

Applying the Lessons of Charter Schools

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Introduction

Charter schools were first created more than 25 years ago when the state of Minnesota passed a law in 1991 that allowed government funds to be used for independent schools that operated outside the traditional public school system. These schools would get the same amount of per pupil funding that public schools received and would not be allowed to charge tuition, but in return these schools gained a lot of autonomy through their own governance system that allowed them to experiment with new approaches to teaching their students, while being exempt from some of the labor regulations previously set by the government or the teacher's union. This new public policy strategy injected some choice and competition into the existing public school system, and since its creation, this strategy has proven itself to be extremely attractive, where virtually every state in the country now allows charter schools in some form to operate there, and charter schools are now educating about 3 million students every year across the country.

This approach has not developed without a considerable amount of controversy. The initial complaint was that by creating a different type of school to compete with traditional public schools, these schools would syphon off the highest performing and cheapest to educate students away from public schools, leaving them with the poorest and disabled students that they were mandated by law to provide with the best education they could. If this came to pass, then the US education system would get separated into two tiers, one for the haves and one for the have nots, that would divide our country, expand inequality, and ensure only part of our country got an education that allowed them to succeed.

To many people's surprise, this is not the way the charter school system in the US has developed over time. In practice, it turns out that it is not the highest performing students that want to opt out of our traditional public schools and try something new, but it is the students stuck with low performing schools in areas with a lot of poverty that find that charter schools can provide them with a better education overall. When you decentralize the strategy for school reform by allowing a great deal of experimentation, while also holding schools accountable through school choice and competition, then you often get surprises about what works and what does not, which is exactly why a decentralized strategy for reform is important.

One metric for success for such a decentralized approach was the development of large chains of charter schools, say like a McDonald's or Target, where once you had done some successful experimentation, identified what was most important, and managed to replicate that success multiple times, the priority would then be to scale up that success as quickly as possible in order to have the biggest impact on the most students. The US is now starting to see the development of those chains

designed to educate students living in poor and minority neighborhoods, where in New York City, Success Academy has proven themselves able to provide a high quality education for elementary school students, KIPP schools has improved educational outcomes for middle school students in low income neighborhoods across the country, and YES Prep high schools in Houston have seen remarkably successful in getting nearly all of their students to attend college. The first part of this policy memo provides a brief description of all three of these charter school networks.

Creating successful chains of charter schools is not enough by itself. Even though this approach has expanded dramatically over the course of 25 years, it still educates only a small fraction of students overall. That means if we really want to have a transformative impact on the education of all of our students, we need to apply the lessons learned from charter schools to the traditional public schools that still educate the vast majority of students in our country. There have been at least three major attempts to apply the techniques learned in charter schools to improve the education of those in public schools. In Newark, New Jersey, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg attempted to dramatically reform the schools there by donating a \$100 million dollars to an effort designed to change the way public schools operated. In Houston, Texas, Harvard economics professor Roland Fryer designed and implemented a rigorous field experiment that tested whether public schools in that city could successfully apply some of the specific educational strategies adopted by successful charter schools in other areas of the country. Finally, New Orleans took the most dramatic approach to reforming its public school system after Hurricane Katrina by turning every school in their school district into charter schools. The second part of this policy memo provides a brief description of each of those three attempts at public school reform.

Profiling Successful Charter School Networks

When looking at charter schools that have successfully taught elementary school students, Success Academy in New York stands out. Success Academy was founded in 2006 by Eva Moskowitz, a former New York City councilwoman, with her first elementary school in Harlem and by 2019 had become New York City's largest charter school network with 47 schools teaching 17,000 students. According to the latest standardized test results from that year, Success Academy did a remarkable job teaching their students. About 95% of their students were proficient in math, and 84% were proficient in English Language Arts compared to the rest of the city where 36% tested proficient in math and 38% in English. Success Academy managed to do this while educating primarily minority and poor communities. The vast majority of their students were Black or Latino, and in most of their schools more than two thirds were from low income families. One of the pillars of their educational approach is their strict discipline, where students are not only expected to show up on time and work hard, but are constantly prodded to make sure they sit up straight with their hand folded on their desks and eyes fixed on the teacher. Success Academy also puts a strong emphasis on standardized tests, where schools work hard to make sure students are motivated to do well on them and put a lot of time into ensuring they have the particular skills necessary to score highly.(1)

