Comments on
“The Evaluation of Charter School Impacts”

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Key Design Features

- 32 oversubscribed charter middle schools (28 sites) in 15 states

- Regression-adjusted comparisons of randomized lottery winners & losers → strong claim to internal validity

- Diverse outcome measures: math & reading scores, attendance, grade promotion, student & parent “satisfaction”
Key Results

- No detectable effects on math or reading achievement overall but...
  - *Positive* math effect for lower-income kids (ES=0.17) and urban schools (ES= 0.16)
  - *Negative* math effect in non-urban schools (ES=-0.15)
  - *Negative* math & reading effects for higher-income kids (ES=-0.14 & -0.12, respectively)
Key Results, cont.

- No detectable effects on most other outcomes: absences, suspensions or student-reported effort and behavior

- Positive effects on student-parent “satisfaction” with school and teachers
  - Student “likes school a lot” (ES=0.52)
  - Parent rates school as excellent (ES=0.94)

- Smaller schools and those using more ability grouping → more effective in improving math
Reactions to achievement results

- I'm surprised!
  - Revealed preferences of parents imply oversubscribed charters schools are comparatively high-quality
  - Virtually all prior lottery studies → positive impacts
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- Treatment heterogeneity?
  - Compared to most lottery studies, this study has more suburban and rural schools, fewer minority and free-lunch students
Possible Research Design Issues

- Treatment contrast attenuated by “lottery loser” reactions?

- “Failure” of randomization to balance unobserved determinants of achievement?

- Need to look beyond two years?
Lottery-Based Treatment Contrast

- Treatment effect of interest *understated* if lottery winners undergo cognitively harmful school transitions at higher rate
  - Lottery winners more likely to move schools in year 1 but *less* likely in year 2 (Table III.5)

- Treatment effect of interest *understated* if “lottery losers” receive exceptional, compensatory parental inputs and school quality
  - Parents of lottery losers significantly more likely to be member of school PTA (Table IV.10)
Did Randomization “Work”?  

- Treatment-control balanced assessed for 50 variables (Table III.3)  

- Treatment group → more likely to have low income  

- Treatment group → “Pre-baseline” math scores 0.15 higher in T group but baseline math scores balanced  
  - Math scores in T group *trending downward* prior to receiving treatment?  

- An aside: The case for using “block” randomization when feasible
Need for Longer Study Window?

- Some evidence from other lottery-based charter-school studies that achievement benefits grow over time

- The “non-cognitive” impacts are striking and suggestive...
  - Growing evidence that psychological traits like school engagement influence long-term academic and economic outcomes
  - 0.52 SD increase in “liking school a lot” is important
  - In contrast, 0.08 SD increase in school engagement of 8th graders from class-size reduction (Dee and West 2008)
Concluding Comments

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• What is the broader research agenda?
  • Charter schools as competitive force or alternative modality for public schooling?
  • Charter schools as “proof of concept” and hypothesis-generating exercises?
  • If the latter, need for 2nd-generation studies of promising mediators?