

The evidence in favour of charter schools in America has strengthened

Meanwhile, both parties have run away from them



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Improving schools is hard. Evidence of success or failure can take a decade to collect. What works in one place may flop in another. This explains why school reformers are excited about an authoritative study from Stanford University which shows that charter schools really do help children learn. That should settle an argument over how to arrange America's schools that has been raging for 30 years.

The theory underpinning charters is that schools should be freed from the bureaucracy of the public-schools system and be able to hire and fire teachers based on merit. If they have these freedoms and are held accountable, then the benefits will show up in better results. That idea attracted Republican support, but it was controversial on the left. Although technocratic-minded Democrats, such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, supported charters, teachers' unions opposed them, arguing that they drew resources away from other public schools. When charters succeeded, the unions said, it was only because they attracted the brightest pupils or the most motivated parents.

Although fine-grained studies were encouraging, the broad evidence for charters was disappointing. In 2009 the group at Stanford published an influential study showing that their pupils did slightly worse in maths and reading than students in conventional public schools. In 2013 the study was updated and the team found that charter pupils did better in reading and worse in maths. Partly as a result, the unions won the argument on the left. When he was running for office in 2020, Joe Biden described himself as “not a charter-school fan”. Meanwhile, the right has turned away from charters and fixated instead on “wokeness” and on giving parents vouchers so that they have more choice over where their children go to school.

Despite all this, charter networks have quietly expanded and experimented. Although some have failed (deservedly), more have thrived. The latest study, from Stanford’s Centre for Research on Education Outcomes, compared 1.9m charter-school students with a control sample in 2014-19. They found that in maths the average charter student advanced by an extra six days each year compared with one at a traditional public school, and by 16 days in reading. Over time, that adds up to a big difference.

What is more, these averages obscure important findings. Charters do much better in cities and with Hispanic and African-American students. Charters in cities advanced their pupils by almost a whole month each year in reading and maths compared with the control group. Black and Hispanic students did better on those measures “by large margins” compared with their peers at traditional public schools. These are the very children the Democratic Party says it especially wants to help.

And the researchers rejected the notion that this was achieved by creaming off motivated pupils or parents. If anything, charter schools take in students who are doing worse than their classmates in public schools.

The Stanford study also points to something larger. Since the Supreme Court overturned affirmative action in college admissions and firms began backing away from diversity, equity and inclusion programmes, Democrats have become unsure about how to deal with the racial disparities they focused on in 2020. They thought the way to fix black-white achievement gaps was to attack standardised tests and gifted and talented programmes. That was unpopular, and left the underlying problem unsolved.



America would do more to cut racial disparities by pursuing race-blind policies that focus on those who most need help. That sounds like a paradox, but it is not. Just as tax credits for poor families narrow racial disparities in income, so charter schools in cities do the same for reading and maths. Republicans should rekindle their enthusiasm for charters. Mr Biden should tell his education secretary that he is now a fan of charter schools. And he should set about helping them flourish. ■

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