

POLICY BRIEF

A Closer Look:

Examining the Impact and Effectiveness of Online Charter Schools

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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.

Topic overview

One of the most contentious debates about public schools in the United States focuses on online schools. Their unconventional structure and instructional practices challenge many notions of educating primary and secondary public school students.

Many online schools operate as charter schools. This gives them considerable autonomy from typical regulations. In exchange, they agree to a limited-term contract and regular performance reviews that may place conditions on them or end their continuation.

In many parts of the country, there is a lively debate about whether online charter schools should be classified in a way that distinguishes them from site-based charter schools. To date, no state legislation has moved to create such a distinction, though, in some instances, legislation has been amended to create different discretion or requirements for online charter schools.

Similarly, any research on the performance of charter schools must consider whether to include or exclude online charter schools. Online charter schools are included in CREDO's *As a Matter of Fact: The National Charter School Study III* for several reasons. First, online charter schools are seven percent of the charter school sector and have grown in popularity. As such, it is essential to evaluate their effectiveness and impact.

Second, online charter schools, like traditional brick-and-mortar charter schools, operate under

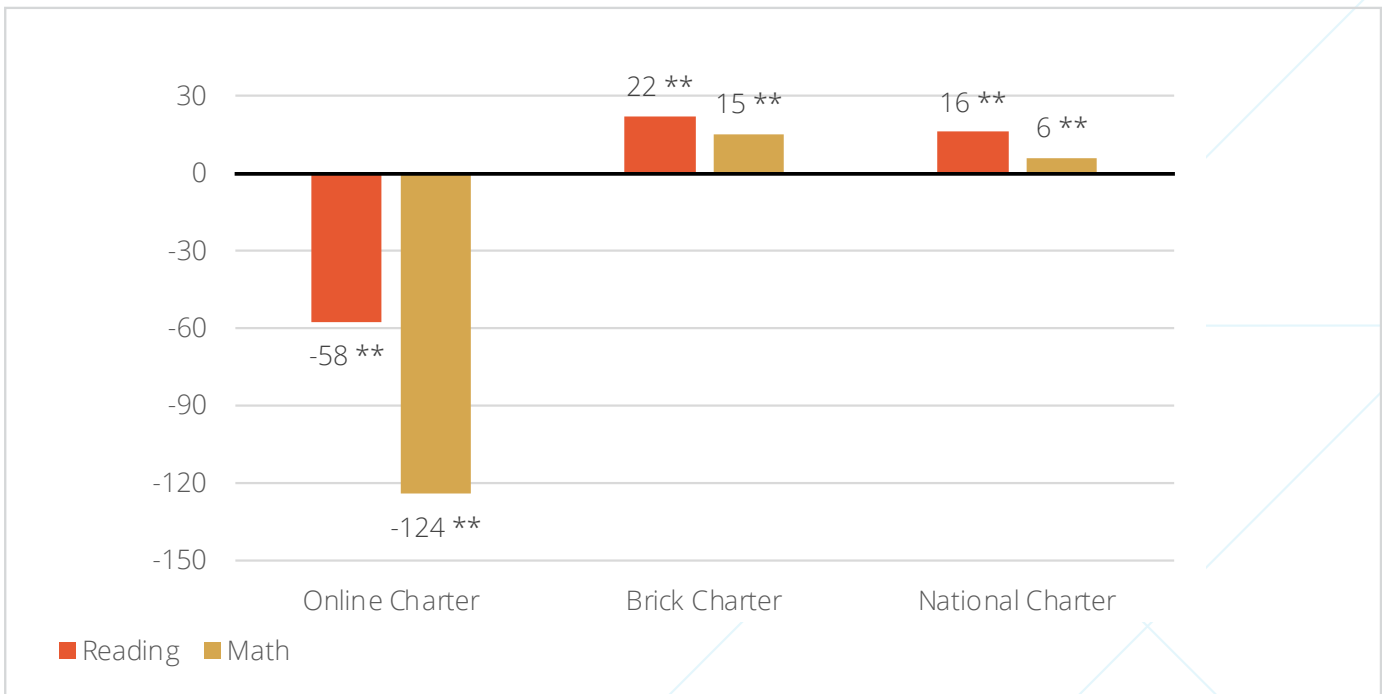
an agreed contract of operating discretion in exchange for responsibility for performance. They receive public funding and are accountable for meeting specific educational outcomes. Including online charter schools in the analysis allows for a comprehensive assessment of the charter school sector as defined in law today.

