

REVIEW OF *CHARTERING AND CHOICE AS AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP-CLOSING REFORM*

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Summary of Review

In this report, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) claims that California charter schools are reversing the trend of low academic achievement among African American students and effectively closing the Black-White achievement gap. After a review of CCSA's analyses and findings, however, it becomes clear that the claims are misrepresented or exaggerated. In the years under study, African American students enrolled in traditional public schools outgained those enrolled in charter schools by a small margin, although the charter school students started and ended higher. In addition, the authors present a regression model, with Academic Performance Index (API) scores as the outcome variable, that accounts for only 3-6% of overall variance. Based on this model, the percentage of African American enrollment is negatively related to API scores in both charter and traditional public schools, a trend that will not reverse the academic standing for African American students. In fact, the gap continues to grow, albeit at a slightly slower rate in charter schools. Finally, the report's claim that charter schools are centers of innovation does not hold. Rather, as the authors eventually conclude themselves, there were no instructional practices observed in California charter schools that are not also present in traditional public schools.

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REVIEW OF *CHARTERING AND CHOICE AS AN ACHIEVEMENT GAP-CLOSING REFORM*

David R. Garcia, Arizona State University

I. Introduction

In October, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) published a report called *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform: The success of California charter schools in promoting African American Achievement*. The report was authored by four members of CCSA’s Research and Evaluation Team.¹ According to the authors, the purpose of the report is to provide, “a quantitative analysis of African American academic performance trends in California, as well as qualitative case studies of three highly successful charter public schools” (p. 4). The report also sets forth two broader purposes: (1) “Above all, our goal is to point to the irrefutable evidence that all students can succeed at high levels and racial achievement gaps can be eliminated” (p. 5), and (2) “Because charters are intended to serve as a vanguard of innovation, we explore these effective schools’ practices in detail so that both traditional public and charter public schools undertaking similar challenges can learn from them” (p. 4).

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report is divided into two major sections. The first section reviews quantitative data comparing charter public schools with traditional public schools. The second section is a case study of three charter public schools selected according to the authors’ specifications.

There are twelve quantitative findings reported by the authors:²

1. African American students enroll in charter public schools at higher rates than in traditional public schools, statewide and at all grade levels.
2. Charters are reversing the trend of underperformance among African American students. The negative relationship between African American enrollment and school performance is three times weaker in charter public schools than in traditional public schools.
3. In 2010, charter public schools serving African American students outperformed their predicted performance at about four times the rate as traditional public schools serving African American students.

4. Over a three-year period, charter public schools serving African American students are over three times as likely as traditional public schools to consistently outperform their predicted performance.
5. Charter public schools serving African American students are more likely to have high academic status and growth, and less likely to have low academic status and growth, than traditional public schools.
6. Charter public schools serving African American students are over three times more likely to be a “High Impact” school than traditional public schools serving African American students. They are about half as likely as their traditional public school counterparts to fall below CCSA’s “Minimal Criteria for Renewal.”³
7. African American students have higher Academic Performance Index (API) achievement in charter public schools than in traditional public schools statewide, although all schools continue to have low proficiency rates for African American students.⁴
8. African American students in charter public schools perform better than traditional public schools in elementary and middle school. However, among high schools, the charter advantage has diminished in recent years.
9. African American students in charter public schools outperform their traditional public school counterparts in most large urban districts.
10. Charter public schools are having more success in closing the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites/Asians, although big gaps persist across all school types.
11. The most successful charter public schools serving African American students well [sic] tend to be part of a network or Charter Management Organization (CMO), and are older, classroom-based, start-up schools.
12. Few schools have demonstrated that they are highly effective educators of African American students; however, charter public schools are more likely to be in this group. While charters make up only 9% of schools statewide, they represent 39% of highly effective schools for African American students (pp. 13-34).

