



Evaluating the Impact of Charter Schools on Student Achievement: A Longitudinal Look at the Great Lakes States

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of charter schools on student achievement in the Great Lakes states: Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. This evaluation addresses two specific questions:

- How does student achievement in charter schools compare with student achievement in demographically similar, traditional public schools?
- Do charter schools show promise of being an effective strategy for improving student achievement over time, even if they are not yet outperforming traditional public schools?

Current Performance of Charter Schools on State Assessments

We conclude that charter schools in the Great Lakes region are currently performing at lower levels than predicted on state assessments—that is, student achievement in them is lower than it is in demographically similar public schools. Lowest performance appears in the states with the newest charter school initiatives, Indiana and Ohio. Illinois has the highest relative results, perhaps because some 15 percent of its charter schools have closed since 2000; when poorly performing schools close, aggregate results for remaining schools rise.

Despite the performance of charter schools in the region overall, at the school level a number of successful charter schools are consistently performing better than expected. Still, for some 60 percent of the school level comparisons drawn, charter schools were performing at levels lower than predicted.

Are Charter Schools Improving Over Time?

Despite lower achievement results than expected, there is evidence that charter schools are gaining ground and that results are improving over time. Trends in

the older reform states—including Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan—show a relatively slow rate of improvement. Relatively newer reform states—Ohio and Indiana—have the lowest current results, but over time their charter schools are making relatively large improvements.

The findings from this study represent an important contribution to the growing body of knowledge about the performance of charter schools as measured by student achievement. Similar to the conclusions that can be drawn from that broader body of research, we have found that charter schools are not performing at levels that exceed traditional public schools. While Illinois has taken measures to close some of its poorly performing schools, the weaker charter schools in the other states continue to overshadow the successful charter schools.

Summary of Findings

- Charter schools in the Great Lakes states are not currently outperforming demographically similar, traditional public schools.
- Trends indicate that generally, charter schools are making notable gains in achievement over time, with newest initiatives showing some of the greatest rates of improvement.
- All states in the region do have some successful charter schools.