Cyber Charters Have 'Overwhelming Negative Impact,' CREDO Study Finds

By Benjamin Herold on October 27, 2015 12:00 PM

UPDATED

Students who take classes over the Internet through online charter schools make dramatically less academic progress than their counterparts in traditional schools, according to a sweeping new series of reports released today.

How stark are the findings?

Statistically speaking, the gains that online charter students saw in math were so limited, it was "literally as though the student did not go to school for the entire year," said Macke Raymond, the director the **Center for Research on Education Outcomes** at Stanford University, in a call with reporters.

CREDO, the **Center on Reinventing Public Education** and **Mathematica Policy Research** collaborated on the National Study of Online Charter Schools, which represents the first comprehensive national look at the roughly 200 schools in the publicly funded, independently managed cyber-charter sector. Such schools enroll about 200,000 full-time students across 26 states.

The groups found that:

- More than two-thirds of online charter schools had weaker overall academic growth than similar brick-and-mortar schools. In math, 88 percent of online charters had weaker academic growth than their comparison schools.
- On average, online charter students achieved each year the equivalent of 180 fewer days of learning in math and 72 fewer days of learning in reading than similar students in district-run brick-and-mortar schools.
- As a group, online charters are characterized by high student-to-teacher ratios, low student engagement, and high student mobility.
- Online charters frequently offer limited opportunities for live contact with teachers and a relative paucity of supports for families, despite high expectations for parental involvement.
- From funding to enrollment to oversight, states are failing to keep up with the unique policy challenges that online charters present.

Just about any way the data were sliced—by racial and ethnic subgroups, for students in poverty, by instructional and management model, compared to brick-and-mortar charters—the story of weak academic growth in online charters was largely the same.

Only in Georgia and Wisconsin did online charter schools show more promising results. Online charters in Florida, Louisiana, and Texas had the worst results, in both reading and math.

The findings "leave little doubt attending an online charter school leads to lessened academic growth for the average student," wrote the researchers from CREDO, the go-to organization for comparisons of the academic performance of students across different types of schools.

In response, the country's largest for-profit operator of online charter schools acknowledged academic difficulties in its schools, but criticized the studies as based on outdated data and a questionable methodology.

National groups representing charters and online-learning proponents, meanwhile, described the results as alarming and troubling.

"There is a place for virtual schooling in our nation, but there is no place for results like these," said Greg Richmond, the president and CEO of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers, in a statement.

A small but rapidly growing sector

The performance and operations of online charters in individual states have been harshly criticized in previous studies by CREDO and the Rand Corporation, as well as in media accounts.

But the new reports offer the first overarching look at the sector.

Despite being a relatively recent phenomenon, full-time online charter schools now enroll about 8 percent of charter students nationwide, according to CRPE, a think tank affiliated with the University of Washington. The group's review of state laws and policies is summarized in its report, The Policy Framework for Online Charter Schools.

Overall, white students (71 percent of total enrollment) are overrepresented in online charters, while Hispanic students (12 percent) and English-language learners (0.4 percent) are underrepresented, according to Mathematica, which conducted a survey of 127 online charter principals for its report Inside Online Charter Schools.

Mathematica researchers found student-to-teacher ratios that averaged about 30:1 in online charters, compared to 20:1 for brick-and-mortar

charters and 17:1 for traditional public schools. At the high school level, more than one-third of the online charters surveyed reported typical class sizes of 50 or more.

Other support staff are also scarce: Most of the online charters surveyed did not use tutors, teaching aides, or instructional assistants and had only one guidance counselor.

Because online charter students learn over the Internet, often via self-paced courses, proponents have questioned the relevance of such figures.

They have also pointed to online charters' use of "synchronous" technologies, ranging from phone calls to Web conferencing, as a strategy for allowing teachers to interact with a wide range of students in real time.

But the Mathematica researchers found that's more aspiration than reality.

For one, just 56 percent of online charters provided all students with computers, and just 29 percent provided Internet service to all students.

The report also found that "students in a typical online charter schools have less synchronous instructional time in a week than students in brick and mortar schools have in a day."