Qualitative Findings

Under the heading, “Best Practices Confirmed” the authors provide a list of 53 individual best practices observed in a case study of three “highly effective” charter schools selected pursuant to the authors’ criteria.⁵ The most-often-cited best practice was “Direct Instruction (24)” followed by “School is Clean (23)” and “Teacher is Patient in Explaining Concepts (22).” The lengthy list of author-generated best practices also includes others

such as, “CST or test-prep in General (5),” “Story-telling (3)” and “School Pride (1)” (p. 39-41).⁶

In both sections (quantitative and qualitative), the authors take a shotgun approach to reporting their many findings, making it difficult for the reader to discern which of them are most important or noteworthy.

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report’s rationale for its findings and conclusions is straightforward. For the authors, charter school status is the linchpin that accounts for the observed differences between the academic performance of charter and traditional public schools, along with the “innovative best practices” observed in charter schools.

To buttress this foundational assumption, the report dismisses the role of family socio-economic status (SES), such as parental education levels and free or reduced-price lunch status. More precisely, SES is discounted regarding charter elementary and middle schools (where the performance numbers appear to favor charters), but it is not discounted regarding high schools (where the performance numbers appear to favor traditional public schools). The treatment of SES is important because research on school choice has consistently pointed to the non-random enrollment of students. That is, researchers take note of the fact that families of students enrolled in choice schools have, by definition, exercised a choice and demonstrated a substantial element of involvement in their children’s education. The selection bias therefore introduced into studies is generally noted by researchers as a limitation and addressed to the extent possible. More sophisticated studies of charter school issues have moved beyond simplistic comparisons between charter and traditional public schools.

Early in the CCSA report, the authors do recognize the importance of non-school factors such as socioeconomic characteristics, but they assure the reader that the socioeconomic characteristics of the African American student population in charter schools is very similar to the African American population in traditional public schools (p. 9). The authors’ assertion serves two important purposes relative to how the rest of the report unfolds. By dismissing the relevance of socioeconomic differences in explaining the differences in academic performance between charter and traditional public schools, the authors leave no competing explanations for the results (other than charter school status). Also, the authors do not generally use socioeconomic characteristics as variables in any further analyses.

There is one important exception to this last point, however. When it comes to the comparison of charter high schools with their non-charter counterparts, the report brings SES considerations back into play. Interestingly, the report finds that traditional public high schools outperformed charter high schools—at least if one does not try to take SES into account. The authors choose, in this case, to not attribute the declines to charter school status. Instead, they point to socioeconomic factors as the explanation for the decline:

This trend is further evidenced when examining student socioeconomic status. From 2007-2010, conversion [charter] high schools shifted from being higher educated (some college or above) to lower educated populations (high school graduates) and from less poverty (20-30% average free/reduced lunch participation) to higher poverty (52-56% average free/reduced lunch participation) schools (p.28).

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report makes use of the research literature on the origins of the Black-White achievement gap, culturally responsive teaching practices as a response to historic underachievement among African American students, and the academic performance of charter schools relative to traditional public schools.

However, the report ignores three other critical areas of research literature that are directly applicable to the report's reasoning and interpretation of results.

1. Researchers have explored the issue of charter school autonomy, which is merely presumed in this report. In reality, charter schools have not experienced the degree of autonomy that school choice advocates originally envisioned, and charter school autonomy has been further limited post-NCLB.⁷
2. Researchers have questioned the assumption, included in this report, that charter schools are laboratories of innovation. There are no innovations in charter schools that are not also present in traditional public schools, and most charter school advocates have relaxed claims that charters are producing innovations. At best, charter schools provide new educational options at the local level, combine existing practices in novel ways, and help facilitate the spread of effective models.⁸
3. As noted above, there are systematic differences between choosers and non-choosers. Such differences between choosers and non-choosers are a major methodological challenge in comparing choice schools (such as private and charter schools) with traditional public schools, and rigorous analyses should account for these differences to avoid biased results.⁹

