**Charter School Claims, Themes, Research
and Experience Summary**

[Review of Separating Fact & Fiction](https://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-separating-fact-and-fiction), Reviewed by Mary Miron, Western Michigan University, and William Mathis and Kevin Welner, University of Colorado, Boulder, February 2015

“This review examines the claims made in the NAPCS report and summarizes the empirical evidence related to all 21 criticisms. The format is to list the criticism, quote the NAPCS claim, and provide a short commentary based on the research literature.”

Conclusion: “Charter schools were originally designed to be a new form of public school. They were supposed to be small, locally run, innovative, and highly accountable. They were supposed to be open to all and were expected to provide new freedoms for teachers to creatively innovate and serve their communities. In reality, the main outcomes of charter schools have been to promote privatization and accelerate the stratification and re-segregation of schools.”

**Themes:**

* Charter Schools are not public schools
* Charters get more money than other public schools
* Charters receive more private funds
* Lack of transparency on charter’s use of public funds
* Charter teachers are less qualified
* Charters aren’t accountable to public since their boards aren’t elected
* Charters cherry-pick students
* Charters don’t enroll underserved populations
* Charters serve fewer ELLs
* Charters serve fewer students with disabilities
* Charters counsel out underperforming students
* Charters have higher suspension and expulsion rates
* Charter students do no better than public school students
* Underperforming charters are allowed to remain open
* Charters take funding away from public schools
* Charter schools re-segregate public education
* Some charter schools are religious schools
* Charter schools aren’t the incubators of innovation they claim to be

