



REVIEW OF *PUSHED OUT?*

Reviewed By

Erica Frankenberg
Pennsylvania State University

May 2015

Summary of Review

To investigate claims that New York City charter schools push out low-performing students in order to inflate academic achievement scores, this report uses six years of student-level data that allows for tracking student movements over time in both district and charter schools. It relies on a regression equation that includes “low scorers” (defined in several ways), whether a school is a charter or a traditional public school (TPS), and an interaction between those two characteristics in order to estimate the probability of a student exiting. The report concludes that charter schools have exit rates similar to TPSs, and there is no significant interaction between low-performing students and charter schools, and thus, there is no charter push-out effect for low-achieving students. The main problem is that the research design does not address its primary push-out question. The brief report has little detail and does not examine a host of other relevant factors. Dichotomous test scores are a proxy for low-achievement, reasons for disenrollment are not addressed, mid-year vs. end of year mobility is not parsed, cumulative rates of attrition are not examined, a possible data discrepancy between the two sectors in grades 5 and 6 is not considered, and 5% of the student population is missing. These unresolved issues are particularly regrettable in light of the rich dataset. While the report’s central question is important, this report fails to provide policymakers with new or definitive guidance.

Kevin Welner

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Managing Director

Jennifer Berkshire

Academic Editor

Erik Gunn

Managing Editor

National Education Policy Center

School of Education, University of Colorado
Boulder, CO 80309-0249
Telephone: (802) 383-0058

Email: NEPC@colorado.edu
<http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Publishing Director: Alex Molnar



This is one of a series of Think Twice think tank reviews made possible in part by funding from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice. It is also available at <http://greatlakescenter.org>.

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REVIEW OF *PUSHED OUT? LOW-PERFORMING STUDENTS AND NEW YORK CITY CHARTER SCHOOLS*

Erica Frankenberg, Pennsylvania State University

I. Introduction

The effectiveness of charter schools, particularly in urban settings or for disadvantaged students, has been widely debated. Among the contended issues is student attrition. Traditional public and charter schools experience student attrition for a variety of reasons, such as when families move. However, a criticism of charter schools is that some of the attrition isn't voluntary but is a result of charter schools pushing out students, including those who would potentially harm school achievement results, disruptive students, or students with expensive educational needs such as English Language Learners or certain types of special education services.¹ Moreover, such approaches are part of a larger set of mechanisms by which charter schools can shape their student body to differ from traditional public schools that serve all students.²

A new report authored by Marcus A. Winters and published by the Manhattan Institute, *Pushed Out? Low-Performing Students and New York City Charter Schools*, argues that low-performing students in New York City's charter schools do not have higher attrition than do students in New York City's traditional public schools.³ The central focus of this report is to examine whether charter schools are shaping their enrollments by pushing out low-achieving students. Although charter schools have been in existence a fairly short period of time, the debate over academic achievement in charter schools is relatively voluminous. Charter schools in New York City alone have been the focus of several high-profile studies that arguably show students have higher achievement in charter schools, but many have been subject to methodological critiques.⁴ Fully evaluating claims of academic performance of charter school students not only necessitates understanding student attrition, as this report purports to do, but also whether there is selective enrollment, non-replacement, or selective backfilling in charter schools in ways that might cumulatively result in peer groups that differ markedly between charter schools and traditional public schools.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The paper's executive summary identifies three main findings (reproduced verbatim here):

- *Low-performing students are more mobile, regardless of where they are enrolled: in NYC charters as well as traditional public schools, low-performing students are more likely to change schools than their higher-performing peers.*
- *Low-performing students are not more likely to exit NYC charters than traditional public schools.*
- *To the extent that higher attrition rates for low-performing NYC students offer cause for concern, they are no less a problem for the city's traditional public schools than they are for its charters.*

The report concludes that claims of charter schools pushing out low-performing students are unfounded.

