



National Alliance for Public Charter Schools

To: Friends and Colleagues
From: Nelson Smith
Re: CREDO Report Reconsidered
Date: June 19, 2009

On Monday, the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University (CREDO) released its “Multiple Choice” report on charter school performance in 16 states. The report’s basic finding is that “in the aggregate, charter students are not faring as well as their TPS (traditional public school) counterparts.” This negative outcome has been picked up in numerous media outlets.

We don’t question CREDO’s motives, but on Monday we immediately raised questions about the report’s methodology (<http://www.publiccharters.org/node/964>). Today we direct your attention back to the report’s own text. CREDO’s data actually include strongly positive results that contradict the report’s summary and the negative slant of its press coverage.

- At the national level, charter students perform lower than non-charter students in reading and math in the first year, but higher in reading and the same in math the second year. **By the third year, national results show charter students performing higher than non-charter students in both subjects.**
- At the state level, charter students perform higher than non-charter students in reading and math in only 3 of 15 states the first year, but higher than non-charter students in 7 of 15 states in reading and 8 of 15 states (and the same in 3 others) in the second year. **By the third year, at the state level, charter students out-perform non-charter students in 11 of 12 states in reading and 9 of 12 states in math (and the same in 2 others).**

What accounts for the difference between these upbeat findings and the negative ones released Monday? The main reason appears to be the “student matching technique” for the student samples. This bears some explanation.

Any strategy used to compare charter and traditional public school students needs to eliminate the chance that charter students are somehow different from the comparison group of traditional public school students, so that any differences in performance can be clearly attributed to charter school attendance. If there are weak or absent controls for differences between students (such as prior achievement, student motivation, information about school

options, or engagement of the family) the results may reflect the influence of these differences rather than attendance at a public charter school.

Half of CREDO’s overall charter-student sample, although matched to “virtual” traditional public school students, uses a comparison of gains based upon those students’ first test scores in a charter, not a test that took place when they were in an actual district school. By matching students after the decision to attend a charter had occurred, CREDO in effect failed to create an appropriate control group. Differences in gains using this sample cannot be clearly attributed to attendance at a charter school.

Why is this important? If a student had low student performance before choosing a charter and then made gains after entering the charter, the student was not matched with a traditional public school student with the same lower prior achievement at the time of the decision. Rather, the charter school student was matched with a traditional public school student at the higher achievement level.

Elsewhere in the study, CREDO disaggregated student performance data by the number of years that students have been in a charter. In this model, CREDO only included charter students matched with traditional public school students at the time a decision to attend a charter occurred (say a student transferred to a charter as he entered 3rd grade – he is then compared to a traditional public school student also entering the 3rd grade who had the same chance of attending a charter school).

With the more valid sample disaggregated over time, the results show that charter students do better than traditional public school students over time.

Finally, while we believe that the report draws too negative a picture from its own data, we do recognize the existence of what CREDO calls “a subset of poorly performing charter schools.” The Alliance has consistently called for action to close chronically low-performing charter schools, and we agree with CREDO’s recommendation for states to improve their charter laws to “remove the barriers to exit” and make it easier to close charters that fail to serve students.

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If you also have questions or comments about the CREDO report, let us know:
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