The result, the Mathematica researchers concluded, was "substantial expectations on parents, who are expected not only to ensure that students keep up with assignments but also to participate in training sessions and, in a large number of schools, to actively participate in the student's instruction."

Weak academic growth

In looking at the impact of attending an online charter school, the CREDO researchers contrasted the annual academic growth of students attending online charters with that of a comparison group that was similar in terms of grade level, gender, race/ethnicity, poverty, English-language-learner and special education status, and prior scores on state tests.

Members of the comparison group attended the traditional brick-and-mortar schools where their peers would have most likely landed had they not been cyber charter students.

The analysis focus on academic growth, not absolute achievement.

The analysis CREDO conducted for its report, called Online Charter School Study 2015, included data from 158 schools in 17 states and the District of Columbia.

In a statement, K12, Inc., a for-profit company affiliated with schools that enrolled more than one-third of online charter students in 2013, attacked that methodology, saying that a variety of factors make it impossible to create legitimate "virtual twins," as the CREDO researchers claim.

K12 also criticized the study for relying on state standardized test data from 2012-13. CREDO researchers countered that those data were the most recent available for which a full comparison could be made.

In reading, the CREDO researchers found that online charter schools in 13 states showed far weaker gains than traditional schools. In two states, no significant differences between online charters and traditional schools were found. Online charters showed positive effects on reading gains in Georgia and Wisconsin.

Online charters were not found to have a positive effect on math gains in any state. In three states, no significant differences were found. The CREDO researchers found that online charters showed significantly weaker math gains than traditional schools in 14 states.

The pattern held strong when looking at students across various combinations of race, gender, poverty, and other demographic characteristics.

"All student profiles...have weaker growth in online charter schools than in [traditional public schools]," the CREDO report reads. "This is due to the overwhelming negative impact on student growth from attending an online charter school."

Few of the school-level practices or management models examined by Mathematica were found to have a statistically significant relationship with academic growth.

The CREDO researchers also looked at mobility, finding that students who enrolled in online charters subsequently changed schools at a rate two to three times higher than their counterparts in brick-and-mortar schools. Some observers worried that this mobility created a selection bias that was not accounted for in the researchers' methodology.

"The study doesn't say that online charter schools can't work," said Lynn Woodworth of CREDO during a call with reporters. "But what is being done right now, for the majority of students, is not effective in producing academic growth. "

Growth of online charters already restricted

About two-thirds of online charter schools contract with for-profit education management organizations for things like curriculum, assessments, professional development, and management services.

K12, Inc., the largest such organization, said in its statement that it has been aware of academic challenges among its students for some time and invested millions of dollars in efforts to improve.

"We have taken vigorous actions over the past two years to meet these challenges with results not reflected in this study," the statement reads. "We are proud of where we are today and where we are going."

In a statement, Nina Rees, the president and CEO of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, said she was "disheartened to learn of the large-scale underperformance of full-time virtual charter public schools."

"The breadth of this underperformance convinces us that states may need to change the parameters within which full-time virtual charter public schools can operate," Rees said, citing possible reforms including funding online charters based on performance, rather than enrollment.

Despite the troubling findings, the CREDO, CRPE, and Mathematica researchers outlined the opportunities that online charters represent, especially the possibility of experimenting with innovative new models and approaches. For example, a growing number of cyber charters award credit based on mastery of content, rather than seat time—a trend that is picking up steam in more traditional schools, too.

Rees also noted that the new reports do not address students in brick-and-mortar schools who take an occasional course online, or "blended" models that combine online and face-to-face instruction. Full-time online schools operated by states and districts were also not included in the CREDO, CPRE, and Mathematica studies.

Those caveats aside, "policy trends with online charter schools appear to be headed toward further restrictions on growth and autonomy," according to the CRPE report.

Fourteen states currently restrict either the number of online charter schools allowed to operate or the total number of students such schools can enroll. And even in Pennsylvania, which has the second highest cyber-charter enrollment in the nation and was long viewed as friendly to the sector, all applications for new online charters have been denied for two years running.

The CREDO researchers suggested that online charters should only be allowed to expand if they can demonstrate better results.

Susan Patrick, the president and CEO of the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, agreed.

"My recommendation to policymakers is to first address the quality assurance question before continuing to open up access," she said.

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