

Questions for Future Research



Charter schools raise many research questions as they expand and change—not only about their impacts on students’ learning and achievement, but also about their teaching practices, financing, operations and labor relations, the policies that govern them, and their relationships with traditional public schools and communities.

Below, we pose a selection of the many important research questions that charter schools raise. Rather than trying to cover every potential question, we include those that researchers, educators, policymakers, journalists and other stakeholders have identified as most pressing. Answers to these questions have the potential to contribute productively to efforts to improve education for all students.

Student Achievement

- Which charter schools or management organizations are providing high-quality education opportunities that are shown to close achievement gaps?
- What are the practices that explain why some charter schools are doing better than others in educating their students? Which practices work best in which contexts and with which types of students?
- What are charters' impacts on academic outcomes other than standardized test scores, including long-term impacts on college entry, graduation, employment and earnings?
- How well are charter school students doing compared with traditional public school students on civic engagement outcomes, including civic knowledge, skills and participation?

Diversity and Inclusion

- Why are special needs students and students with limited English-language proficiency underrepresented in charter schools nationwide? Are some charter schools actively trying to attract those students and families? What strategies are they using, and how well are they doing?
- Is there evidence that charter schools are contributing to racial and ethnic segregation in neighborhoods and cities?
- Is there evidence that lower-achieving students are being discouraged from staying in charter schools?
- What, if anything, distinguishes students and families who choose charter elementary schools from those who do not? Is there any indication that traditional public schools are losing better-prepared elementary school students to charter schools?
- How effective are lotteries at randomly assigning students to charter schools? When lotteries are weighted to ensure that charter schools represent students living in poverty and students of color, how effective are they in achieving those demographic goals?

Teachers and Teaching

- Will the apparent decrease in teacher turnover at charter schools prove durable over the long term? Why is teacher turnover at charter schools apparently decreasing? Is decreased teacher turnover at charter schools associated with better student achievement or other outcomes?
- What can we learn from charter schools and management organizations with particularly low rates of turnover? How are these schools and organizations handling the financial challenges of meeting payrolls with more experienced teachers?
- How do charter school teachers' training and effectiveness compare with traditional public school teachers' training and effectiveness?

- How do management and leadership—including top-down leadership styles and more teacher-led styles—affect teaching, operations, learning and staff turnover at charter schools?
- To what extent do teachers in charter schools use instructional or pedagogical methods that are different from those used in traditional public schools?
- What metrics can researchers use to identify and compare curricula at charter schools—such as back-to-basics curricula or thematic focuses on arts or on science, technology, engineering and math—to learn more about the outcomes and difficulties of these approaches to teaching and learning?

Innovation

- What metrics can researchers use to identify and evaluate innovative practices in all schools, including charter schools? How can researchers include not only innovative practices in classrooms, but also organizational, administrative, financial and policy innovations?
- When charter schools and traditional public schools form “compacts” to work together, what challenges do they face and what successes do they achieve?

Finances

- Which state policies create better or worse financial outcomes for charter schools and for traditional public schools, and how are those related to students’ achievement?
- What costs and burdens do overseeing and authorizing charter schools place on public institutions such as school boards and higher education systems?

Governance and Regulation

- To what extent and how do state policies, including education financing policies, affect achievement in both charters and traditional public schools?
- What political dynamics affect the outcomes of efforts to cap or increase the number of charter schools that states allow?
- Given their roles as key governing bodies for charter schools, how do authorizers interpret and apply laws and regulations during the charter application, review and renewal processes?
- How do authorizers negotiate any tensions between charter schools and traditional public schools, particularly in cases when authorizers are also local school boards?

Charter School Operators

- How can data about finances, management and achievement from nonprofit and for-profit charter school operators be reported in ways that make it easier for researchers, journalists and policymakers to understand which operators are doing well and which need help?
- What educational, management and financial practices are different management organizations using? How do those practices affect students' achievement and schools' sustainability, particularly as management organizations scale up?

Families

- How many charter schools nationwide use lotteries each year to enroll students? Bearing in mind that one student might enter more than one charter school's lottery, how many individual students are seeking seats through lottery systems in all charter schools nationwide?
- What opportunities do charter schools and operators offer parents and community members for participation in school governance? How do parents and community members participate in charter school governance, what outcomes do they seek and what do they achieve?

Public Opinion

- How do misunderstandings about charter schools—such as mistaken beliefs that they can charge tuition or select only high-achieving students—affect parents' decisions to choose charter schools or enter their children into lotteries?
- Does the presence of charter schools in a community have any effect on the attitudes, choices and behaviors of parents whose children attend traditional public schools? ●