V. Review of the Report's Methods

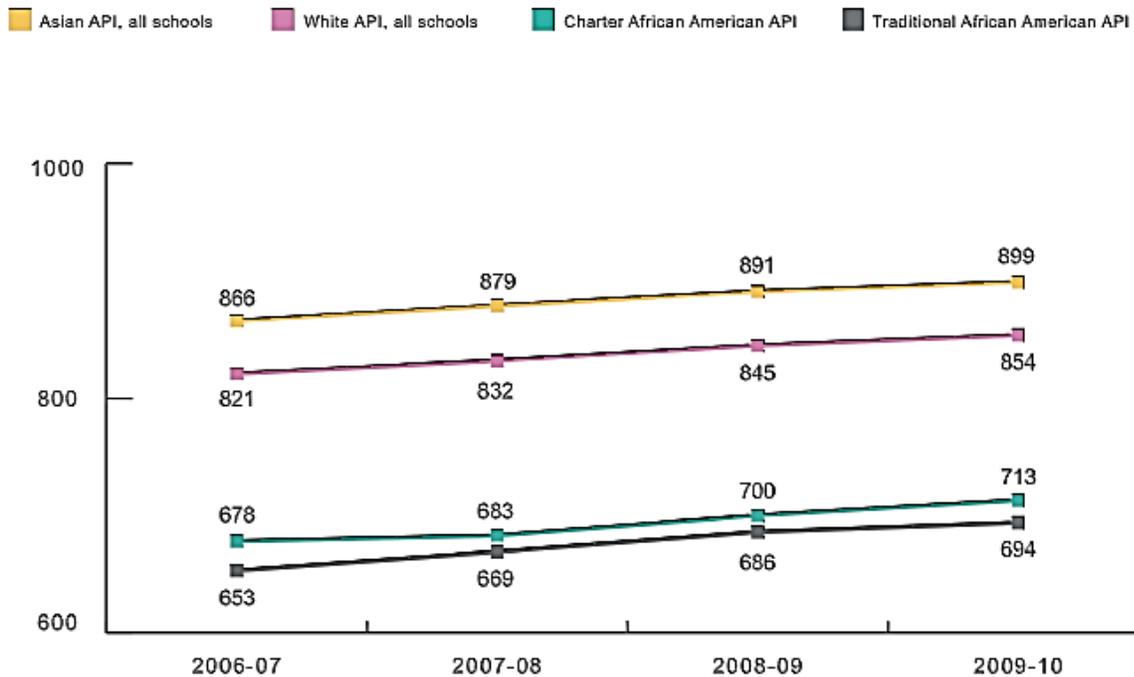
The above 12-item list of the report's findings is too lengthy to review each one individually. Therefore, I will review the two principal findings most relevant to the authors' claim that California charter schools are effectively closing the Black-White achievement gap.

Finding 1

According to the CCSA press release, "From 2007 to 2010, African American student API scores in California charters grew from an average of 678 to 713. This last year, the score was 19 points *higher* than the average statewide African American API score for traditional schools."¹⁰

The claim that California charter schools outperform traditional public schools in closing the achievement gap is based on Figure 21 of the report (reproduced below), particularly focused on the 19-point difference between charter and traditional public schools on the 2009-2010 API results. This reflects, as noted earlier, the reality that students are not randomly assigned to charters and other schools. The students enrolled in the charter schools score higher. According to the graph, African Americans in charter schools started out higher and actually *lost ground* relative to traditional public schools over time. In 2006-2007, African Americans in charter schools scored 25 points higher than those in traditional public schools. That difference then shrunk to 14 points for two years and finally grew to the 19-point difference highlighted in the CCSA press release. Thus, in the four years represented in this graph, traditional public schools outgained charter schools by 6 points (41 to 35 points, respectively). Closing the achievement gap requires that African American students make more gains relative to White students—and by this definition, traditional public schools outperformed charter schools.¹¹

Figure 21: API Achievement Gap in CA, 2007-2010



Reproduced from Toney, A., Brown-Olivieri, S., Robitaille, E., et al. (2011). *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform: The success of California charter schools in promoting African American Achievement*. Sacramento, CA: California Charter Schools Association, p. 31.

