

Chicago's charter-schools experiment flops: report

By Greg Hinz October 13, 2014

Chicago's massive experiment in adding charter schools pretty much is a flop, one in which the charters do little better than conventional schools and in some ways lag behind.

That's the eye-catching conclusion of **a new report issued by** the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity at the University of Minnesota Law School that surely will be controversial, injecting a fascinating new data set into the upcoming race for mayor.

The institute is headed by nationally known urban researcher **Myron Orfield**, who pulls no punches about what his findings show.

Pound for pound, charters should do better than typical neighborhood schools because parents, who have to go to special trouble to enroll their children, presumably are more invested in their kids' performance, Mr. Orfield suggests. However, "after controlling for the mix of students and challenges faced by individual schools, Chicago's charter schools actually underperform their traditional counterparts in most measurable ways," he says.

"Reading and math pass rates, reading and math growth rates, and graduation rates are lower in charters, all else equal," he added. "Although there is some evidence that charter students score higher on ACT scores, the finding is statistically significant for only one of four indicators — hardly reason to continue the rapid expansion of the system."

Beyond that, charters tend to be significantly less diverse than regular schools, with only about 7 percent found to be diverse, compared with 20 percent of neighborhood schools.

CHARTER SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Indeed, the number of charter schools has soared under Mayors Richard M. Daley and Rahm Emanuel, with enrollment rising nearly sixfold from 2003 to 2013: 8,647 students to 48,707.

The Chicago Teachers Union and some parent groups have argued vehemently that charters have had a mixed record on prior studies, and effectively shift resources away from local schools. Charter operators, in turn, dispute that.

The new report clearly sides with the foes.

One key set of findings, those on Table 3, indicate that vis a vis regular schools, charters have reading and math pass rates generally only 2 or 3 percentage points higher. But when controlled-enrollment magnet and gifted schools are added — they have about as many students collectively as all of the charters — the numbers turn south, with charters scoring below the overall noncharter total.

When all of that is adjusted for factors including racial mix, native language, income and whether the schools were open to all comers or had a selective enrollment, charters scored more poorly by almost every performance measure, including graduation rates, the report found.

One factor the report does not adjust for is that charters use expulsions "much more extensively" than regular schools, although they also use suspensions "much less extensively," the report says.

Chicago Public Schools and city officials had no immediate reaction to the report on this Columbus Day holiday, nor did the teachers' union. Expect plenty later.

Update, 1:00 p.m. — Some reaction from Andrew Broy, director of the **Illinois Network of Charter Schools**.

He terms Mr. Orfield's review "a very limited analysis" that is "wrong in some cases." The one specific example of an error that Mr. Broy gave me is that, according to him, charters actually had an 11 percentage point better graduation rate than regular Chicago high schools, 74 percent versus 63 percent — not the 8 percentage point lag that Mr. Orfield reported, 84 percent to 76 percent.

Mr. Broy also says that other prior studies by the Rand Corporation and a unit at Stanford University found charters were better. But the Stanford report now is five years old, and Mr. Orfield in his report suggests that the Stanford review failed to adjust for the impact of parental engagement.