

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: January 17, 2012

Published in Print: January 18, 2012, as **High School Results Are Mixed in Review of Charter Networks**

Mixed Results Seen for Charter Networks

Success patterns echo middle-grades study

By **Christina A. Samuels**

A follow-up to a major national study on the performance of charter school networks shows that they are yielding varied results when it comes to their students' progress in graduating from high school and going on to college.

The study shows that, of the six private charter-management organizations, or CMOs, for which data were available, three have significant positive impacts on students' on-time graduation rates compared with the regular public schools in their areas. One of the charter networks increased the probability that its students would graduate from high school in four years by 23 percentage points.

Two of the other charter-management groups studied had positive but not statistically significant impacts on graduation. And one network had a serious negative impact on the graduation rates of its students compared with the local public schools: It reduced the probability that students would graduate on time by 22 percentage points.

The report was released last week by the research group Mathematica, with headquarters in Princeton, N.J., and the Center on Reinventing Public Education, at the University of Washington Bothell. The groups released a study in November showing similarly mixed results on the academic performance of students in charter networks, based on middle school test scores. The update focuses on high school performance and college enrollment. ("**Study Finds Charter Networks Give No Clear Edge on Results,**" Nov. 9, 2011.)

Academic Challenges

The researchers focused on 40 CMOs, with 292 public charter schools in 14 states, all of which were nonprofit organizations that controlled at least four schools and had at least four schools open in fall 2007. **The CMOs had a greater share of low-income and minority students compared with the regular district, and tended to enroll higher-achieving black and Hispanic students.** The report does not, however, disclose the names of the networks in the study.

The study was financed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation of Seattle and the Walton Family Foundation, based in Bentonville, Ark., with project-management assistance from the NewSchools Venture Fund in San Francisco, which provides startup help for charters serving low-income children, among other efforts.

(The Gates Foundation also provides grant support for *Education Week's* coverage of the K-12 education industry and for organizational capacity-building by its publisher, Editorial Projects in Education. The Walton Family Foundation supports the newspaper's coverage of parent-empowerment issues.)

Thomas Toch, a Washington-based senior fellow at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, in Stanford, Calif., said CMOs, with their high population of low-income students, face a big academic challenge in moving students through high school and on to college enrollment. The less-affluent students who make up the majority of those enrolled in CMOs tend to be below grade level, compared with more affluent peers. "To take kids that are way behind and catch them up significantly in high school takes a lot of work," said Mr. Toch, who has done research on CMOs. "In some ways, it's encouraging that a few of the CMOs have been successful."

College Attainment

The researchers were able to gather postsecondary information on graduates for four of the charter-management organizations. Two had large positive impacts on college-enrollment rates, increasing the likelihood of college entry by 21 percentage points and 23 percentage points. The two other networks did not have any significant impacts on college-entry rates.

"The message for a city or a district that wants to work with one of these groups is to be sure to look at the overall record for success at each of these schools," said Robin Lake, the associate director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education and a report co-author.

The update also includes school-level impacts on student achievement. For those data, the researchers examined 18 CMOs that had two or more middle schools.

Seven of those networks showed uniformly positive impacts on student learning in mathematics and seven in reading. Five of the 18 had uniformly negative impacts in math and one in reading. Most of the variation was seen between different charter networks, rather than from school to school within the same network.

"From a perspective of policymakers, it suggests that if you know about the CMO's existing schools, that can give you a good idea of what the other schools will be like," said Brian Gill, a senior fellow at Mathematica.

The researchers plan to release a report in March that examines common practices among high-performing networks.