The report asserts that charter schools “often” have higher test scores than public schools. The report also concludes that the author's analysis contradicts the claim that the purported difference is related to selectively high attrition in charter schools.

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report is based on an analysis of a longitudinal, student-level dataset that allows the author to track whether students move between schools in subsequent academic years. It includes students in traditional public schools as well as charter schools in NYC entering grades 4, 5, 7, and 8 from 2007-08 to 2011-12.

The author concludes that the report's “findings are inconsistent with the argument that NYC charters systematically push out low-performing students” (p. 2). The rationale for this conclusion is described in the preceding paragraph:

Low-performing students, the paper finds, *are* more likely to exit NYC charters than are higher-performing students. That pattern, the paper also finds, exists equally within the traditional public school sector (p. 2).

The gap between the author's findings and his conclusions is substantial. Simply put, finding that attrition of low-achieving students is higher than attrition of higher-performing students in NYC traditional public and charter schools does *not* support the conclusion that NYC charter schools are not pushing out students.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report is framed as a response to anecdotal comments, not research-based claims, of higher attrition in charter schools. There is little empirical evidence cited in the brief report (of the 15 pages, only five actually address the literature and the analyses). Despite a fairly significant related literature, only five studies are cited in the literature review, including some of the author's other reports.⁵ In the conclusion, the report also refers to a series of studies showing that attending charter schools in New York City is beneficial for students' achievement.⁶

The one peer-reviewed article the author describes in depth is Ronald Zimmer and Cassandra Guarino's 2013 examination of attrition of low-performing students from charter schools and public schools in an anonymous urban district.⁷ Zimmer and Guarino conclude that low-performing charter students do not have higher attrition than their similarly performing peers in traditional public schools. However, they do find some variation: in particular, low-performing students (according to their performance on reading tests) have significantly higher attrition from low-performing charter schools than their public school peers (3.9% higher).

Despite the large longitudinal dataset, this report includes few specifics that actually describe attrition.

To more fully contextualize the research on this topic, the report could have included several articles that find evidence of higher attrition for lower-performing groups of students from schools of choice in different types of school choice programs.⁸ Some research suggests that attrition could differ by grade level or by certain groups of charter schools.⁹ Another recent study compared KIPP

charter schools with comparison district schools across the country. Notably, it found wide variation in *cumulative* attrition rates: In charter schools and comparison district schools, attrition varied from just over 10% to 50% or greater.¹⁰

V. Review of the Report's Methods

One of the potential strengths of this report is the use of student-level data across many years in both traditional public and charter schools in the same district. Studying attrition from any type of school requires longitudinal student-level data, and a comparison of attrition requires this data across different sectors collected in ways that are comparable and have the same variables. For privacy reasons, such data are not publicly available. The author of this report, however, had access to such data over a six-year period for both traditional public and charter school students in the largest public school district in the country. Given the rich data source, the report is disappointing in the lack of specific information about attrition.

Questions Regarding What Students Are In the Dataset

This short report does not provide basic descriptive information, nor is it comprehensive in describing the research methods utilized. Other than describing the years and grade levels examined, no other information is provided. Without knowing this information, it isn't possible to evaluate whether the charter and public school populations in the descriptive analysis displayed in the report's Figure 1 are similar or, for instance, whether a more appropriate comparison might be attrition between charter schools and public schools that are feeders to these charter schools.¹¹

In subsequent sections, the number of observations reported is approximately 1.4 million, or an average of 280,000 students per year. In 2011-12, there were 293,000 students in the four grades examined in this report, suggesting that about 5% of students in NYC may not be included; if the students not included are the most mobile, that may bias findings. Additional information could explain whether the missing data makes the final sample representative of the overall enrollment.

