

No Measurable Gap Between Charters, Traditional Public Schools on National Tests

By Andrew Ujifusa on September 25, 2019 12:40 AM

There are "no measurable differences" between the performance of charter schools and traditional public schools on national reading and math assessments from 2017, a finding that persists when parents' educational attainment were factored into the results.

That's one key takeaway from a report released Wednesday by the National Center for Education Statistics about charters, private schools, and home schooling. "School Choice in the United States: 2019 " also found that Hispanic students constituted a plurality—33 percent—of charter school enrollment in 2016-17, followed by white students at 32 percent and black students at 26 percent. Meanwhile, nearly half of students enrolled at traditional public schools, 49 percent, were white. And a higher share of charter school students were enrolled in "high poverty" schools compared to their traditional public school counterparts, as defined by eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, by a count of 34 to 24 percent.

Enrollment in charter schools grew by more than five times between 2000 and 2016—not the most shocking finding given the growth of the charter sector in general, although that increase did outpace the enrollment growth of just 1 percent in traditional public schools over the same time period. Meanwhile, the number of children ages 5 to 17 being home-schooled nearly doubled, reaching 1.7 million in 2016.

Let's dig into those math and reading results for a minute. They come from the 2017 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also known as the "nation's report card," in reading and math to students in the 4th and 8th grades. It's important to remember that these exams have no stakes attached for students, educators, and schools. And there are other ways in which using NAEP to measure the impact of policies and practices can get tricky very fast. For more on [how to look at NAEP data and avoid "misNAEPery" go here for a classic Education Week piece](#) from 2013 by Stephen Sawchuk.

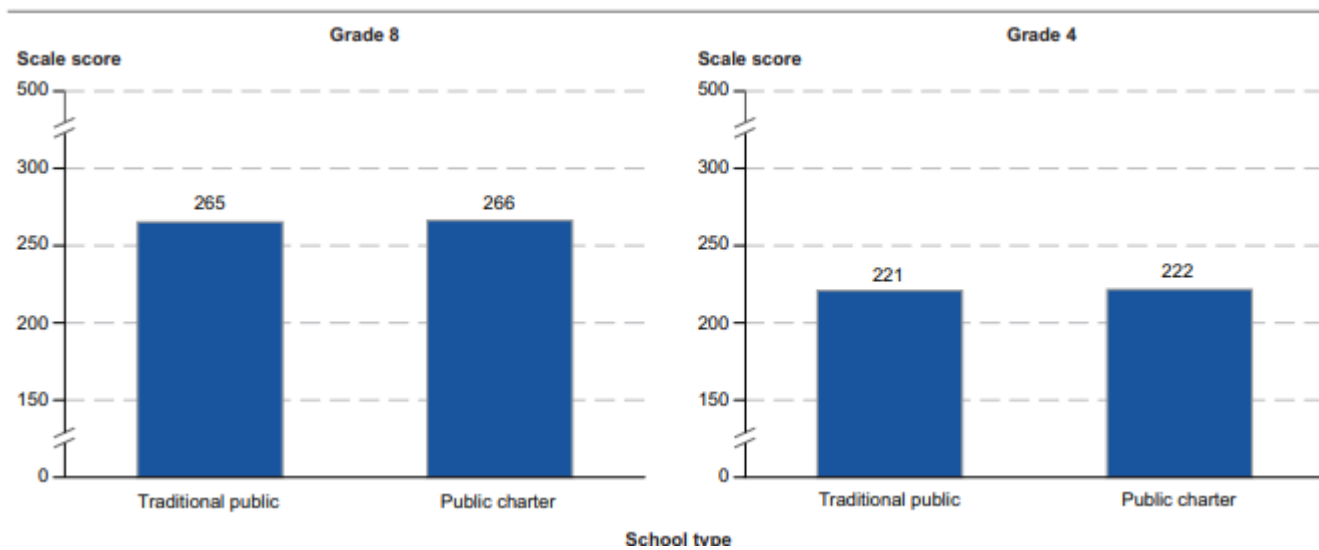
With that said, here are a few conclusions we can draw from the new NAEP data comparing charter schools and traditional public schools:

- Based on scores alone, with no controls, there was no statistically significant difference between charters and traditional public schools on NAEP in reading or math.
- Why does this matter? Because these schools tend to serve different populations with different background characteristics, which can skew scores.
- The researchers controlled for parent educational attainment, and still found no significant difference.
- A lack of data meant NCES couldn't rule out lots of other factors (like income, teacher quality, race and ethnicity) that are potentially caught up in these test results. The report

notes that other factors not controlled for "are substantively correlated with student assessment scores and school type."