Nearly all of the 12 findings listed in the quantitative section of the report are favorable toward California charter schools serving African American students, yet the hallmark finding demonstrates the opposite. How is this possible? The likely explanation goes back to the shotgun approach of the report itself. The report includes so many findings that it loses track of which schools are included in which findings. For example, some findings pertain to the 98 California charter schools with significant African American populations,

while other findings refer to a subset of 55 charter schools with complete enough data to allow an application of the CCSA accountability framework. Moreover, the case studies focus on only three carefully selected charter school exemplars. By design, the authors' primary focus is on the best charter school performers. Yet, Figure 21 appears to include all charter schools, not just the top performers. By definition, the results for the top performers are the most exemplary and do not reflect the full spectrum of charter school performance.

Finding 2

“Charter schools are reversing the trend of underperformance among African American students. The negative relationship between African American enrollment and school performance is three times weaker in charter public schools than in traditional public schools” (p.15)

This claim has two parts. First, charters are “reversing the trend of underperformance among African American students.” According to the regression results (see Figure 43 from the report, reproduced below), there is a negative relationship between school-level

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achievement and African American enrollment, and this negative relationship exists for charter school as well as traditional public schools. In both types of schools, higher percentages of African American students are related to lower API scores (Figure 43, Column “B”). In order to “reverse” the trend, the values in column “B” must be positive (or at least zero), which is clearly not the case in either the charter or traditional public school models.

The second claim of the authors is also flawed: the “negative relationship between African American enrollment and school performance is three times weaker in charter schools than in traditional public schools.” Taking the study’s results at face value, the relative influence of African American enrollment is in fact weaker in charter schools (Figure 43, Column “B”). This does not mean, however, that the predicted outcomes in charter schools are “three times” better (or, in this case, that the predicted charter school outcomes are three times less worse). To estimate the predicted difference between charter and traditional public schools, the coefficients in column “ β ” are most helpful. All other factors being equal, one would expect the API scores for a charter school with 50% African American population to “decline” by 7.6 points ($50 \times -0.152 = -7.6$), compared with a predicted decline for traditional public schools of 11.8 points ($50 \times -0.236 = -11.8$). That is a difference of 4.2 points in favor of charter schools—a value that does not support the claim that the charter school effect is three times the traditional school effect.

Figure 43: Regression Analysis Summary for Percent African American Students Predicting API

Variable	B	SEB	β	R ²	p-value
Charter	-0.758	0.183	-0.152***	0.022	P < .001
Traditional	-2.06	0.096	-0.236	0.056	P < .001

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001

Reproduced from Toney, A., Brown-Olivieri, S., Robitaille, E., et al. (2011). *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform: The success of California charter schools in promoting African American Achievement*. Sacramento, CA: California Charter Schools Association, p. 65.

Finally, both models are poor predictors of API scores. The accuracy of the models to predict API scores can be derived from the values in the R² column. To avoid confusion, I will use the authors' definition of R²: "It provides a measure of how well future outcomes are likely to be predicted by the model" (footnote 9, p. 72). The models with R² values of zero have no predictive value, and those models with an R² approaching 1.0 are the most predictive. The R² of the CCSA models are near zero. The R² for the charter school model is 0.022, and the R² for the traditional public school model is 0.056. Policy makers should not make decisions based on weak models, because the results are not accurate for the purpose of predicting future outcomes.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Any given school, whether it is a traditional public school or a charter school (or a private school or home school) can provide an excellent learning environment. The challenge presented to researchers for a study such as the one reviewed here is to help readers understand any significant trends or differences that can be best attributed to the type of school. In particular, the authors here set out to understand whether African American students are, on average, doing better in charter schools, and they offer the major claim that charter schools are closing the Black-White achievement gap. Yet, the report's interpretations of the findings most relevant to supporting this major claim are either incomplete or incorrect, and the report overwhelms the reader with a splattering of findings, with no guide to discern which of them are most important or noteworthy.

