

The political economy of school choice: Support for charter schools across states and school districts

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Abstract

Public charter schools are one of the fastest growing education reforms in the US, currently serving more than a million students. Though the movement for greater school choice is widespread, its implementation has been uneven. State laws differ greatly in the degree of latitude granted charter schools, and—holding constant state support—states and localities vary widely in the availability of and enrollment in these schools. In this paper, we use a panel of demographic, financial, and school performance data to examine the support for charters at the state and local levels. Results suggest that growing population heterogeneity and income inequality—in addition to persistently low student outcomes—are associated with greater support for charter schools. Teachers unions have been particularly effective in slowing or preventing liberal state charter legislation; however, conditional on law passage and strength, local participation in charter schools rises with the share of unionized teachers.

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1. Introduction

Among education reforms currently underway in the United States, “market-based” reforms encouraging competition outside of traditional public schools are some of the most contentious. Reflecting both the short-run demands of families for immediate alternatives and the long-run hopes among a number of policymakers that the injection of competitive forces into public education will yield sustained improvement in student outcomes, market-based reforms have been closely watched and hotly contested.

Market-oriented reforms—in particular, public charter schools—are also among the fastest growing education reforms at the state and local levels. Though state accountability measures involving sanctions or rewards tied to student performance emerged well before charter laws, the growth in charter school authorizations has been much more rapid.¹ Since the first law authorizing charter schools was passed in Minnesota in 1991, 39 other states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have all adopted legislation supporting public charters. As of 2003–2004, more than 3000 charter schools were in operation, serving over 825,000 students.²

While the movement for greater school choice has been widespread, its implementation has been uneven. In the case of charter schools, state governments must first provide the legal foundation upon which charter schools can form and operate. The implementation of these laws, in turn, takes place at the local level, through parental demand, willing and able suppliers of charter schools and sufficient cooperation on the part of state and local officials who authorize proposed schools. State laws differ greatly in the degree of latitude granted charter schools, and—holding constant the level of state support—states and localities vary widely in the level of actual participation in these schools.

What explains these differences in support for and participation in charter schools across states and districts? Voters, elected officials and families who endorse charter schools may have a range of underlying motivations for their support: dissatisfaction with the performance of traditional public schools, desire for greater parental involvement or control, frustration with stringent state regulations or inefficient local bureaucracies, diverging preferences for education driven by a rise in local population heterogeneity, or other unmet demands for sorting across schools or districts. On the supply side, state-level advocacy groups who lobby for charter legislation or provide technical assistance to upstart charter schools may also explain differences in charter school growth across states and localities.

Using demographic, financial, political, and school performance data covering the 1990–2004 period, we examine the various forces associated with the level of support for charter schools. We take a dual approach to our analysis, examining the support for charter schools at both the state and local levels. First, we consider the political economy of charter school authorizations at the state level—why do some states support strong charter school legislation while others do not? What forces are instrumental to the passage of state laws enabling charter schools, and what forces work against such passage? Second, conditional on law passage and law strength, we look at the local conditions that yield support for—and subsequent enrollment in—charter schools.

¹ Of course, the sweeping federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 effectively superseded most existing state accountability measures. Stoddard and Kuhn [24] document the growth in state accountability reforms and charter laws prior to this act.

² Authors’ calculations, using the 2003–2004 Common Core of Data School Universe, with Allen and Cooper [1]. The Center for Education Reform calculates that in the 2004–2005 school year, about a million students were served in about 3600 charter schools.

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