from the pool that initially walk through its doors.

The claims that the Harlem Children’s Zone charter schools are experiencing dramatic success in educating their students also are overblown. As Figure 3 suggests, while HCZ charter schools performed at high levels on the New York State exam for which they were specifically prepared, these same students did poorly on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, scoring in the thirty-third percentile nationally. The Iowa results are significant in revealing the lack of reliability of the HCZ New York results, as Columbia University’s Aaron Pallas notes, because “if proficiency in English and math are to mean anything, these skills have to be able to generalize to contexts other than a particular high-stakes test.”⁷

Figure 3. Harlem Children’s Zone Eighth Grade Math Assessment Results (2007–08), by Exam



Source: Aaron Pallas, “Just How Gullible Is David Brooks?,” GothamSchools.org, May 8, 2009, <http://gothamschools.org/2009/05/08/just-how-gullible-is-david-brooks/>.

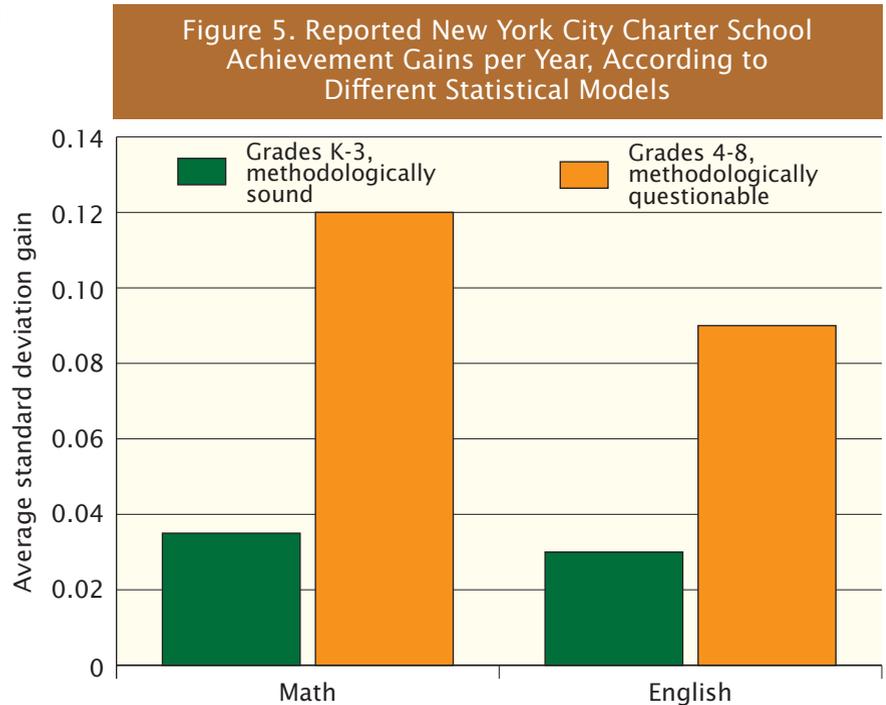


Source: Jennifer Jennings, "The Boston Pilot/Charter School Study: Some Good News, and Some Cautions," Eduwonkette blog, January 7, 2009, <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/eduwonkette/2009/01/>.

The Boston Foundation study⁸ of Boston charter schools is also less impressive upon closer scrutiny. As Figure 4 shows, the study compared students only in the one-quarter of charter schools that were oversubscribed—presumably those judged by parents to be the strongest performing schools. There are sound methodological reasons for comparing students who lotteried in and out of charter schools, but media reports often neglected to mention that the study compared only the strongest charter schools against public schools generally.

