



# Are low-performing students more likely to exit charter schools? Evidence from New York City and Denver, Colorado



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## ABSTRACT

A common criticism of charter schools is that they systematically remove or “counsel out” their lowest performing students. However, relatively little is currently known about whether low-performing students are in fact more likely to exit charter schools than surrounding traditional public schools. We use longitudinal student-level data from two large urban school systems that prior research has found to have effective charter school sectors—New York City and Denver, Colorado—to evaluate whether there is a differential relationship between low-performance on standardized test scores and the probability that students exit their schools by sector attended. We find no evidence of a differential relationship between prior performance and the likelihood of exiting a school by sector. Low-performing students in both cities are either equally likely or less likely to exit their schools than are student in traditional public schools.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, studies of educational policy have examined how incentives contained within policies have evinced potential or actual behaviors on the part of school personnel. Jacob (2005), for instance, analyzed the incentives codified in high-stakes testing policies and discovered teachers responded strategically to improve test scores by increasing special education placements, preemptively retaining students, and placing greater classroom emphasis on subjects covered in high-stakes tests and away from low-stakes subjects like science and social studies.

An educational policy of particular interest in this milieu has been school choice. In her discussion of the policy theories of school choice, Weiss (1998) sketches out the essential premises of choice as an intervention and the role incentives play: Poor educational results stem from school leaders and teachers who face little pressure to improve; choice policies enable parents to choose from among schools, thereby providing an incentive for school personnel to produce superior outcomes—generally measured by test scores—to attract and retain families.

A central assumption in this theory is that school personnel will seek to generate the best possible educational outcomes by max-

imizing their organizations' effectiveness (Friedman, 1955, 1962; Friedman & Freidman, 1980). Yet, some scholars have expressed concern that market-incentives may compel school personnel to pursue means of generating high test scores other than organizational performance, mechanisms such as manipulating the composition of student bodies (Lubienski, 2005; Lubienski, Gulosino, & Weitzel, 2009).

The most recent of such discussions has focused on charter schools. As public schools of choice, charter schools enable parents to send their children somewhere other than a neighborhood school run by the local school district. As such, charter policies are designed to introduce into the educational system the incentives discussed above. Although self-evident, it is nevertheless worth noting that all the schools in an educational marketplace—charters as well as traditional public schools—compete for students, which means schools of choice face the same incentives—likely at an even greater intensity—to produce superior outcomes. A persistent question is whether schools respond to those policy incentives by discriminatorily manipulating student enrollments to affect aggregate outcomes.

Of specific concern is whether charter schools—whose existence depends entirely on the ability to attract and retain students—“push out” certain groups of students (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013). The theorized motivation to do so is improving the school's academic profile and minimizing costs by pushing out low achieving and educationally challenging students (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013).

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Prominent charter school critic Diane Ravitch, as just one example from many, has written that, “(Charter schools) are also free to push out low-scoring students and send them back to the local public schools. This improves their results, but it leaves regular public schools with disproportionate numbers of the most challenging students” (<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/nyeducationnews/conversations/topics/43167>, para. 7). This common critique of charter schools was given additional weight when it was recently raised by New York City school’s chancellor (<http://ny.chalkbeat.org/2014/11/20/farina-implies-some-charter-schools-boosting-scores-by-pushing-out-students/#.Vjmrel4DrE>).

Yet, little is currently known about the factors that predict student mobility out of charter schools, particularly as it relates to similar attrition out of traditional public schools. Is it in fact the case that low-performing students are particularly likely to exit charter schools? To date, research provides surprisingly little evidence addressing that important question.

Along with the policy consequences of charter schools artificially improving their aggregate test score performance through student attrition, understanding student mobility is an additionally important issue because mobility compromises effective student learning (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Rose & Bradshaw, 2012; Scherrer, 2013) and school accountability (Finch, Lapsley, & Baker-Boudissa, 2009), making it a particularly relevant topic for policymakers and educational leaders (Dauter & Fuller, 2011).

In this paper, we use student-level longitudinal data from two large urban school districts with growing and effective charter sectors—New York City and Denver, Colorado—to expand upon recent research comparing whether low-performing students are more likely to exit charter schools than they are to exit traditional public schools.

