

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

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 - Revealed preferences of parents imply oversubscribed charters schools are comparatively high-quality
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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)

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- Considerable policy-research benefits from making data from studies like this publicly available (and from funding follow-up?)
- 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?