Further, despite the rich dataset that would allow for a more precise measurement of “push out,” the way in which this report measures attrition is limited. The report classifies students as leaving a school if they are not enrolled in the same school the following year, thus conflating students who move within the school year with those who move between school years. Within-year moving may be more indicative of being pushed out.¹²

The report does not consider the transition from fifth to sixth grade because it is considered a “structural move” as many public schools move from elementary to middle school across that grade span.¹³ However, many charter schools start their “middle schools” in the fifth grade. According to 2011-12 data from the U.S. Department of Education, 15 charter schools in NYC have fifth grade as their lowest grade, while only 9 charter schools have sixth grade as their lowest grade. This practice could potentially overlook a key point at which charter schools may push out students. In a study of cumulative attrition, the individual attrition rate was higher for charter school students after fifth grade than it was after sixth or seventh grades.¹⁴ Another method would be to analyze the moves of all students in grades lower than the highest offered at the school.¹⁵ Either approach would allow for a more fine-grained approach to measuring attrition.

Defining Measures of Interest

The report analyzes attrition using a one-year measure. If the aim of the report is to examine whether low-performing students are more likely to persist in charter schools, it would be useful to also examine the *cumulative* attrition of low-performing students. Given the data described, the report could identify students as low performing and analyze whether they are more likely to have left their school by grade 8. This would be an important contribution to our understanding of charter school attrition.

The report helpfully provides several ways of defining the key variable of interest, “low-performing students.” In different analyses, students are classified as low-performing if (1)

their tests scores are lower than the average of all NYC students,¹⁶ (2) their test scores are lower than the average of students in their school, or (3) their scores are lower than 75% of the school's students. The report also separately defines each of the three low-performing categories using scores on math and English/Language Arts, for a total of six different profiles of low performance. It is interesting, yet puzzling, that the report would split the data by three different dichotomous variables when it could have more powerfully used the actual distribution of student's test scores. It would have also been interesting to potentially test for a delayed effect of low achievement on attrition once charter school operators received students' scores, which takes several months and could potentially precipitate attrition as a means of improving school performance the following academic year.

Lack of Specific Description

Despite the large longitudinal dataset, this report includes few specifics that actually describe attrition. In the descriptive analyses section, the report's "Figure 1" shows the proportion of students exiting a school based on school sector (traditional public school or charter school) and the different definitions of "low-performing" described above, there is no indication of the specific percentages in each category or the number of students in each category. Such percentages would allow for comparison within sector and also across sectors. The text indicates that there are "significant" differences, but states that the ". . . analyses include no statistical controls" (p. 3).

There is no overall attrition percentage for students reported, nor are the years of data or individual grade levels analyzed separately. Additionally, while overall trends are useful, they may mask divergent trends by grade level or changes over time. Further, variation can also be informative: not specifying the range of attrition rates for charter or public schools is a serious and fundamental omission.

There is very little information about the control variables included in the regression analysis. Particularly because there was virtually no discussion of the dataset, the reader cannot ascertain what student characteristics (*e.g.*, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, special education status, gender) the analysis actually used. The author simply refers to "a vector of observed student characteristics" (p. 4).¹⁷

Finally, the description of the regression analysis is somewhat confusing. The labeling of the columns in Figure 2 displaying the regression results presumably refers to which of the six specifications of the "below test" variable is displayed, yet one could also interpret the column to refer to the specific subgroup of the population that is low-performing.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

Fundamentally the report's analyses do not fully support the conclusions, and the report does not discuss its discrepant findings. Simply showing that low-achieving students in

both sectors have higher attrition rates than do higher-achieving students does not actually answer the overall question the report purports to answer.

The most fundamental discrepancy in the findings is that, in two of the three ways in which students are defined as “low-performing” based on ELA test results, the attrition of low-performing charter school students is actually higher than their low-performing peers in traditional public schools. This result is not considered in the author’s description of the findings. Also missing is a discussion of the differences in attrition rates among low-performers in math as compared to ELA.