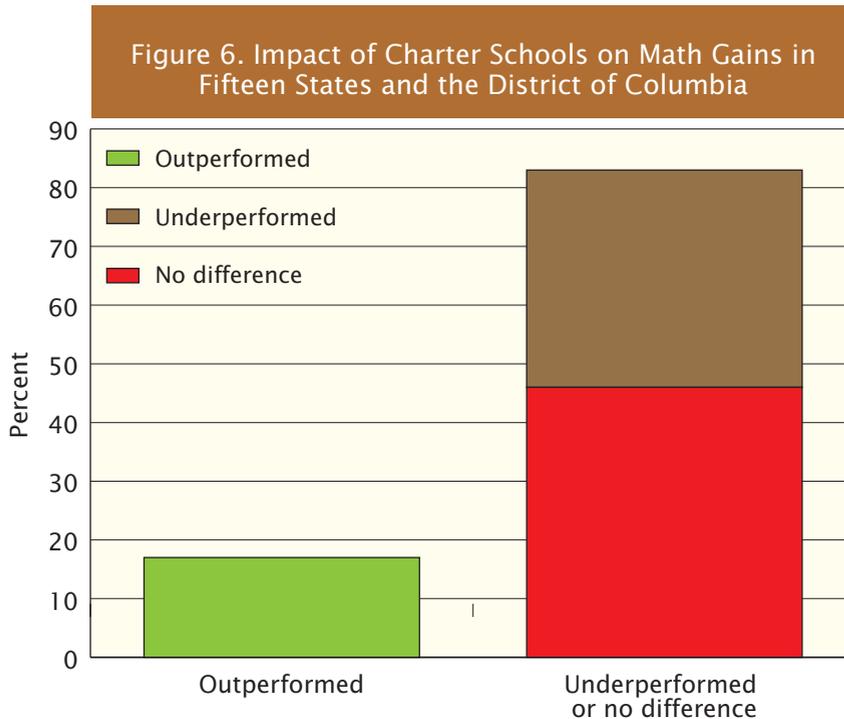
Finally, a recent study by Stanford University's Caroline Hoxby of New York City charter schools,⁹ which claimed to find a significantly closing of the Scarsdale-Harlem gap, relied on a set of methodologically questionable assumptions. As Hoxby's colleague Sean Reardon found, the methodologically sound gains mentioned in the study were substantially smaller.¹⁰ (See Figure 5.)

Moreover, while individual charter schools or charter schools in particular cities may claim some improvement in test scores for students, national assessments of charter schools have revealed their performance as a whole to be disappointing. As Diane Ravitch notes, "Charter schools have been compared to regular public schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009, and have never outperformed them."¹¹



Note: The reported achievement gains for English K-3 had a p-value of 0.07, which indicates they are marginally less statistically significant than the standard conventions of social science practice.

Source: Sean F. Reardon, "Review of 'How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement,'" Education and the Public Interest Center and Education Policy Research Unit, November 2009.



Source: "Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States," Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, Stanford, California, June 2009, 44, Table 9.

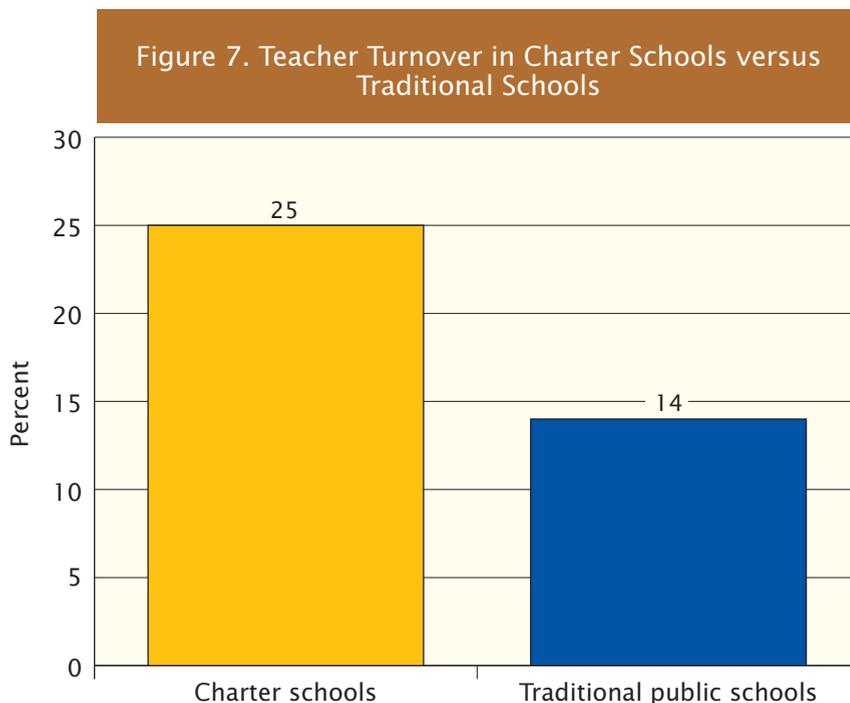
Likewise, a 2009 landmark study conducted by the generally pro-charter Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University¹² found that charter schools are twice as likely to underperform rather than over-perform compared to public schools. The study of charter schools in fifteen states and the District of Columbia, which together educate roughly 70 percent of the nation's charter school students, found that, in examining math gains over time, only 17 percent outperformed regular public schools, while 37 percent underperformed and 46 percent showed no difference. (See Figure 6.)

