

POLICY BRIEF

Unlocking Potential: Lessons from Charter School Frameworks for Improving K-12 Education

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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

Finding ways to improve academic outcomes for US K-12 students is an ambition shared by policymakers, community leaders, educators, families, and funders. To do so, it is critical to look both inside and outside our traditional public school systems for evidence of success. This policy brief advances insights drawn from results from **CREDO's three national charter school studies** to illuminate a path to better performance for the larger US K-12 education system.

CREDO has tracked and evaluated charter school academic outcomes for students, schools and networks for over 20 years. Across three national charter school studies, we examined the effectiveness of charter schools. The results show a pattern of improvement over time both in average yearly learning for students and in the overall strength of the community of charter schools.

These important trends, described more fully in the following section, raise the critical question: *"What can we learn from these results?"*

Charter schools operate under a different policy framework than the rest of the K-12 public school system. The framework sets the conditions for charter schools' growing positive outcomes and offers a chance to examine a divergent approach from the conventional governance and operations strategy for traditional public schools. Captured in the mantra, "flexibility for accountability," the construct is not just a catchphrase. It is a distinctly different mode of operation. The "loose-tight" parameters of the framework create incentives to

which schools and networks respond. The influence of incentives fosters the kind of improvement over time that the evidence shows.

On the "loose" side of the framework, the charter framework establishes a policy of possibility where educators, leaders, and boards of directors have the discretion to build and deliver curriculum and instruction that meets high standards for learning and is responsive to local needs. Charter schools determine how to best organize their governance, operations, and finance and budgeting functions and manage these functions independently from their local school districts.

On the "tight" side of the framework, charter school authorizers and sponsors are expected to behave as governors of quality. They review new school applications against quality criteria, ensuring that only school teams that meet academic, operational, financial, governance, health and safety standards move forward to open schools. Through the charter review and renewal process, authorizers periodically assess the ongoing performance of the schools they oversee. This tight regulation and review of school performance means charter schools must return results to continue to stay open and operate.

The connection between the framework and the improvement trends revealed in CREDO's studies stimulates ideas for how to transfer similar policy constructions to other parts of the US K-12 education system. We explore some of these connections in the final section of this policy brief.

Looking Deeper: What Does the Evidence Say?

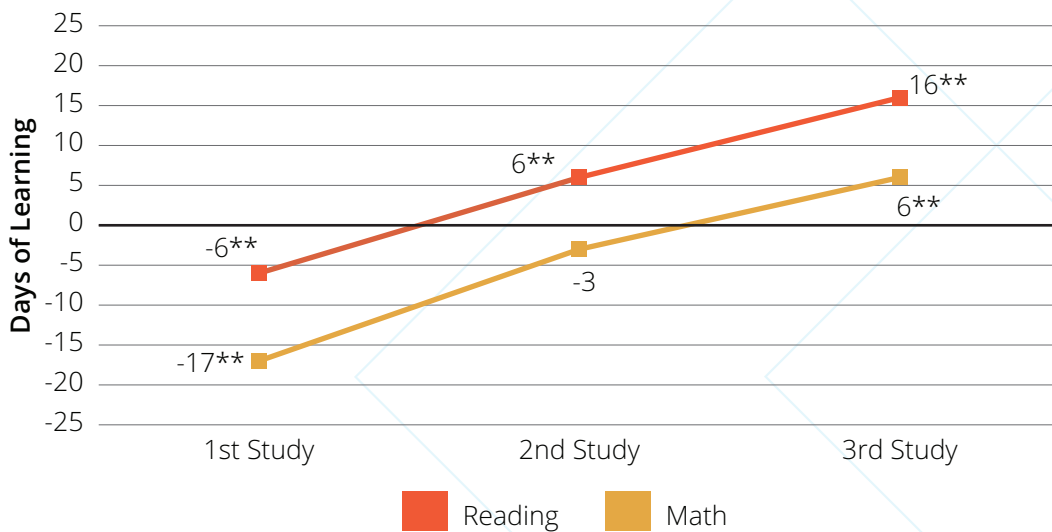
Across our three CREDO [National Charter School Studies](#), we focus on the annual academic progress students enrolled in charter schools make compared to [exact-matched students](#) attending the traditional public schools (TPS) the charter students would otherwise have attended.

Student learning in charter schools improved over the time period covered by the three studies. Figure 1 below shows the annual academic growth of charter school students across our three national studies, released in 2009, 2013, and 2023. As shown in the [2023 study](#), the typical student enrolled in US charter schools advanced their learning in a year's time by 16 additional days of learning in reading and six (6) additional days in math compared to the progress of their matched peers in TPS.

Additionally, between the 2009 and 2023 studies, against a backdrop of flat performance for the nation, the trend of learning gains for students enrolled in charter schools is both large and positive. Reading growth of students in charter schools rose by 23 days of learning each year. In the same period, student learning in math increased by 37 days of learning each year.

Charter schools produced superior student gains even while enrolling larger shares of non-white students and a greater percentage of students experiencing poverty than their adjacent traditional public schools. They moved Black and Hispanic students and students in poverty ahead in their learning faster than if those students had enrolled in their local traditional public school. These results are consistent across most grade spans and community settings.

