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# Six things we know about charter schools

They don't work miracles, but some do better for some types of students than regular public schools.

**inql.** FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — Maine may soon become the 42nd state to pass a charter school law, but I suspect that few Mainers understand charter schools.

I've had countless conversations with people who have never set foot in a charter school, but know that charters will destroy public education. And I've heard charter backers insist that charters will revolutionize public education.

We have no shortage of opinions, but what are the facts? I've spent a decade doing fieldwork in more than 50 charter schools in eight states. From that, I can say six things about charter schools.

■ First, parents and teachers love charters. Every survey ever conducted has found that charter school folks like their schools more than district school folks like theirs. Charters often win by 50 percent margins!

Critics point out that parents like charters because they chose them, but this fails to explain why teachers also prefer charters. The survey data is reinforced by fieldwork finding charter parents and teachers attracted by specific programs (Montessori, Core Knowledge, etc.), characteristics (small size, teacher governance) or results (safety, academic achievement) which are unavailable elsewhere. Further, as studies report, most charters do not promote segregation.

■ Second, on the whole, charter test scores lag behind those in traditional public schools. Far from "creaming" the best students, charters mainly serve kids having trouble.

After all, if your child succeeds in a traditional public school, why choose

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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a charter? Though charters typically have lower tests scores, most studies find kids learning more in year in a charter than in a year in a traditional public school.

Even the much publicized CREDO study often cited by charter opponents in fact finds charter elementary and middle schools doing slightly better on value added criteria, though the high schools do worse.

■ Third, charters are safer. For example, one study found that 59.5 percent of charter parents view their school as safer than nearby traditional public schools, as compared to only 3.5 percent seeing the charters as less safe. The University of Washington's Center on Public School Change reported staff surveys that charters have less bullying even while serving more at-risk students.

This makes sense, since most charters are small, serving niche markets. In a small school a principal of ordinary rather than extraordinary abilities can know all the kids and parents. As a charter teacher told me not long after Columbine, small schools have no secrets: "There are only a few students here - I would notice if one went out for a smoke, much less for a gun."

■ Fourth, charter schools do not harm district schools. As Scott Milliman and I show in a 2009 Journal of

School Choice article, where traditional public schools do well, charters only serve students who are floundering or bored (or both). It is only where the traditional public schools are dysfunctional, in places like Kansas City, where charters threaten school budgets.

■ Fifth, traditional public schools improve to compete with charters. As my co-authors and I reported, Arizona districts that lost a tenth or more of their students to charter competition reacted with positive changes in leadership and curricula.

Similarly, Stanford economist

Charter schools make parents and teachers happier, increase learning (slightly), are safer, cost less, and prod traditional public schools to improve. Charters do not bring heaven on Earth, but do seem better than most other educational reforms tried in the real world.

Caroline Hoxby's quantitative analyses suggest that competition from vouchers in Milwaukee and from charters in Michigan and Arizona improved the test scores of all students, even those "left behind" in district schools.

■ Sixth, charters spend less. Though public school spending is less transparent than Hosni Mubarak's salary, yeoman work by the indefatigable Bryan Hassel finds that on average, charters get about 20 percent less public funding per pupil than traditional public schools.

In short, charter schools make parents and teachers happier, increase learning (slightly), are safer, cost less, and prod traditional public schools to improve. Charters do not bring heaven on Earth, but do seem better than most other educational reforms tried in the real world.

Isn't that good enough? If kids come first, why do we still argue about charter schools?

— Special to The Press Herald

*It's not easy being a white male*