General Problems with the Charter School Model that Contribute to Its Failure

What explains the disappointing results of charter schools? In considering the characteristics shared by most charter schools that stifle progress in improving academic achievement, two factors stand out.

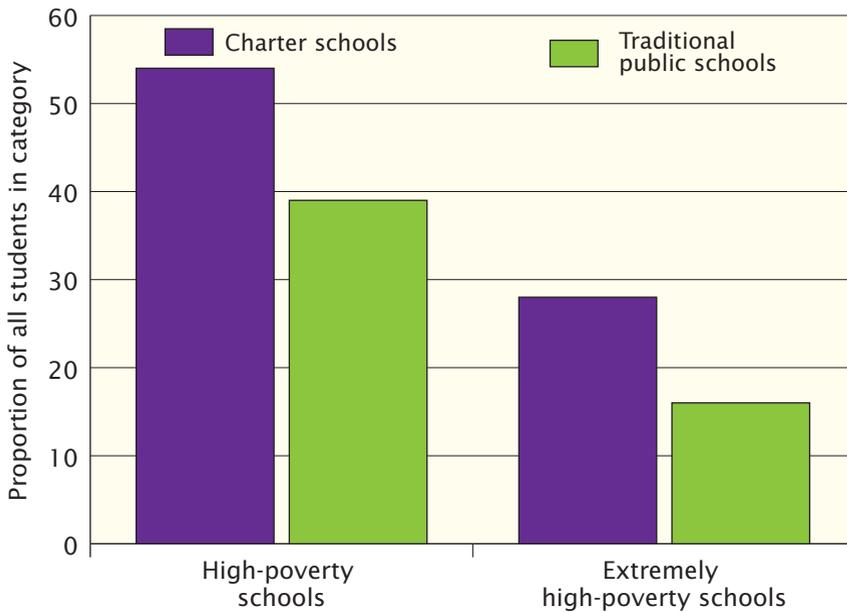
Lack of Teacher Voice

When Albert Shanker proposed charter school in 1988, he had in mind that teachers would draw on their knowledge and expertise to make suggestions about how to design better schools.¹³ Minnesota state legislator Ember Reichgott Junge, author of the nation's first charter law, noted "many teachers were frustrated with their work and were leaving the profession. I wanted to give them more ownership."¹⁴ Over time, however, Shanker became disillusioned with charter schools, which he believed had become a vehicle for bypassing unions. (Today, almost 90 percent of charter schools are not unionized.)¹⁵ And far from providing a way to stem teacher turnover, as Junge envisioned, teacher turnover is substantially higher in charter schools, as Figure 7 illustrates. High rates of turnover can reduce student learning by exposing pupils to inexperienced teachers, by disrupting coherent instruction, and by diverting school resources to recruitment.¹⁶



