



Twice considered: Charter schools and student achievement in Utah

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ABSTRACT

A relatively small state, Utah presents an interesting case to study charter schools given its friendly policy environment and its significant growth in charter school enrollment. Based on longitudinal student-level data from 2004 to 2009, this paper utilizes two approaches to evaluate the Utah charter school effectiveness: (a) hierarchical linear growth models with matched sample, and (b) general methods of moments with student-fixed effects regressions. Both methods yield consistent results that charter schools on average perform slightly worse as compared to traditional public schools, a result that is primarily affected by the low effectiveness and high student mobility of newly opened charter schools. Interestingly, when charter schools gain more experience they become as effective as traditional public schools, and in some cases more effective than traditional public schools. This research has implications for local and state charter school policies, particularly policies that avoid “start-up” costs associated with new charter schools.

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1. Introduction

The United States charter school movement has been driven by a multitude of arguments, including the expectation for market-based reforms to improve the quality of the current K-12 system of public education, the need for increased options for a dissatisfied customer base, and the ability of charter schools to educate children using fewer resources. Importantly, advocates predict that charter schools will benefit both students who actively choose their school—a direct effect—and non-choosers who remain behind in their assigned public schools—a systemic effect. Although both proposed benefits are equally important, this paper examines the direct effect of charter schools. Specifically, we address how charter schools affect the achievement of the students who attend them.

Since large-scale charter school systems were implemented in the 1990s, there has been a growing body of empirical research examining the relative effectiveness

of charter schools and traditional public schools (TPSs). Recent literature reviews on this issue, however, reveal the challenges of studying charter school effects. Among all the charter school achievement studies, only a small percentage of studies are considered methodologically rigorous, relying on either lottery-based or student-level growth-based methods (Betts & Tang, 2008, 2011). Depending on the student population served, operational years, and other factors, different studies found that charter schools have produced negative, positive, or no effect on student achievement (Betts & Tang, 2008, 2011; Miron, Evergreen, & Urschel, 2008; Teasley, 2009).

More recently, charter school studies using data nationwide or data from multiple states are also inconclusive (CREDO, 2009; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010; Lubienski & Lubienski, 2006; Tuttle, Gleason, & Clark, 2012; Zimmer, Gill, Booker, Lavertu, & Witte, 2012). Although national and multi-state studies provide a representative picture of charter schools in general, it is possible that the mixed results are the consequences of different policy environments. Charter school laws vary widely on mission, finance, regulation, and support from state to state. It is reasonable to expect different policies and implementation to influence

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charter school outcomes substantially. Consequently, the evidence of state-specific studies is important as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of the variations of charter school effectiveness in different policy environments. However, only a small number of states to date provide integrated longitudinal student level data for rigorous state-wide studies. By providing a specific state analysis, this study contributes to this body of research.

Based on longitudinal student-level data from 2004 to 2009 in Utah, this paper is one of the few studies to utilize two alternative methods, hierarchical linear growth models with matched samples and general methods of moments (GMM) with student fixed-effects models, to evaluate charter school effectiveness. In addition, with the availability of student residential information, the paper improves upon existing research in controlling for unobserved neighborhood characteristics when matching charter and TPS students. This study also presents a timely and interesting case with significant policy implications. Despite the overwhelming support of charter schools among politicians and increasing interest by parents, the information on Utah charter school effectiveness remains largely based on anecdotal evidence. As a state with both friendly charter school policies and the lowest per pupil funding, Utah presents a unique case.¹ Also, in comparison to charter schools in many other states and locales, Utah charter schools serve a predominately white and non-poverty student population. In that sense, this study extends existing literature and makes a potential contribution to generalizing the effects on charter schools as a whole.

2. The Utah charter school program

Among all the 40 states with charter school laws, the Utah charter law structure was ranked as the 4th strongest or most charter-friendly by the *Center for Education Reform* in 2010 and 11th in 2011.² Utah officially established charter schools in 1998. The Utah State Office of Education (USOE) Charter School Division describes the purpose of charter schools as:

Charters schools offer parents and students additional choices about where students attend school and the school's curricular emphasis. They allow educators freedom to try new strategies to inspire students and to experiment with innovative ways of educating students. Also, charter schools allow individuals and

organizations outside of the traditional education system to create and run public schools.³

The growth of the number of charter schools and the charter school enrollment in Utah has been steady. Charter schools in the state had 390 students in the first year of operation compared to about 33,000 ten years later in 2008–2009, which accounts for about 5% of all public school students in Utah. In 2008–2009, there were 65 operational charter schools.⁴ Currently, there are no caps on the number of charter schools. Following the 2010 Legislative Session, the State Board of Education was given the authority to remove the cap on charter school enrollment contingent on the availability of legislative appropriations (see Utah Code §53A-1a-502.5).

According to provisions of the Utah Code §53A-1a-506, Utah charter schools, as a public school choice option, must maintain an open enrollment similar to their traditional public school peers. Currently, charter schools in Utah have a higher proportion of elementary students and a lower proportion of high school students than TPSs. Policymakers and practitioners alike anticipate that the existing enrollment will lead to further demand for charter school availability as a student progresses from the elementary to secondary school level. Reportedly, many charter schools have waiting lists (Rorrer, Hausman, & Groth, 2006). When enrollment space is exceeded by demand, the charter school is required to use “random” selection.⁵

Utah charter schools may be authorized by local school boards, the Utah State Charter School Board with recommendation to the State School Board, and—as of 2010—higher education institutions. The majority of the charter schools are authorized by the State Board. According to Utah Administrative Code (R277-470-6), charter schools must be approved two years prior to opening their doors to students. Moreover, charter school applicants are required to attend an orientation and training session (Utah Administrative Code R277-470-4) provided by the State Charter School Board.⁶ Participation in the training may result in priority status for approval as well as additional funds.

Utah charter schools receive revenue from state funds (e.g., Local Revenue Replacement Program, Minimum School Fund, Revolving Loan Fund for capital outlay, School LAND Trust funds), federal funds (e.g., Federal Dissemination grants, Federal Start Up and Implementation Awards),

¹ Charter schools in Utah, as in any other states, cannot be affiliated with or restrict admissions based on a particular religion. However, frequently when discussing public education in Utah, questions arise with regard to the influence of religion in the state. Although an important question, it was not the focus of this inquiry. We only utilized official records maintained by the Utah State Office of Education, which does not contain any religious-related data on students.

² Please see <http://www.edreform.com/upload/ranking.chart.pdf> and <http://www.edreform.com/download/CER-Charter-Laws-2010.pdf>. The Center for Education Reform based their ranking on multiple factors, such as the existence of caps on the number of charter schools or enrollment, funding, start-up assistance, and the amount of regulation over charter school operations.

³ Please see <http://www.schools.utah.gov/charterschools/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx>.

⁴ Fourteen new charter schools have opened up between 2009–2010 and 2010–2011.

⁵ There are mandatory and optional preferences considered for the random selection. Mandatory preference refers to those schools where a TPS has converted to a charter school. Optional preference must be based on the school's charter and offers preference consistent with parent involvement with charter development, siblings attending schools, returning student status, district, municipality, and/or proximity of residence and parent is a licensed classroom teacher. <http://www.schools.utah.gov/charterschools/Frequently-Asked-Questions.aspx#6>.

⁶ The training topics include, but are not limited to, implementation, statutory, and Charter Board, financial, data management, legal, and funding requirements.

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