When looking at charter schools that have successfully taught middle school students, KIPP schools stand out in particular. KIPP stands for the Knowledge is Power Program and was founded by Teach for

America veterans in 1995 in Houston and New York. Since then it has expanded around the country to become the nations largest network of charter schools with 242 schools teaching more than 100,000 students in 20 states in 2020. This charter school network started by focusing on middle schools serving grades five to eight, but has recently been teaching more elementary and high school students, while focusing their efforts on neighborhoods serving mostly low income and minority students. One carefully done research study looked at a single KIPP school in Massachusetts and relied on the randomized lottery used to decide which students got to attend. They found that the KIPP school was not generating their high level of academic performance by selecting for the best students in their application process, but that instead the school achieved significant gains in performance even for students learning English, those in special education, and those that initially performed poorly on standardized tests. KIPP schools rely on the classic no excuses model of education and even lays out their approach in a slogan, “Five Pillars: High Expectations, Choice and Commitment, More Time, Power to Lead, and Focus on Results.” The high expectations pillar signifies an emphasis on behavior and discipline. The choice and commitment pillar highlights that each student has agreed to a certain commitment to show up on time, work hard, and complete their schoolwork. The more time pillar shows how the schools provide a longer school day and extended school year to give students more instructional time. The power to lead principle indicates the need to adapt the network’s overarching educational strategy to the particular needs of each individual school. The focus on results pillar demonstrates how KIPP schools rely on the results of standardized tests to monitor the progress of students.

When looking at charter schools that have successfully taught high school students, the schools that are part of the YES Prep network in Houston, Texas stand out in particular. YES stands for Youth Engaged in Service and was started by Chris Barbic in 1995, and has currently grown to over 19 schools serving over 13,000 students in the Houston area. These schools serve primarily low income families and the overwhelming majority come from Black and Hispanic households. Where YES Prep has succeeded best is in getting their high school students to go on to attend college, where virtually every high school student goes on to reach this goal. YES Prep does this by providing incredible levels of support for its students in the college preparation process, where early on each student is taken on at least 20 college visits to see what life might be like for them in the future. In addition, each student at YES Prep takes a year long course in their Junior and Senior years to guide them through the admissions process by getting help on completing your college applications, writing your college essay, preparing for the SAT, and filling out the financial aid paperwork. Plus, nearly half of students at YES Prep complete a college level AP class before finishing high school compared to just 18% of high school students in the US.(3)

Applying the Lessons from Charter Schools to Public Schools

Even though charter schools have expanded dramatically over the last 25 years to the point that they educated over 3 million students in the fall of 2017, this still represents only about 6% of all students in the country, which means public schools are still responsible for educating the vast majority of the students here. In order for charter schools to have a truly transformative impact on education, public schools need to apply the very same techniques that have proven so successful in charter schools.

One major initiative that tried to have a dramatic impact on public schools in the US happened in 2010 when Mark Zuckerberg went on Oprah to announce he was teaming up with then Newark Mayor Cory Booker and then New Jersey Governor Chris Christie to provide a \$100 million donation to the Newark school district, which was ultimately matched dollar for dollar by other donors. The idea was to push through a series of reform initiatives in the following years that would serve as a model for other struggling urban school districts around the country. The effort kind of fell apart over the next few years into disarray as highlighted by a book by Dale Russakoff called *The Prize*. Even though the test scores for Newark's public school languished in the years after the reform, the one positive development is that the percent of Newark's students going to charter schools rose from under 10% in 2008 to around 35% in 2018. Even though not every charter school has succeeded, the entire sector has performed quite well in Newark, where a 2015 Stanford study showed that Newark's charter schools saw greater improvements in math and reading scores compared to Newark's public schools and the gap was wider in Newark than any other city except Boston. In more recent test data, Newark's charter schools saw about 60% of their students pass their standardized tests in grades three through eight for reading compared to 35% for public school students. For math, about 48% of charter schools students passed their standardized tests compared to 26% of public school students. Even if reforming the existing public school system proved to be difficult to pull off, many students did get a better education in Newark because of the increase in the number of students attending charter schools.(4)