Underlying these problems are two familiar traps. First, the report is built in part on the assumption that there is something distinct about charter school status alone. In truth, there is nothing particularly telling or predictive about the charter school label; charters run the gamut in terms of educational approaches as well as successful (or unsuccessful) outcomes. What matters most is what happens within any given school. For example, charter schools have generated very few (if any) true instructional or curricular innovations, a conclusion that the authors themselves eventually reach, "All of the practices identified in this report can and do exist in the traditional and charter public school sectors" (p. 54). Second, the report is built in part on the assumption that one can

evaluate schools of choice without taking into account the characteristics of the choosers themselves. By definition, student choosers (or their families, or both) are different than non-choosers. As such, separating the benefits (or obstacles) to learning that choosers bring to schools from the influence of the schools themselves is not possible given the methods employed by the authors.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The most useful policy briefs are concise as well as accurate. This report is lacking on both counts. Most important, the report fails to support the claim in the report's title that charter schools are closing the achievement gap. The data presented suggest, in fact, that the gap overall is largely unaffected by charter enrollment. To the extent there is a relationship, it is small and suggests that the gap continues to widen—just at a slower pace. Setting aside the broad policy conclusions, the actual data and analyses presented in the report do offer some meaningful information, and this information is consistent with past research: charter schools are of variable quality, and there are very few innovations in charter school practices as a whole that are not also present in traditional public schools.

Notes and References

1 Toney, A., Brown-Olivieri, S., Robitaille, E., et al. (2011). *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform: The success of California charter schools in promoting African American Achievement*. Sacramento, CA: California Charter Schools Association. Retrieved October 23, 2011, from <http://www.calcharters.org/understanding/research/africanamericanreport/>.

2 The list here is quoted directly from the headings in the report's "Key Findings" section.

3 The criteria for a "High Impact" school were developed by the authors in accordance with the CCSA's accountability framework.

4 The Academic Performance Index (API) is the primary metric in California's school accountability system. The API measures academic growth and performance on a standardized test scores. API scores range from 200 to 1,000.

5 The authors' criteria for a "Highly Effective" school include a school API score of 800+ for African American students and 65%+ African American students passing both the English Language Arts and Mathematics sections of California's standardized test.

6 Direct Instruction is a teaching model that emphasizes small learning tasks and prescribed teacher tasks. CST stands for California Standards Test. The bracketed numbers represent the number of observed occurrences in the course of one day.

7 For a review of charter school autonomy in the years following No Child Left Behind see Finnigan, Kara S. 2007. "Charter School Autonomy: The Mismatch between Theory and Practice." *Educational Policy* 21(3): 503-26.

8 Finn, C.E. Jr. (2006). *"Chartering and Innovating" in Charter Schools Against the Odds: An Assessment of the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education*. Paul T. Hill (Ed.). Palo Alto: Hoover Institute Press.

9 According to the research guidelines established by the national charter school achievement consensus panel, the research design of this report would be classified as "weak," largely because of inability to account for student-level differences between charter and traditional public schools. For more information see Charter School Achievement Consensus Panel. (2006). *Key Issues in Studying Charter Schools and Achievement: A Review and Suggestions for National Guidelines*. Seattle, WA: National Charter School Research Project. Retrieved November 3, 20011 from http://www.crpe.org/cs/crpe/view/csr_pubs/5.

10 CCSA Press Release available online at <http://www.calcharters.org/blog/2011/10/african-american-students-performing-better-enrolling-at-higher-rates-at-california-charter-schools.html>.

11 The interpretation of these results is tenuous because the data points represent different students over time.

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