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| Criticism | NAPCS Claim | Explanation |
| *Charter schools are not public schools* | *As defined in federal and state law, charter schools are public schools* | While charter schools are generally characterized as ‘public schools,’ courts have had a difficult time determining their legal status because charter schools contain both public and private characteristics.” it is estimated by 2015-16, more than half of the nation’s charter school students will be enrolled in schools owned and operated by private EMOs. Thus, while claiming to be “public,” and while having some elements that are public (most importantly, public funding for a no-tuition education), their operations are basically private. |
| *Charter schools get more money than other public schools.* | *On average, charter schools receive less public funding than traditional**public schools.* | The portion of “pass-through” funds to charter schools from school districts must be subtracted or district revenues are erroneously and vastly inflated. It is necessary to account for private dollars devoted to charter schools that are not publicly reported. Review of IRS 990 tax forms revealed that KIPP schools were receiving an average of $5,700 per pupil in private sources of revenue in 2008. Nevertheless, there is research consensus that charter schools receive less public funding per pupil than surrounding district schools, since charters spend less on special education, student support services, transportation, and food services. |
| *Charter schools receive a disproportionate amount of private funds.* | *Charter schools receive fewer private funds per pupil than traditional**public schools.* | The NAPCS report attributes this finding to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Arkansas’s “Department of Education Reform.” However, this report was about an issue completely different from private funding disparities: the claim that charter schools operate with fewer funds in total. The fatal flaw in the study was erroneously classifying pass-through money to charters as public school expenditures. Increasingly, charter schools set up private trusts that receive and spend private revenue on behalf of the charter school. This “off the books” revenue is not reported. |
| *A lack of transparency around charter schools’ use of funds.* | *Charter schools have greater accountability and scrutiny over their**finances than traditional public schools* | The report does not cite any evidence to substantiate this claim. Instead it cites a few reports about “ideal” standards for authorizing and oversight, but these do not comport with practice. The reason some policymakers are calling for oversight standards is the broad recognition that charter school oversight is inadequate. Charter school boards are not able to obtain data and information about their own schools that is held by the private EMO. (Ohio litigation to force White Hat Management to share details with the charter school board on how this private EMO is spending public dollars on charter schools that are struggling and failing) |
| *Charter school teachers are less qualified*  | *Charters hire talented, passionate, qualified teachers to boost student achievement*  | A number of independent empirical studies show that charter schools do, in fact, have a less qualified work force, if measured by experience or certification levels. Teacher attrition rates are extremely high in charter schools, and dissatisfaction with salaries and working conditions are common among the teachers who leave charter schools. A national study of charter school finance reported that district schools spend substantially more on teacher salaries than do charter schools |
| *Charter schools aren’t accountable to the public since their boards**aren’t elected.* | *Charter schools are directly accountable to the public.* | Any form of accountability relies on transparency and thecommunication of accurate, relevant information. Although some appointed charter school boards assume fiscal and legal responsibility for their school, many boards consider themselves to be in an advisory role; their power and responsibility is curtailed by the private EMOs that operate the schools, with a large portion of decisions taken at corporate headquarters which are often located halfway across the country. In recent years, board members have been refused access to information about how money is being spent. Further, there are cases where EMOs have asked the authorizer to remove board members when they start asking uncomfortable questions about finance. |
| *Charter schools cherry-pick the best students from**traditional public schools* | *Public charter schools are generally required to take all students*  | There are a number of actions charter schools take to help ensure that they can end up with a more homogeneous set of higher-performing students. In some cases, charter schools use admission tests to determine “academic interest.” In other cases, charter schools such as KIPP use “admission” or “placement” tests to make decisions on student grade levels assignments. Rather than be held back one to three grade levels, struggling students often simply return to the district school so they can stay with their peer group. Harsh or push-out school discipline practices can also drive away more difficult students or drive them out once enrolled. |
| *Charter schools don’t enroll children from underserved families.* | *Public charter schools enroll more students of color and from low-income* | Aside from a few reports generated by advocacy groups, there is a substantial body of research concluding that charter schools are accelerating re-segregation by race, class, measured achievement, special education status (particularly when severity of disability is considered), and English-Language Learner status. |
| *Charter schools serve fewer English Learners**.* | *There is no significant difference in the % of ELs**served by traditional or public charter schools* | This claim by NAPCS is unsubstantiated and demonstrably false. In 2013 the GAO reported that it was unable to compare English-Language Learners (ELL) enrollment in charter schools and traditional public schools because “Education’s only available data on school-level ELL enrollment were unreliable and incomplete. Specifically, for over one-third of charter schools, the field for reporting the counts of ELLs was left blank. In Miron et all 2010, only 4.4% of the students in the EMO-operated charter schools were classified as ELL, compared to 11% of all students in the nation  |
| *Charter schools serve fewer students with disabilities*  | *10% of charter school students are students with disabilities, compared to 12 % of students in traditional public schools* | The response from NAPCS is intentionally misleading and false. It is true that the proportion of children with disabilities in charter schools has increased, although the proportion of children with severe and moderate disabilities still remains very low. There are close to 60 charter schools in the country that focus on or almost exclusively serve students with disabilities. Most charter schools, however, continue to enroll between 0% and 7% students with disabilities, and these are largely children with mild disabilities, while the districts are still responsible for children with moderate and severe disabilities. The national average for district schools was 13% in 2011. |