The author summarizes the findings, writing that “this paper detects no statistically discernible difference—whether measured by basic descriptive statistics or a simple statistical model—in the probability that low-performing students are more likely to exit charters than traditional public schools” (p. 5). It is curious that such a massive “n” did not produce statistical significance (except in one instance in which low-performing students are more likely to leave charter schools), and this is explained in the very small effect sizes. Given the lack of documentation in the report, effects of using the dichotomous cut-off scores, the failure to employ other indicators beyond test scores, the effect of the missing 5% of the student body, differences between within-year vs. end-of-year mobility, the discrepancy in student body definitions for charters and TPSs between grades 5 and 6, and the failure to examine cumulative or overall attrition, in combination, invalidate the findings of the report.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Because of the impact on students who transfer, as well as on the schools they leave and enter, attrition is of concern regardless of which sector of school they leave.¹⁸ This report would be more useful if it contained more substantive information about charter student attrition rates.

Moreover, even if charter schools and traditional public schools had similar annual attrition rates among low-performing students, it would not necessarily indicate that charter schools are not pushing out students, which is the stated focus of this report. As described above, attrition and “pushing out” are not identical. The diverse reasons for attrition have quite different policy implications. Since traditional public schools are often geographically zoned, what appears to be attrition in public schools may simply reflect the housing mobility of many urban, low-income families. Additionally, whereas oversubscribed charter schools may only admit students who apply in advance—making them less accessible to transient families—traditional public schools serve anyone who moves into the district at any point in time. Thus, traditional public schools may have attrition that results from the mobility of district families that has nothing to do with the school, while intra-district moves are less likely to affect charter school attrition. Despite the author’s conclusion, the analysis in this report cannot distinguish among the various reasons for student attrition in either traditional public or charter school sector.

In sum, understanding whether students are differentially pushed out of charter schools requires a more nuanced, in-depth study using a range of student characteristics, looking at variation within and across sectors and across grade levels over time. The dataset used in this report presumably could be used for such a study, which could make a contribution on an important policy question. Studies augmenting quantitative data with qualitative analysis might be especially appropriate to fully understanding *if* students are being pushed out, and if so, why. Such research would have valuable policy and practical implications for charter and traditional public schools alike.

Notes and References

- 1 As a recipient of public funding, charter schools are required to serve all students. Indeed, some evidence shows that charter schools push out disruptive students. See:

Karp, S. (2010). One in 10 charter school students transfers out. *Catalyst Chicago*. Retrieved from <http://www.catalyst-chicago.org/news/2010/11/09/one-in-10-charter-school-students-transfers-out>;

Zubrzycki, J., Cavanagh, S., & McNeil, M. (2013, February 20). Charter schools' discipline policies face scrutiny. *Education Week 32* (21), 1,16-17, 19-20.

Academic studies suggest that discipline is likely to be a mechanism for pushing out low-performing students out of charter schools instead of solely for academic reasons. See:

Zimmer, R.W. & Guarino, C.M. (2013). Is there empirical evidence that charter schools “push out” low-performing students? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35, (4) 461–80.
- 2 Like any institution receiving public funding, charter schools are responsible for protecting the civil rights of all students who would wish to attend these schools. The U.S. Department of Education released guidance last year reminding charter schools of their responsibilities. Further, a recent report suggests that discipline policies in New York City charter schools may be violating students' civil rights.

Advocates for Children of New York. (2015). *Civil Rights Suspended: An Analysis of New York City Charter School Discipline Policies*. New York: Author.
- 3 Winters, M.A. (2015). *Pushed Out? Low-Performing Students and New York City Charter Schools*. New York: Manhattan Institute. Retrieved March 23, 2015, from http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_95.htm#.VQM1BUK-eXs.
- 4 See for example, Corcoran, S. P. (2014). *Review of “The Economic Benefits of New York City’s Public School Reforms, 2002-2013.”* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved April 29, 2015, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-economic-benefits-nyc>.

