



# Charter school authorizers and student achievement

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 15 July 2010

Received in revised form 25 January 2011

Accepted 22 March 2011

### JEL classification:

I20

I21

I28

### Keywords:

Charter school

School governance

Student achievement

Enrollment

## ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the relationship between charter school authorizers and student achievement. We perform this analysis using a 10-year panel dataset from Minnesota, a state that permits four distinct types of authorizers—local school boards, postsecondary institutions, nonprofit organizations, and the Minnesota Department of Education. The results of the analysis indicate that there is no statistically significant relationship between charter school authorizing type and mean levels of student achievement. However, the analysis also reveals that schools authorized by nonprofit organizations exhibit substantially more variability in achievement than schools authorized by local school boards.

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## 1. Introduction

As charter schools have become more firmly established in the educational landscape, the policy issues surrounding these institutions have evolved significantly. Charter school policy debates in the 1990s and early 2000s were largely focused on the existence and expansion of charter schools (Geske, Davis, & Hingle, 1997). With those issues largely settled, issues of charter school governance, administration, and operation—along with the effects of charter schools on student outcomes—now drive the dialogue in policymaking circles. Within these contemporary policy discussions, one particular topic that is beginning to garner significant attention is the issue of charter school authorization. Although authorizers have always been central to the concept of charter schools, issues related to authorization were largely an afterthought in the early pol-

icy debates. In recent years, however, policymakers and scholars have exhibited an increased recognition of the important space that authorizers can occupy in the operation of charter schools and in shaping student outcomes.

Despite the increased attention devoted to issues of authorization, there is relatively little strong empirical evidence on the relationship between charter school authorizers and student outcomes. This relative dearth of evidence is attributable to both empirical and theoretical factors. Empirically, it is difficult to design research that makes a direct connection between charter schools authorizers and student outcomes (Viteritti, 2009). Theoretically, charter school authorization is only one of dozens of factors that may affect the outcomes of charter school students, and it is relatively distant to the lives of students. As a result, theoretical connections between charter school authorization and student outcomes are more tenuous than the connections between authorizers and more proximal outcomes, such as school operation and management procedures.

This paper explicitly addresses these difficulties in its evaluation of the relationship between charter school authorizing institutions and student achievement. We

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perform this analysis using data from Minnesota, a state that permits four distinct types of charter school authorizers—nonprofit organizations, school boards of local or intermediate school districts, postsecondary institutions, and the Minnesota Department of Education. In addition to specifying the authorizing institution of each charter school, the Minnesota Department of Education provides data on achievement, demographic composition, and a number of additional topics. Such data are available over multiple years, a feature that allows us to construct a 10-year panel and employ appropriate modeling techniques. Our analysis examines not only the relationship between authorizers and mean levels of achievement, but variance in achievement as well; both the mean and variance of achievement contain important, policy-relevant information. We further explore the relationship between authorizers and charter school outcomes and operations by analyzing the relationship between authorizing type and enrollment levels.

To provide a brief preview of our results, we find authorizing type to have no statistically significant relationship with mean levels of student achievement, but we find that schools authorized by nonprofit institutions exhibit much more variance in achievement than schools authorized by local school boards. With respect to enrollment, we find some evidence that charter schools authorized by nonprofit organizations and postsecondary institutions are somewhat larger than schools authorized by school districts or the Minnesota Department of Education. The analyses presented in this paper bring evidence to bear on several important policy topics, especially the ongoing debate over extending chartering authority to institutions other than local school districts.

This paper proceeds by first exploring the issues involved with charter school authorization. This section describes how charter school governance might affect student outcomes, but also considers why it might not. It also considers existing empirical evidence regarding the relationship between charter schools and student outcomes, with a particular focus on the limited literature on authorization. The paper then moves on to outline and describe policies that expand chartering authority to a variety of institutions. It briefly reviews the various authorizing structures that are in place throughout the country, with a more in-depth treatment of the authorizing situation in Minnesota. Subsequently, we describe our data and outline our analytical framework. Finally, we present our results and discuss the implications of our findings.

## 2. Charter school governance and student outcomes

The most powerful arguments supporting a causal connection between school governance—including charter school authorization policies—and student outcomes cite the ability of governance structures to pave the way for innovation and positive systemic change (Henig, 2009; Viteritti, 2009; Wong, 2005). Unlike most education reforms, governance-based reforms rarely have a directly perceptible impact on students' school and classroom experiences. Instead, by creating the conditions necessary to implement changes that will have a direct bearing on

students' lives, governance-based reforms are theorized to effect student outcomes in a more indirect manner. Jeffrey Henig summarizes the theoretical path through which governance-based reforms may impact student outcomes when he writes "If governance arrangements are relevant it is because of the things they either facilitate or undermine . . . what matters are vision, capacity, and sustained political support" (Henig, 2009, p. 42). Echoing this theme, Joseph P. Viteritti states that "Structure is not a solution; it is an enabler" (Viteritti, 2009, p. 9).

Applied to the context of this paper, expanding chartering authority beyond local school districts enables alternative institutions to bring different visions and capacities to the operation of charter schools. Under a policy that expands chartering authority, a university could authorize and operate a charter school that uses an innovative curriculum to teach reading, math, or science. Similarly, a nonprofit organization could open a school that operated around a particular theme, such as environmentalism or the performing arts. In short, institutions would be given the autonomy to execute their vision for a school—a vision that they undoubtedly believe would enhance student outcomes—as long as they abided by the accompanying accountability requirements.<sup>1</sup> In schools that succeeded in producing positive results, the proximal cause of the improved student outcomes would likely be identified as the particular vision, intervention, or curriculum employed in the charter school. Less visible, but no less important, in the generation of the enhanced student outcomes is the governance-based reform that made implementation of the vision, intervention, or curriculum possible. In the case of charter schools, authorizing entities and their associated visions and procedures may clearly matter in ways that we discuss below.

### 2.1. Issues in authorizing charter schools

The preceding paragraphs provide a broad, theoretical perspective on the potential relationship between charter school authorization and student outcomes. While this perspective is useful, there are also several smaller, more concrete issues related to charter school authorization that have the potential to affect school management, operation, and viability, which may in turn affect student outcomes. These topics, which have been debated in state legislatures across the country, can be usefully classified into two main sets of authorization-related issues: (1) independence of charter schools, and (2) competence, consistency, and oversight. These two issues, each of which inform our empirical analyses and conclusions in distinct manners, undoubtedly influence charter schools in important ways that we discuss below.

#### 2.1.1. Independence of charter schools

An original rationale underlying the creation of charter schools was the desire for systemic reform (Buckley & Schneider, 2007); people believed that it was important to

<sup>1</sup> The exchange of autonomy for accountability has been identified as one of three main pillars of support for the original charter school concept, as well as its subsequent expansion (Buckley & Schneider, 2007).

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