| *Charter schools’* *‘counsel out’ underperforming students,**through strict discipline and attendance policies, high academic or parent**involvement expectations* | *There is no evidence of charter school policies that explicitly push out students.* | The overall performance of charter school students relative to demographically similar district schools’ students is mixed, and the results vary considerably among and within states. The claim that charter schools do not “explicitly push out students” is misleading. Over the past decade, charter school results have been improving and catching up to those of district schools, largely due to the expansion of college-prep charter schools and so-called “no excuses” charter schools. These schools market themselves as having high standards and rigorous expectations for students. Responding to this marketing, families self-select. When students leave during the school year, in most states the money stays with the charter school, even though the local district has to receive students at any time in the academic year. Districts then provide an education for all students even if the money for that year stays with the charter school. |
| *Charter schools have higher suspension and expulsion rates* | *Federal data show that the expulsion rate for public charter schools is no**higher than that of traditional public schools* | This sweeping NAPCS claim is based on an *Education Week* article, which drew from a small number of major city comparisons. Among the selected cities, Los Angeles, Newark, and San Diego had much higher suspension rates for charter schools. For expulsions in 2011-2012, three of the four highlighted cities (Philadelphia, Washington, and Chicago) had vastly higher expulsion rates for charter schools. NAPCS does report that only about 1/4th of charter schools are in the data set, which raises the further question of what the missing three-fourths of the data might say. Self-selection effects by students remain unaddressed. In New York City, charter schools regularly have suspensions and expulsion policies that violate students’ civil rights. In Massachusetts, charter schools enroll 3% of all public school students but account for 6% of all disciplinary removals. Charter schools in this state (especially the Boston-based charter schools) have much higher discipline rates—many over 20% |
| *Charter school students do no better than traditional public school**students.* | *Between 2010 and 2013, 15 of 16 independent studies found that students**attending charter schools do better academically than their traditional school peers* | The citation for this claim comes from an internally produced NAPCS study. Since there are more than 80 independent and generally accepted studies that examine student achievement in charter schools, such an omission raises the question of why only these 16 are examined. It is interesting to note that the most rigorous study, and by far the most expensive, commissioned by the US DOE, is not even mentioned. This longitudinal study showed no overall effect for charter schools. Mathematica’s large-scale study found no overall difference between the two groups of students. It did find that urban charter school students did slightly better and suburban charter school students did slightly worse. The clear answer that appears repeatedly is that after controlling for student demographics, charter schools show test-score results at levels that are not meaningfully better or worse than district schools. Thus, the criticism (“myth”) is very accurate. |
| *Under-performing charter schools are allowed to remain open* | *If a public charter school is not improving student achievement as laid out in its charter agreement, it can be closed* | This assertion, which is frequently repeated by charter school advocacy groups, is based on how charter schools are supposed to work rather than on actual practice. But saying they *can* be closed is not the same as saying that they *are* closed. The staunchly pro-charter Center for Education Reform reports that about 15% of charters have closed over the past two decades, but most of these closures were for financial or mismanagement reasons. Only 19% of the closures (or about 3% of all charter schools) were closed due to underperformance |
| *Charter schools take funding away from traditional public schools.* | *Public school funding is sent to the public school that a student attends* | In many cases, charter school money is a flow-through from the public school. This results in inflated costs when the money is double-counted. A closer look at high-poverty urban communities reveals that limited resources are now being stretched across two parallel systems of education that are, based on school performance measures and financial need claims, both struggling. |
| *Charter schools resegregate public education* | *Parents decide where to send their children to school within the options**available to them.”* | There is a growing body of virtually undisputed evidence that charter schools segregate students. The above discussion of criticisms concerning skimming and of serving fewer percentages of various high-need groups applies here as well. But the important question here is whether segregative and stratifying effects of charter schools can be justified or excused by invoking the exercise of choice. Put another way, if policymakers decide to create a system based on parental choice, do they have an obligation to mitigate segregative effects caused by that policy? |
| *Some charter schools are religious schools* | *No public school, whether traditional or charter school, can operate as a**religious school* | In Colorado, the Douglas County School Board used the charter school law to create a shell charter school that then packaged the state money into vouchers for private (mainly religious) schools. Further, in the 1990s, a small number of charter schools were started by Christian churches or church-affiliated groups. Church leaders direct some charter schools, and some charters lease facilities from church groups represented by the founder or charter school director. Over the past 15 years, there has been a growing number of charter schools catering to Islamic minorities, and there are growing networks of Hebrew charter schools serving the Jewish community. At national conferences, it is not uncommon to see at least one report session devoted to research on religious-oriented charter schools, and there is in fact a growing body of literature about “religious” and “faith-based” charter schools. If researchers are studying religious charter schools, it is very likely that religious charter schools do in fact exist. |
| *Charter schools aren’t the incubators of innovation that they claim to be.* | *Public charter schools use autonomy to push boundaries to better serve students, generating lessons that can be refined and shared throughout the broader public school system* | Independent research on the issue shows that charter schools increasingly operate in much the same way as public schools. In fact, over the past decade, charter school advocates have noticeably shifted away from rhetorical claims that charter schools are innovative, shifting instead to claims that charters benefit communities by replicating popular existing models of schooling |