Source: David A. Stuit and Thomas M. Smith, "Teacher Turnover in Charter Schools," National Center on School Choice, Vanderbilt University, 2009, 22–23. (Also see Gary Miron and Brooks Applegate, "Teacher Attrition in Charter Schools," Education Policy Research Unit, Arizona State University, 2008.) Stuit and Smith compare teacher turnover in charter schools to teacher turnover in traditional public schools of all socioeconomic status levels. They find though that "an increase in percent of students on free and reduced-price lunch slightly increases the odds of a teacher leaving the profession and the odds of a teacher moving schools" (p. 28). Indeed, Richard Ingersoll found that teacher turnover in high-poverty traditional public schools is about 15.2 percent. See Richard M. Ingersoll, "Teacher Turnover, Teacher Shortages, and the Organization of Schools," Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington, January 2001, 16, Figure 2.

Figure 8. Concentration of Poverty in Charter Schools (2007–08)



Source: Erica Frankenberg, Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, and Jia Wang, “Choice without Equity: Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards,” The Civil Rights Project at UCLA, Los Angeles, California, January 2010, 72, Table 30. Data are from the 2007–08 NCES Common Core of Data. “High-poverty schools” are schools with 50 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and “extremely high-poverty schools” are schools with 75 percent of more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Lack of Socioeconomic Integration

The charter school movement's heavy reliance on a model of trying to make high-poverty schools (that is, schools with 50 percent or more of their students eligible for free or reduced-price meals) work is another factor that can explain their failure to make progress. There is more than forty years of research to suggest that concentrations of school poverty make for a very difficult learning environment because a student in a high-poverty school is likely to be surrounded by peers who are less academically engaged, parents who are less active in school affairs, and weaker teachers who tend to have low expectations.¹⁷ Unfortunately, as Figure 8 suggests, charter schools have even greater concentrations of poverty than regular public schools.

More than half of charter school students attend schools that are majority poor, and 28 percent attend schools that have extremely high poverty levels (with more than 75 percent of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch). While the “no excuses” model of making high-poverty schools work succeeds in rare cases, the vast majority of high-poverty public schools in this country fail to produce high achievement.¹⁸ The mediocre performance of most charter schools suggests they have not picked the lock and figured out how to make separate schools for poor children work systemwide.

A Way Forward: Charter Schools with Increased Teacher Voice and Socioeconomic Integration

Of course, the charter school model is not one that inherently reduces teacher voice or concentrates poverty, and it seems quite possible to reinvent charter schools that do the opposite. Indeed a number of such promising schools already exist.

Increasing Teacher Voice

A small but growing number of charter schools are designed to enhance teacher voice. The Green Dot chain of charter schools, for example, employs a “thin” teacher contract that allows for flexibility cherished by charter proponents, but also provides teachers with a mechanism to make their voices heard on a variety of matters. All teachers in Maryland charter schools have union representation, and in New York City, Buffalo, Chicago, and elsewhere, several charter schools are unionized. In Minnesota, teachers sit on charter school boards by law, and in Wisconsin, several new “teacher cooperatives” have been established. In the coming years, the charter school movement should explore a variety of alternatives as means of reducing teacher turnover and restoring the original vision of charter schools as places that tap into the knowledge of teachers to improve the education of children.

Increasing Socioeconomic Integration

Likewise, some charter schools build on the magnet school model by intentionally seeking a socioeconomically integrated student body. Examples include such highly regarded charter schools as the Denver School of Science and Technology (which has a weighted lottery with a goal of having more than 40 percent of student eligible for free and reduced price lunch) and High Tech High in San Diego (which seeks diversity by zip code). Likewise, Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., was sited in an economically mixed neighborhood with the intent of drawing a diverse population and E. L. Haynes Public Charter School, also in D.C., makes explicit attempts to recruit low-income students to balance out applications from middle-class families. By seeking an economic mix, these schools are reducing the number of low-income students stuck in high-poverty schools, where their academic achievement and life chances are likely to be diminished.¹⁹ Because charter schools are not constrained by neighborhood assignment policies, they are uniquely positioned to recreate the common school of the new century.