- This data is based on average or aggregate performance, which tends to suppress outliers. We know from recent work from Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes that **charters in some cities like Boston** do better than traditional public schools. That's not always the case, however.

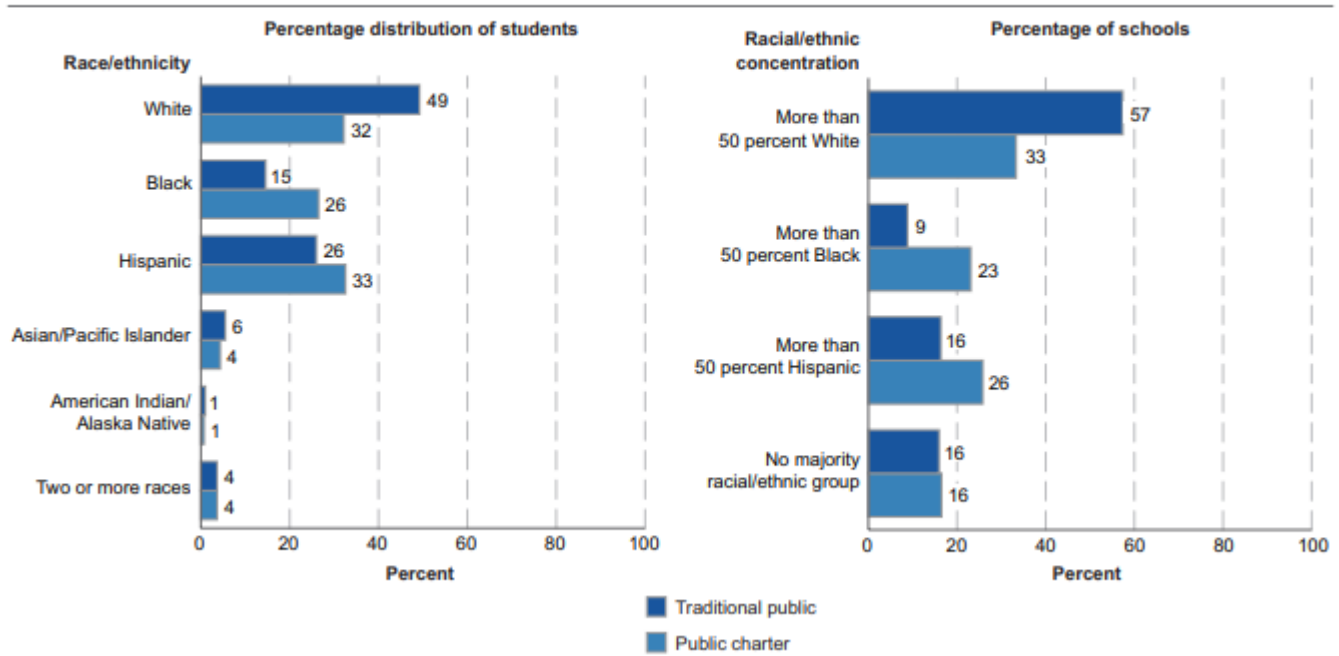
For a visual, here's the NCES chart of those scores for charters and traditional public schools in reading:



There's a bunch of other data on charter schools in there for folks to chew on. For example, charter schools are more than twice as likely to be located in cities than in the suburbs—56 percent of charters are in cities, compared to 26 percent that in the 'burbs.

Here's one more demographic data point for you: 57 percent of traditional public schools are more than 50 percent white, compared to 33 percent of charter schools that can be described that way. More on that breakdown here:

Figure 2.2. Percentage distribution of students in traditional public schools and public charter schools, by race/ethnicity, and percentage of traditional public schools and public charter schools, by racial/ethnic concentration: 2016–17



To read more about what regions of the country are best for public school choice according to parents, check out the full NCES report below. There's also a bunch of information in there about gang activity in schools, bullying, and more.