Although they differ somewhat, our results are generally consistent across these two very disparate urban public school systems. We find that low-performing students are more likely to exit charter schools than are higher-performing students. However, this pattern is statistically indistinguishable from the exiting patterns seen within the local traditional public school system. Overall, in both cities we find that low-performing students in charter schools are either as likely or less likely to exit their school than are low-performing students in traditional public schools. Although this paper does not directly analyze the motivation behind student exits, these findings are generally inconsistent with the argument that charter schools systematically push out low-performing students.

## 2. What prior literature suggests

A small literature has recently emerged evaluating the characteristics of students who exit charter schools. Those concerned about charters “pushing out” students are particularly attuned to differences based on academic performance, but mixed results provide little consensus. Finch, Baker-Boudissa, and Cross (2008), for example, found students with *higher* test scores were more likely to exit Indiana charter schools. Miron, Cullen, Applegate, and Farrell (2007) examined the exit patterns of charter students in Delaware and likewise found leavers at the elementary level reported higher test scores than students who remain in the charter schools, but in other grades patterns differed. No notable differences appeared at the middle school level, and leavers had lower test scores than stayers at the high school level. Considering another type of school choice Cowen, Fleming, Witte, and Wolf (2012) find that lower performing students are more likely to exit private schools where they had used a voucher to pay for tuition.

To date, Zimmer and Guarino (2013) provide the only empirical analysis of which we are aware comparing exit rates of

low-performing students in charters and traditional public schools (TPS) for an entire large school district. Their results from an anonymous large school district in the Midwest indicated that although students transferring out of charter schools report slightly lower achievement levels, the same holds true for TPSs. Moreover, when analyzed in formal regression models, the authors found little evidence that low-performing students are more likely to transfer out of charter schools than above-average students or that they are more likely to transfer out of charters than TPSs. Although their results are convincing for the school district they analyze, Zimmer and Guarino call for similar work in other cities in order to determine whether the results are robust across the charter school sector. Such replications in other jurisdictions are particularly important when studying charter schools because their operation and effectiveness varies dramatically across school systems.

Of the small literature that has considered the characteristics of families that leave charter schools, some studies have focused on personal characteristics of families and students, such as income levels or race/ethnicity. Others have focused on school quality. Of the personal characteristics, prior results find no difference in exit rates based on family income (Hanushek, Kain, Rivkin, & Branch, 2007), but racial and ethnic minority students appear more likely than their white counterparts to exit charter schools (Finch et al., 2009). Finch et al. (2008), for example, discovered non-white families in Indiana were twice as likely to leave their charter schools as white families. Others have found the differences are not limited to white versus nonwhite. Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin (2004) and Booker, Zimmer, and Buddin (2005), for instance, found African American families more than white or Hispanic families were more likely to exit charters in Texas and an unnamed school district respectively. Similarly, Dauter and Fuller’s (2011) findings from Los Angeles suggest differences manifest between Hispanic students and their white and Asian peers, where the former exit more often than the latter.

Some prior research has looked particularly at the mobility of students with classifications that suggest they present unique challenges or costs to educate. Contrary to conventional wisdom, that research suggests mobility of students with special needs (Dauter & Fuller, 2011; Winters, 2013, 2015) and English language learners (Winters, 2014) are significantly less likely to exit charter schools than they are to exit traditional public schools, at least in the urban districts analyzed.

Finally, Hanushek et al. (2007) suggest the decision to leave a charter school may be more a function of the quality of the school. In a study of Texas schools, they found that higher achieving charter schools have lower exit rates than lower achieving charter schools, a pattern that was also evident among TPS. The state-derived performance rating was significantly related to the probability of exit for both regular and charter schools, but the effect sizes tended to be much larger for students attending charter schools.

Such findings provide an important initial consideration of the type of student who exits charter schools, but the mixed results and the limited number of studies mean much is left to know about the mobility of students in and out of charter schools. To that end, we contribute a study of charter school leavers in two large urban districts not unfamiliar with assertions of charter school cherry-picking (Gabor, 2014).

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Research questions

The research was guided by the following questions:

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