

## **POLICY BRIEF**

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# **Bridging the Gap:** Identifying Gap-Busting Charter Schools for Educational Equity

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**CREDO Policy Briefs** aim to provide succinct research summaries on topics of interest to policy makers, educators, and the general public. This brief draws from *As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III*, which can be found at [ncss3.stanford.edu](https://ncss3.stanford.edu).

## Topic overview

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted far-reaching effects on many aspects of society, especially its impact on the students in US K12 education. One concerning consequence is the worsening of prior persistent achievement gaps when comparing different student groups. [Recent research](#) indicates students from marginalized communities were disproportionately affected by the unprecedented disruptions to schooling. According to [a study](#) on the pace of learning conducted by CREDO, it is likely the road to recovery from this setback will be quite lengthy.

To aid in the recovery of learning losses, there has been a substantial infusion of funding exceeding \$100 billion into K12 education through the [American Rescue Plan Act](#). Now is the opportune moment for all stakeholders to contemplate new school improvement strategies and plan a productive course to recover. We greatly need proven approaches to strengthen or accelerate student learning. This policy brief describes important new exemplars that fulfill that need.

This brief presents analyses from CREDO's recent [As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III](#). Based on student-level administrative data from 29 states, New York City and the District of Columbia, we identified charter schools and multi-school networks that achieve educational equity, delivering what we term "gap-busting" teaching and learning. We designated schools (networks) as "gap busters" if they met the following criteria:

1. the average achievement of a school or network was above the state average, and
2. demonstrated yearly academic growth that was as strong as or stronger for Black or Hispanic or students in poverty or English Language Learners (ELL) than their non-disadvantaged peers within the same school or network.

These criteria describe education that provides equitable education to all students in a concrete and measurable way.

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Duncan, G. J., & Murnane, R. J. (2016). Rising inequality in family incomes and children's educational outcomes. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(2), 142–158.

Hanushek, E. A., Peterson, P. E., Talpey, L. M., & Woessmann, L. (2019). The achievement gap fails to close. *Education Next*, 19(3), 8–17.

## What does the evidence say?

The breadth and depth of the evidence on gap-busting schools surprised us. Thousands of charter schools have delivered a gap-busting performance for their minority, ELL and economically disadvantaged students.

As shown in Table 1, more than 500 charter schools across the country have supported Black students' learning in reading to meet or exceed that of their white peers, with both student groups recording absolute achievement stronger than state averages. More than 450 charter schools have done the same for Black students in math. The numbers increase when Hispanic student learning is in focus: More than 900 charter schools meet the standard in reading and more than 700 do so in math.

The evidence for students in poverty or who are ELL is even stronger. In reading, more than 1,000 schools ensure equivalent gains for ELLs or students in poverty. In math, more than 1,000 charter schools meet the criteria for students in poverty, and more than 800 charter schools have similar results for their ELL students.

Gap-busting schools account for notable shares of the charter school population, as seen in the column of percentages. What is less obvious is the story behind the numbers: The schools and networks in Table 1 operate independently of each other, creating these impressive results autonomously and in parallel.

Table 1. Gap Buster Charter Schools

	Reading		Math	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Blacks equal or outperform Whites	526	7.3%	456	6.3%
Hispanics equal or outperform Whites	912	12.6%	731	10.2%
Poverty students equal or outperform non-poverty students	1,393	19.3%	1,142	15.9%
ELLs equal or outperform non-ELLs	1,015	14.1%	809	11.2%

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% since a CMO could be included in multiple rows.

However, the existence of gap-busting networks of schools shows someone does possess the answer, and they have been able to replicate it across multiple schools. When we shift attention to gap-busting at the charter school network level, we find more positive evidence of organizations delivering educational equity. In our study, we define any charter school organization holding the charters for three or more schools as a charter management organization (CMO). CMOs tend to be larger, operating as many as 200 schools. Every comparison in Table 2 shows dozens of CMOs with network-wide performance that assures strong outcomes for Blacks, Hispanics, students in poverty and ELLs. Eighteen percent of CMOs move their Black students ahead in reading, and 14% do so in math.

Hispanic students in a quarter of the CMOs get equal learning in reading, and one-fifth of CMOs have similar results in math. For students in poverty and ELLs, more than one-third of CMO networks provide gap-busting results in reading; in math, the proportions are one-quarter of networks for student learners in poverty and nearly a third for ELLs.

The CMOs reflected in Table 2 are a subset of the schools described in Table 1, so they share the attribute of building their education practice autonomously. Their unique attribute is that each has demonstrated the capacity to scale these practices across their networks so that gap-busting education becomes the norm.

*Table 2. Gap Buster Charter Management Organizations*

	Reading		Math	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
<b>Blacks equal or outperform Whites</b>	65	18%	51	14%
<b>Hispanics equal or outperform Whites</b>	95	26%	72	20%
<b>Poverty students equal or outperform non-poverty students</b>	122	33%	97	26%
<b>ELLs equal or outperform non-ELLs</b>	128	35%	115	31%

Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% since a CMO could be included in multiple rows.

## Policy considerations

Our analyses reveal a substantial share of charter schools have the capacity to effectively bridge achievement gaps across their student populations, delivering all-too-rare academic growth to their traditionally underserved students on par with more advantaged peers. Our finding amplifies the generally positive learning gains for US charter school students. It bears noting that these results were realized in organizations that our national study showed enroll more academically challenging student populations; to begin with, they have done so with existing funding levels.

This segment of highly successful school operators supports a few policy considerations.

The sheer volume of schools and networks identified as “gap-busters” proves that educational equity

is within our collective grasp. The findings are too extensive to be considered flukes or outliers. The implication is clear: Achievement gaps should not be accepted as inevitable outcomes. Our results affirm it is indeed possible to eradicate the disparities. We contend they also impose a duty on policymakers to level up.

Our research does not extend to in-depth explorations of how these results are created. We are confident, however, that similar outcomes are to be found in district schools. Further work is required to uncover any common features of gap-busting schools, whatever their status, that may be transferable to other education settings. With the continuation of education challenges in a post-pandemic world, this work should be prioritized in every corner of the country.

