



Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

See a sample reprint in PDF format.

Order a reprint of this article now

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

REVIEW & OUTLOOK | NOVEMBER 4, 2009

No Child Left Behind

New evidence that charter schools help even kids in other schools.

Opponents of school choice are running out of excuses as evidence continues to roll in about the positive impact of charter schools.

Stanford economist Caroline Hoxby recently found that poor urban children who attend a charter school from kindergarten through 8th grade can close the learning gap with affluent suburban kids by 86% in reading and 66% in math. And now Marcus Winters, who follows education for the Manhattan Institute, has released a paper showing that even students who don't attend a charter school benefit academically when their public school is exposed to charter competition.

Mr. Winters focuses on New York City public school students in grades 3 through 8. "For every one percent of a public school's students who leave for a charter," concludes Mr. Winters, "reading proficiency among those who remain increases by about 0.02 standard deviations, a small but not insignificant number, in view of the widely held suspicion that the impact on local public schools . . . would be negative." It turns out that traditional public schools respond to competition in a way that benefits their students.

Imagine that. Competition works.

School choice opponents insist that charters diminish the overall public school system by luring away the best students, the most motivated parents and scarce per-pupil dollars. However, Ms. Hoxby's research has shown that "creaming" can't explain the academic success of charter schools given that the typical urban charter student is a poor black or Hispanic kid living in a home with adults who possess below-average education credentials.

It's true that the growth of charters has reduced enrollment at some traditional public schools in places like Detroit and Washington, D.C. But charters are themselves public schools, albeit without the burden of work rules and other constraints imposed by unions and the bureaucracy. They are hugely popular with parents, and more than 1.4 million kids now attend 4,578 charters in 41 states.

The result has been, on balance, a superior education for the charter-bound kids and pressure on local public schools to improve or lose students. Public schools that must compete with charters are no longer insulated from the consequences for failing to educate their charges. How is that a bad outcome?

One of the most encouraging findings by Mr. Winters is how charter competition reduces the black-white achievement gap. He found that the worst-performing public school students, who tend to be low-income minorities, have the most to gain

from the nearby presence of a charter school. Overall, charter competition improved reading performance but did not affect math skills. By contrast, low-performing students had gains in both areas, and their reading improvement was above average relative to the higher-performing students.

President Obama and Education Secretary Arne Duncan are using the leverage of federal dollars to promote an increase in charter schools, which are still limited in many states by caps on their number and on funding. State and local policy makers who cave to union demands and block the growth of charters aren't doing traditional public school students any favors.

Copyright 2009 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com