There was another major initiative to improve the performance of public schools by applying lessons learned from charters that was led by Harvard economics professor Roland Fryer. In the 2010 to 2011 school year, he teamed up with the Houston Independent School District to implement five different reforms in 20 elementary and secondary schools, and then evaluated how well the schools performed in math and reading compared to either a randomized control group or the rest of the district over the following three years depending on the circumstances. The five major changes implemented in these schools were to increase instructional time, replace about 95% of the principals and about half of the teachers, institute intensive tutoring programs, increase reliance on data driven metrics to improve student performance, and to create a high expectations learning environment in each of the schools being reformed. The reforms cost about \$1,800 per student in middle or high school, and the results generally showed that math scores improved substantially in the schools being reformed relative to the comparison group but that reading scores remained about the same. This field experiment was replicated with some variation in Denver as well with similar results. This experiment shows that public schools can improve if major reforms are implemented there, and that the results are comparable to charter school improvements in New York City, but that the gains in math likely to be significantly higher than the gains in reading.(5)

The third place that tried to reform the entire public school system based on the lessons learned from charter schools was New Orleans, where after Hurricane Katrina hit in 2004 they took the dramatic step of turning all of their schools into charter schools in 2005. Public schools were no longer run by the local school board, since the state took them over and then transferred control over to non-profit organizations. Instead of each student going to their local neighborhood school, each family got to select from any school in the city, and schools were paid based on the number of students they

attracted. The long term results of this dramatic change were remarkable where by 2014 student performance had improved by many metrics, where the high school graduation rate rose, the percent of students going to college increased, and the college graduation rate went up as well compared to similar districts elsewhere in Louisiana. This approach to school reform reinforces the idea that the key is to get more students into charter schools as quickly as possible. Technically, it does not tell us anything about how easy it is to reform public schools without turning them into charter schools, only that getting more students in charter schools has proven to be a highly effective strategy.(6)

Conclusion

The charter school movement has made some important gains since it began in the early 1990s. Not only has enrollment increased dramatically over the decades, but charter schools have proven that they can provide a better education for low income and minority students at the elementary school, middle school, and high school level. Even with these dramatic achievements, only about 6% of all students are taught at charter schools, which means another key priority is figuring out how to apply the lessons of charter schools to public schools more broadly. Attempts to achieve this goal have led to mixed results, where Newark had a difficult time making improvements to their public schools, while Houston had some success improving math scores by adopting strategies used by charter schools. Both Newark and New Orleans demonstrate that getting more students into charter schools is an effective strategy to improving educational outcomes, so that approach to reform should remain a key priority in any overall strategy.

End Notes

#1 – The information for the profile of Success Academy came from an article in The New Yorker (Mead 2017).

#2 – The information on KIPP schools came from the academic study studying the impact of the KIPP school in Lynn, Massachusetts (Angrist et al 2012).

#3 – The information on YES Prep came from a profile done by American Radio Works (Hanford 2012).

#4 – The book on the Newark school reforms is called “The Prize: Who’s in Charge of America’s Schools?” by Dale Russakof (2016), and the data on charter school performance in New Jersey came from the NJ Spotlight (Wall 2018).

#5 – The information on this field experiment in Houston comes from the paper by Roland Fryer (2014) that officially publishes the results from that experiment.

#6 – The information on the impact of the dramatic conversion of nearly all public schools into charter schools in New Orleans comes from Harris and Larsen (2018).

References

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