However, authorizers of online charter schools face unique challenges in evaluating these schools. Students in online settings are dispersed around a state, typically in their homes. This makes normal regulating activities such as site visits impossible. Additionally, such basic educational practices as classroom observations may not be possible for online programs where students take classes asynchronously to fit their unique needs, which may be the reason families chose online education in the first place. This means while online charter schools may be held to the same charter bargain of flexibility for accountability, how accountability for online charter schools is addressed will have to look different from the typical brick-and-mortar charter school.

Additionally, including online charter schools in the analysis provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of online education as a mode of instruction. With technological advancements, online learning has become increasingly prevalent, and understanding its effectiveness in different contexts is crucial for improving educational outcomes.

What does the evidence say?

The performance of online charter schools is more varied than might appear from the aggregate findings. The picture is exceptionally bleak when the performance of all students enrolled in online charter schools is analyzed. The chart below shows the average one-year learning of online charter school students compared to their matched peers in traditional public schools. We adjusted the average academic growth for the matched peers to zero for comparison purposes. On average, online charter school students progress by 58 fewer days of learning in a year in reading and 128 days fewer days of learning in math. Put another way, in a 180-day school year, the typical online student makes two-thirds of a year of progress in reading. In math, they make only a third of a year of progress in a year of schooling.



The chart includes the results for all charter schools in our study and the results for the students attending brick-and-mortar charter schools. These figures clearly make the difference in average student learning across the two settings. Further, the degree to which online schools' performance impacts the national picture is also apparent. Despite enrolling only six percent of the nation's charter school students, the results for student learning in online charter schools are so negative that they diminish the sector's performance by six days in reading and nine days in math.

There is more to the performance story, however. It is easy to think the average online charter school impact applies to all students, but that would be incorrect. There are substantial numbers of students benefiting from attending online charter schools. Over one-third of students who attend online charter schools have positive gains relative to their matched TPS peers; however, the remaining two-thirds overwhelm those gains.

Similar – though smaller -- differences exist when discussing online charter school education at the

school level. Of the 135 online schools in our study, just two online charter schools have significantly stronger school-wide results than their TPS comparison in reading, and one school does so in math. As a share of all online charter schools, these are rounding errors. Another quarter of the schools have similar results to TPS in reading, and 10 percent are equivalent in math. While these are minor shares of the whole set, these schools figured out how to leverage the model to benefit students. Unfortunately, these schools are in the company of the 73 percent of schools with worse performance than TPS in Reading and the 90 percent who under perform in math.

Policy considerations

Our findings inform policy considerations in the near and long term. In both cases, the predominant concern is the academic welfare of the students attending online charter schools. The analysis clearly shows educational harm for many students in the short term. The magnitude of the learning shortfall far exceeds any reasonable tolerance for parent preferences or model development. If these were medical trials, they would face termination forthwith.

Online charter school operators face existential risk in the short run unless they deliver two things. The first is better guidance for parents and students to grasp better whether the option aligns with their educational aims. It is fair to stress that some students do well in each school, but a significant knowledge gap persists about the successful match between student and program characteristics. This may require new data and analysis to reveal the conditions that favor positive academic performance. Monitoring provider transparency would also help.

The second is a plan of corrective action that they will use to address the staggering learning shortfalls of the students in each school who lose critical

To summarize the findings, learning for most students in online charter schools is far less than they would have realized either in their local TPS settings or in other brick-and-mortar schools. Against that dominant result, about one-third of enrolled online charter school students fare better than they would have in their local options. Those high-performing students are spread across all the online charter schools, making up a small fraction of every online charter student body. Speculating if most schools have a share of their students performing well, these school operators may think it sufficient to prove the value of the model. Almost certainly, these are the students on display for marketing and recruiting new students.

learning while in their school. Authorizers have a role in holding all charter schools, especially the lowest performing ones, accountable for performance. Part of that scheme should be remedies and ongoing support.

The longer-run policy questions focus on the tension between the current performance landscape and the future opportunities for evolving online education offerings in more productive forms. There is a real risk that the current set of online charter school operators might permanently damage any appetite for online schooling. Without swift changes to strategy and execution, they could run themselves off the proverbial cliff.

It is critical to the model's future that the select few online charter schools delivering solid learning for their students have protection and encouragement to replicate and evolve. By using their autonomy to design and deliver successful new educational approaches, they embody the upside of the overall charter school bargain.

