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**NO EXCUSE FOR REACHING BEYOND THE EVIDENCE**  
**FOLLOW-UP TO A REVIEW OF “NO EXCUSES CHARTER SCHOOLS:  
A META-ANALYSIS OF THE EVIDENCE ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT”**  
**BY CHENG, HITT, KISIDA, AND MILLS (2015)**  
**OCTOBER 9, 2015**

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## **Introduction**

In December 2014, the University of Arkansas released a working paper that provided a meta-analysis of the achievement effects of “No Excuses” charter schools (Cheng, Hitt, Kisida, & Mills, 2014). I reviewed this paper for the National Education Policy Center in January 2015 (Powers, 2015). In September 2015 a second version of the paper was released by the National Center for Studies of Privatization in Education (NCSPE) that contained the same analysis with a revised introduction and conclusion. My initial review detailed a number of significant problems with the implications Cheng et al. (2014) drew from their findings. As I detail below, the revised paper mentions some additional limitations that slightly moderate the authors’ earlier claims, but it does not adequately address the concerns I raised in my initial review.

## **Do “No Excuses” Schools Close the Achievement Gap?**

The revised study continues to make the claim that No Excuses schools can close the achievement gap. To be clear, past studies have used the achievement gap between

Black and White students as a benchmark to assess the achievement growth of students that attend No Excuses charter schools (e.g., Tuttle, Gill, Gleason, Knechtel, Nichols-Barrer, & Resch, 2013). Cheng et al. (2015), however, make the stronger assertion that based on “a straightforward extrapolation of results” No Excuses schools “could eliminate the achievement gap” (p. 23). This claim only holds if the students who participate in a lottery for admission to an oversubscribed school – traditional public school or charter school – are not different from students who do not apply. They indirectly concede (and dismiss) this point in a footnote at the beginning of the paper, yet by the end of the paper they make broad claims about closing the achievement gap that imply that their findings hold for all students (Cheng et al., 2015, p. 6, fn. 1). While some studies included in the Cheng et al. analysis indicate that students who attend No Excuses charter schools are similar to their peers in the comparison schools on most characteristics readily available in school administrative data, they likely differ from their peers in other unmeasured ways. Lottery students’ parents may be more educated or more engaged than the parents of their peers who do not participate in the lottery.

Cheng et al. (2015) grant a related point in their conclusion when they note that schools that have lotteries may be oversubscribed for nonrandom reasons. In fact, they suggest that oversubscribed schools are “better schools” than schools that are not oversubscribed and cite research indicating that *parents that engage in school choice* are likely to choose schools for academic reasons (p. 25). Thus, without tempering their conclusions, they acknowledge important differences between oversubscribed and non-oversubscribed No Excuses schools, and between lottery applicants and their peers who did not apply to the lottery. It is not clear whether lottery (i.e., oversubscribed) schools are “better” than non-lottery schools or whether they are merely perceived as better by other parents because, for example, they serve families that are more educated and engaged than the other schools in their communities. The studies in the analysis indicate that there are a small number of No Excuses schools, and the No Excuses schools with lotteries are a subset of these schools (e.g., Tuttle, Gleason & Clark, 2012; Tuttle, et al., 2013). Schools with lotteries differ from non-lottery schools, so one must generalize beyond these studies with care – or not at all. At a minimum such generalizations should be carefully qualified; readers should not have to read between the lines to understand the limits of the analysis and the resulting claims.

In sum, Cheng et al. have not made the case that “attending a No Excuses school could eliminate the achievement gap.” Cheng et al.’s results do indicate that on average oversubscribed No Excuses schools—the subset of No Excuse schools that are perceived as highly desirable—may increase achievement for the types of families and students that participate in their lotteries and then attend the lottery schools, a much more modest claim.

Finally, as I noted in the Think Tank Review (Powers, 2015), the prominent and popular No Excuses schools tend to be supported by extensive outside resources. For example,

external funding allows KIPP schools to dramatically extend their instructional hours. Accordingly, it would almost certainly be challenging to “scale up” this reform. Because most of the studies included in the meta-analysis do not control for resources, Cheng et al. (2015) could not address this issue in their analysis. However, the paper should address this limitation in the discussion of the potential of No Excuses charter schools to close achievement gaps. Similarly, they should note that even a sound finding that the No Excuses schools in the included studies are “better” does not isolate the model (No Excuses) from the added resources. The causation and scaling-up issues are particularly important for a paper that is framed as offering useful findings for policymakers.

### **Other Technical Issues**

The revised paper highlights the geographical limitations of the study at the outset, viz., that there are no experimental studies of No Excuses schools (or schools that conform to the No Excuses model) outside of the United States. However, they have not fully addressed a second limitation: most of the studies included in the meta-analysis examine schools located in Northeastern cities, and these studies were most heavily weighted in their analyses (see Figures 4 and 5). Only one of the studies of No Excuses charter schools included schools in three other states (Tuttle, et al., 2013) and there may have been some overlap with the samples from the other studies. The other (Hastings, Nielsen & Zimmerman, 2013) was an analysis of five schools from an unidentified mid-size urban school district. Again, this point should be clearly explained so that the reader can weigh the benefits they gain from combining findings from a small sample of experimental studies against the possible liabilities of the approach, i.e., that these are studies focused on short-term outcomes in a relatively limited number of settings. That is, while worthwhile research can certainly have geographic limitations, such limitations should nonetheless be noted for the reader.

Cheng et al. (2015) also claim that No Excuses schools are more effective in middle and high school, a claim that is based on calculations of school-level effect sizes presented in Table 3 (p. 38). Yet a careful reading of the analysis reveals that while the middle school findings are calculated from three studies, the relatively large effect size for high schools is drawn from a single study. A meta-analysis of one study is not a meta-analysis at all.

### **Conclusion**

Like the version that preceded it, the revised version of this paper makes claims that go well beyond what is warranted by the authors’ findings. While they provide some additional tepid qualifications for these claims, these may not be clear to a wide, non-technical audience. As a result, it provides little solid guidance for policymakers interested in understanding the possible academic outcomes of No Excuses schools.

## References

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