Also see Section IV and_endnote 6 below.
- 5 For a review of one of these reports see:

Meade, J. F. (2013), *Review of “why the gap? Special education and New York City charter schools”*. Boulder, Colo: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved April 29, 2015, from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-why-the-gap>.
- 6 Indeed, the findings of one report have been questioned due to a lack of specificity about methodology and inappropriate use of models that may have overstated the positive effects of charter schools. For a review of the report see:

Reardon, S.F. (2009). *Review of “How New York City’s Charter Schools Affect Achievement*. Boulder and Tempe: Education and the Public Interest Center & Education Policy Research Unit. Retrieved [date] from <http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/TTR-Hoxby-Charters.pdf>.
- 7 Zimmer, R.W. & Guarino, C.M. (2013). Is there empirical evidence that charter schools “push out” low-performing students? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35, (4) 461–80.
- 8 Regarding vouchers, see: Cowen, J. M. G. V., Fleming, D. J., Witte, J., & Wolf, P. (2011). Going public: Who leaves a large, longstanding, and widely available urban voucher program. *American Educational Research Journal*, 20, 1–25.

For KIPP charter schools, see: Miron, G., Urschel, J. L., & Saxton, N. (2011). *What makes KIPP work? A study of student characteristics, attrition, and school finance*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University.

- 9 Miron, G., Urschel, J. L., & Saxton, N. (2011). *What makes KIPP work? A study of student characteristics, attrition, and school finance*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University.
- 10 Nichols-Barrer, I., Gleason, P., Gill, B., & Clark Tuttle, C. (2015). Student Selection, Attrition, and Replacement in KIPP Middle Schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. DOI: 10.3102/0162373714564215 (subscription required).
- 11 In the regression analyses, the author states that he included a “vector of observed characteristics” (p. 4) although, as mentioned, there is no information as to what characteristics these include. However, some studies of attrition use only feeder public schools as the comparison group to account for any differences in beyond measurable student-level characteristics that might relate to attrition such as neighborhood residence.
- 12 One study of student mobility in Texas found that 8.9% of students moved within the school year, including 4.4% that made multiple moves. Such mobility would be unobserved by this report’s design.

Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., & Rivkin, S. G. (2004). Disruption versus Tiebout improvement: The costs and benefits of switching schools. *Journal of Public Economics*, 88, 1721–1746.
- 13 The author calculates this at 78% of NYC district public schools (p. 2).
- 14 Nichols-Barrer, I., Gleason, P., Gill, B., & Clark Tuttle, C. (2015). Student Selection, Attrition, and Replacement in KIPP Middle Schools. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 4-5. DOI: 10.3102/0162373714564215 (subscription required).
- 15 Zimmer, R.W. & Guarino, C.M. (2013). Is there empirical evidence that charter schools “push out” low-performing students? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 35, (4) 461–80, 476
- 16 While the text and the tables suggest in most places that the low-performing students are defined in relation to the *district* average, on page 4, the methodology says that the students are defined “relative to his school or NY state.” This review assumes this is a typo.
- 17 Given other relevant literature, it would have been essential to run additional models also including interaction terms of school-level proficiency rate. E.g., see Zimmer and Guarino. Theoretically, it stands to reason that schools close to proficiency—either above or below—might be more likely to push out students whose academic performance might be lower.
- 18 Hanushek, E. A., Kain, J. F., & Rivkin, S. G. (2004). Disruption versus Tiebout improvement: The costs and benefits of switching schools. *Journal of Public Economics*, 88, 1721–1746.

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AUTHOR:

Marcus A. Winters

PUBLISHER/THINK TANK:

Manhattan Institute

DOCUMENT RELEASE DATE:

March 12, 2015

REVIEW DATE:

May 4, 2015

REVIEWER NAME:

Erica Frankenberg, Pennsylvania State
University

E-MAIL ADDRESS:

euf10@psu.edu

PHONE NUMBER:

(814)-865-5862

SUGGESTED CITATION:

Frankenberg, E. (2015). *Review of "Pushed Out? Low-Performing Students and New York City Charter Schools."* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center. Retrieved [date] <http://nepc.colorado.edu/thinktank/review-pushed-out>.