Prepared by Richard D. Kahlenberg, Century Foundation Senior Fellow.

- 1 See Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 308–18; National Alliance for Public Charter Schools Students Overview, 2009–10 National, <http://www.publiccharters.org/dashboard/students/page/overview/year/2010>.
- 2 See Jay Mathews, *Work Hard. Be Nice: How Two Inspired Teachers Created the Most Promising Schools in America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2009), 2.
- 3 See David Brooks, “The Harlem Miracle,” *New York Times*, May 8, 2009.
- 4 See Atila Abdulkadiroglu, Josh Angrist, Sarah Cohodes, Susan Dynarski, Jon Fullerton, Thomas Kane, and Parag Pathak, *Informing the Debate: Comparing Boston’s Charter, Pilot and Traditional Schools* (Boston: The Boston Foundation, 2009).
- 5 Caroline M. Hoxby, Sonali Murarka, and Jenny Kang, *How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement* (Cambridge, Mass.: The New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project, September 2009), <http://www.aeaweb.org/aea/conference/program/retrieve.php?pdfid=532>.
- 6 Attrition problems are not confined to KIPP’s San Francisco area schools. See Jeffrey Henig, “What Do We Know About the Outcomes of KIPP Schools?” The Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, November 2008, http://greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Henig_Kipp.pdf. Although a recent Mathematica study found that attrition at KIPP schools is similar to high poverty public schools, the study ignores the fact that whereas regular public schools take in new students, KIPP schools generally do not. See Gary Miron, “New KIPP Study Underestimates KIPP Attrition Effects,” Education and Public Interest Center, June 22, 2010, <http://www.epicpolicy.org/newsletter/2010/06/new-kipp-study-underestimates-attrition-effects-0>.
- 7 Aaron Pallas, “Just How Gullible Is David Brooks?” GothamSchool.org, May 8, 2009, <http://gothamschools.org/2009/05/08/just-how-gullible-is-david-brooks/>.
- 8 Abdulkadiroglu et al., *Informing the Debate*.
- 9 Hoxby, Murarka, and King, *How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement*.
- 10 For further discussion of Reardon’s critique of Hoxby’s study, see Marco Basile, “False Impression: How a Widely Cited Study Vastly Overstates the Benefits of Charter Schools,” The Century Foundation, May 14, 2010, http://www.tcf.org/publications/education/basile_brief.pdf.
- 11 Diane Ravitch, “A New Agenda for School Reform,” *Washington Post*, April 2, 2010.
- 12 “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,” Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), Stanford University, Stanford, California, June 2009, 44, Table 9.
- 13 Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, p. 312.
- 14 Ember Reichgott Junge, “Chartering 2.0 Leadership Summit,” National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Proceedings Document, Mackinac Island, Michigan, August 7–9, 2005, 9.
- 15 According to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 12 percent of charter schools are unionized. E-mail correspondence with Sarah Johnson, Senior Manager, Communications, National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, July 23, 2010. See also Tom Weber, “Mpls. Teachers’ Union Wants Power to Authorize New Charter Schools,” Minnesota Public Radio, July 9, 2010.

16 See, for example, Donald Boyd, Pam Grossman, Hamilton Lankford, Susanna Loeb, and James Wyckoff, "Who Leaves? Teacher Attrition and Student Achievement," NBER Working Paper 14022, 2008, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14022>.

17 See, generally, Richard D. Kahlenberg, *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001); and Kahlenberg, "Turnaround Schools that Work," The Century Foundation, 2009, <http://www.tcf.org/publications/education/turn-around.pdf>.

18 See, for example, Douglas N. Harris, "Ending the Blame Game on Educational Inequity: A Study of 'High Flying' Schools and NCLB," Educational Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University, March 2006, 20.

19 See Kahlenberg, *All Together Now*, 25–40, and Kahlenberg, "Turnaround Schools that Work," 7–10.

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