

What Works Clearinghouse



August 2008

WWC Quick Review of the Report “Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis”†

What is this study about?

The study examined whether charter schools have higher growth in student achievement than traditional public schools.

The study analyzed data on 79 charter schools and 593 traditional public elementary, middle, and high schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District from 2005-06 to 2006-07.

School-level academic achievement was measured using the Academic Performance Index (API) created by the California Department of Education. The API is a composite measure of how well a school’s students perform on standardized tests.

The study measured the effect of charter schools by comparing the change in the API from 2005-06 to 2006-07 for charter schools to the change for their matched comparison schools during the same period.

However, the WWC does not consider these results conclusive because there is no evidence that the schools were initially equivalent. The reported differences might reflect differences in the types of students who attend charter schools rather than the effect of these schools on student achievement.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report is not consistent with WWC evidence standards

Cautions: The study compared the annual API change in charter schools to the change in traditional schools. Although the study attempts to match charter schools to traditional public schools based on racial and income composition, parent education, and geographic proximity, it does not provide evidence that these two groups were initially equivalent on academic achievement. Although the authors use statistical techniques to adjust for some differences, it is possible that there were differences between the two groups that were not accounted for in the analysis, and these differences could have influenced changes in API. For example, parents who are more committed to their children’s education may be more likely to send them to a charter school. In addition, schools with very low API levels may make greater gains than other schools simply because they have more room for improvement. For these reasons, differences in API trends between the two groups of schools cannot be attributed with confidence to the effect of charter schools.

What Two Groups of Schools Were Contrasted?

The study examined Los Angeles charter schools operating in 2005-06 and 2006-07.

Each charter school was compared to three nearby public schools with demographically similar student populations.

What did the study authors report?

The study found that the API in charter schools increased more from 2005-06 to 2006-07 than it did in matched comparison traditional schools.

†“Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis.” Aisha Toney and Danessa Murdock. California Charter School Association, June 2008.