

## Charter Schools Neither 'Silver Bullet' Nor 'Apocalyptic,' Research Indicates

By [Andrew Ujifusa](#) on November 27, 2019 1:40 PM



***[Click here to see our deep dive into charter school platforms from Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders](#)***

A new review of charter schools based on a broad range of studies paints a complicated picture of their performance, and says that much of both the hype and the fear that surround them don't match the reality of their impact.

**"Nearly three decades into the charter school movement, what has research told us about charter schools?"** is a working paper from four researchers published on a website hosted by Brown University's Annenberg Institute. Reviewing a host of recent research published in peer-reviewed journals, the paper says that on issues such as racial segregation, serving students with disabilities, and traditional public school finances, charter supporters and critics both have evidence and questions they should consider that don't match their chosen narratives.

And crucially, the paper also says that a lot more research is needed into charter schools' instructional practices and school environments, as well as their effectiveness as a turnaround strategy, given a relatively small sample size in places like Tennessee and New Orleans.

The paper itself is a work in progress and has yet to go through the peer-review process. Its authors are Danielle Duffy, Sarah Ausmus Smith, and Ron Zimmer at the University of Kentucky, and Richard Buddin at the University of Virginia.

Here are a few other notable findings, based on a review of research:

- The extent to which charters "push out" low-performing students or those with special needs, while "skimming" top-performing students from traditional public schools is difficult to discern; the authors state in a footnote that there are limited studies on "pushout." Most of the research in this area, they say, is focused on test scores, although new research has focused on student behavior and special education status.
- On the effectiveness of charters, the paper notes that the strongest research method for studying this—the random assignment of students to charters and traditional public schools—has never been tried, because it would run counter to the intent of charters to provide alternative educational options based on parent and student interest, among other factors.
- The study says that "the bulk of the research" indicates that "charter schools lead to greater racial segregation for African Americans" with less clear results for whites and Hispanics. However, the discussion shouldn't stop there, the paper stresses: "While it is generally clear that charter schools are leading to more segregated schools for at least African American students, it may be that family socioeconomic characteristics are leading to these results rather than the race of the student or the racial mix of the school."

Such research, of course, won't settle the stormy political debate about them in political contexts, such as the 2020 Democratic presidential primary. In that contest, for example, charter school supporters have **publicly pushed back on Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts** and her plan to ban for-profit charters and overhaul their accountability requirements. Warren and Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, want more restrictions and tighter oversight for charters, although it's unclear how they'll actually implement much of their agenda.

---

### **See Our In-Depth Coverage: What Are Charter Schools and How Do They Work?**

---

While "initially sold as a silver bullet" by charter advocates and often described in "apocalyptic" terms by foes, the author says that, "In sum, the research results have not lived up to the hopes nor the fears of the advocates nor critics."

Not everyone who discusses charter schools speaks in polarized terms. Democratic presidential candidates like Pete Buttigieg and Beto O'Rourke (who's dropped out of the race) have said charters can serve as laboratories for successful practices in other public schools. **In a column** published earlier this year by the Harvard Kennedy School Review, Chris Geary, a

graduate student, said big difference in state and local policies "impossible to draw universal conclusions on charter schools."

"Our focus should not be on whether all charter schools are good or bad but on which policies can facilitate meaningful achievement and empowerment for students, teachers and their families," he wrote.