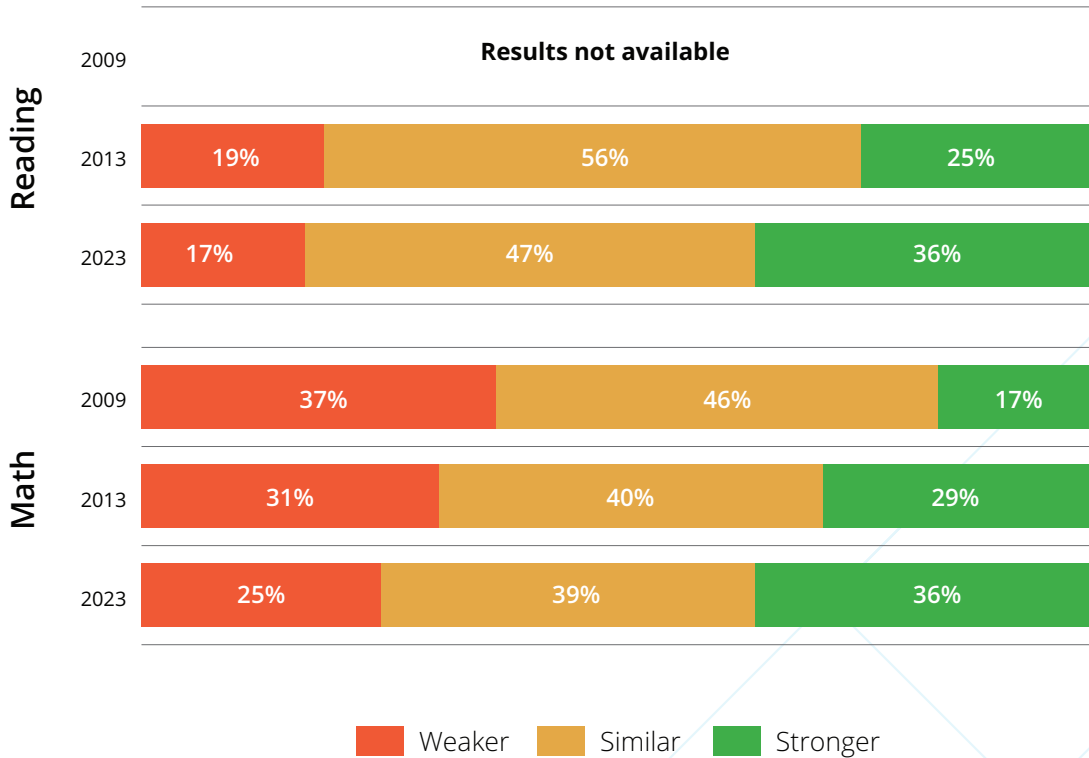
Figure 1: Annual Academic Growth of Charter School Students across Three National Studies



Looking deeper at school level performance, the share of charter schools with significantly stronger learning gains than their traditional public school peers has increased over the three studies in both reading and math. Simultaneously, the share of charter schools underperforming their traditional public school peers

has decreased over time in both subjects. Figure 2 below shows the academic growth of charter schools compared to their local TPS in reading and math, across CREDO's three national studies:

Figure 2: Academic Growth of Charter Schools Compared to Their Local TPS across Studies, Reading and Math



What is Behind the Trends? We probed trends to better understand how the observed improvement occurred. New charter schools opened with stronger results than at any time in the past but accounted for a minor share of the overall rise in learning observed in the 2023 study. The new-to-the-study schools had identical growth in reading as their TPS peers, and stronger growth in math (+13 days). Several factors contribute to the strong starts for new charter schools: expansion of high performing charter school networks, the emergence of strong new networks and stronger charter school authorizing all play a role.

The overall improvement in student academic gains was primarily the result of existing charter schools improving over time, with 18 days of additional learning than their TPS peers in reading and 10 additional days in math. It bears noting that charter schools and networks operate independently of one another, so there is no cohesive program or design driving these improvements.

This growth represents accelerated learning gains for hundreds of thousands of students nationwide. Each student and each school are proof points showing it is possible to change the trajectory of learning for students at scale. This finding is especially important for students traditionally underserved by their school systems.

Policy Considerations

The 2022 results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress removed any ambiguity about student learning coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a country, student academic performance has regressed by two decades in math and fallen steeply in reading. The most severe declines are found among minority students, students experiencing poverty, and those with special needs, all of whom were already performing below their non-white and economically advantaged peers before the pandemic. The need for evidence-backed approaches to sustained academic success for students transcends demographic, economic, and political divides.

The charter school policy framework is the common and consistent factor among our country's diverse set of charter schools and charter management networks, and this commonality suggests that it could be a potential tool for school improvement more broadly. The correlates of the charter school policy framework are compelling: gradual increases in academic gains and fewer underperforming schools over time. These associations support a number of implications that could lead to improvements in other parts of the US K-12 system.

First, the “flexibility for accountability” construct differs markedly from the prevailing approach in the rest of the public school system. The construct is intentionally hands-off on the “hows” of teaching, instead requiring clear performance standards for judging schools coupled with regular and routine monitoring and oversight. The design has given rise to thousands of charter schools, autonomous and independent of each other, building their

own solutions for effective learning experiences. Hundreds of diverse approaches have emerged, broadening the repertoire of successful school models.

Second, the construct implicitly acknowledges that success will not be universal, despite all good intentions. Its design is probabilistic, with odds that are favorable for success but not completely certain. In practice, it creates expectations for success and consequences if schools fall short. These parameters are known and agreed to in advance by both the charter school's governing board and the charter authorizer.

As tough as it is to close schools, the disservice of not closing poorly performing schools has large and lingering ripple effects on student academic success. The accountability side of the charter policy framework, embodied in the practices of charter school authorizers and sponsors, is as important as the autonomy schools enjoy.

We contend the incentives embedded in the charter framework can and should have broader applicability in public schools. Thousands of charter schools have proved that we can do better for our students. Whether it be termed “charter school” or something else, the deduction from data in our national charter school studies is that when both sides of the equation—flexibility and accountability—are working together for more schools, more students' academic results will improve.

