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How Many Charter Schools Is Just Right?

EDUCATION NEXT TALKS WITH

SCOTT PEARSON, JOHN H. "SKIP" MCKOY, AND NEERAV KINGSLAND

In dozens of U.S. cities, more than one in five students now attend charter schools. Charter school expansion has fueled an increasingly energetic discussion among advocates: How large a share of urban schools should be charters? Is the ideal New Orleans, where nearly all public schools are charter schools? Or does that create demands on charters to become more and more like the district schools they're replacing, potentially undermining the premise of charter schooling? Is it better for a charter sector to coexist with a substantially traditional school district, as is the case in Washington, D.C.? In this forum, arguing for the two-sector model are Scott Pearson and Skip McKoy. Pearson is executive director and McKoy is the chairman of the District of Columbia Public Charter School Board. Making the case for an all-charter system is Neerav Kingsland, former CEO of New Schools for New Orleans and now a consultant who works to support charter expansion.

D.C. STUDENTS
BENEFIT FROM MIX
OF CHARTER AND
TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS
BY SCOTT PEARSON AND
JOHN H. "SKIP" MCKOY



Charter schools are revolutionizing public schooling in Washington, D.C. In just 18 years, charter schools have grown from an initial 5 to 112 schools today, managed by 61 nonprofit organizations. This school year, charters will serve nearly 38,000 students—44 percent of all public-school students in D.C. And these schools, which consistently outperform D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) overall and across all subgroups, offer students a tremendous variety of quality educational opportunities.

As the executive director and the board chairman of the District of Columbia's independent chartering body, we are often asked whether we favor a "New Orleans" future for D.C., where charter schools eventually serve virtually all

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THE NEW ORLEANS CASE FOR
ALL-CHARTER SCHOOL DISTRICTS
BY NEERAV KINGSLAND



Across the country, children in urban districts are being denied rich, rigorous educational opportunities. The causes of these poor opportunities are multifold: urban students suffer from high rates of poverty and violence; additionally, as a country, we do not develop enough teachers who can succeed in these difficult conditions. But, contrary to many leading reform voices, progress on the important issues of poverty and talent will not be enough to reverse the dysfunction of urban school districts. Poor educational opportunities will remain the norm unless we tackle one remaining issue: the structure of urban school districts.

The structure of urban school systems has made a mess of the relationships between family, educator, and government.

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public-school students.

Our response may surprise some, but we do not. Rather, we see students and families in the District of Columbia better served

with two thriving and successful sectors: charter and traditional public. Here's why.

When Congress passed charter school legislation for Washington, D.C., in 1995, our public schools were a national disgrace, characterized by decrepit buildings, a meddling school board, patronage-based employment, sky-high truancy, and some of the nation's lowest graduation rates and test scores. Enrollment in DCPS had fallen by nearly half from the mid-sixties, from 150,000 to just over 75,000 students.

The arrival of charter schools in 1996 offered parents another way out of a failing urban school system. No longer would they have to move to neighboring Maryland or Virginia in search of better public schools. For the first several years, charter schools added students as DCPS bled and cycled through a revolving door of leaders. After 10 years of charters and following the election of Mayor Adrian Fenty in 2006, DCPS was down to

we see improvements across charters and DCPS for students in every group, including black (see Figure 1), Latino, low-income, and those with disabilities.

City residents are taking notice. Charters keep growing, but now DCPS is growing as well. For the first time since the Beatles appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, total public-school enrollment in D.C. is rising.

We now have a virtuous cycle: growing enrollment and improving results in both the charter and traditional sectors.

Having two strong sectors is good for the city. It's also good for charter schools.

Neighborhood Schools

One of the arguments for maintaining the traditional sector is that a lot of people like having neighborhood schools of right. They are usually close by, often walkable. They help create a community of neighbors. When the schools are good, they boost home values and attract new residents. Because admission is guaranteed, they take the anxiety out of school choice.

Neighborhood schools have also been associated with de

Having two strong systems raises the odds that charter schools can retain the freedoms and flexibilities that underpin their success, and it provides families with more choice as they select among charters, a local neighborhood school, and other specialized district options.

just 50,000 students, with charters claiming 20,000 students.

But something else happened. In part because of the growing popularity of charter schools, major reforms were made to DCPS:

- The district spent more than \$2 billion on facilities improvements.
- Mayoral control replaced the elected school board.
- A path-breaking labor agreement ended seniority-based placement and tenure.

Most significantly, DCPS benefited over the past eight years from the uninterrupted strong leadership of two excellent chancellors—first Michelle Rhee and today Kaya Henderson. Two mayors and the city council gave these leaders the political cover, generous funding, and, perhaps most important, the time to make the improvements in people, systems, curriculum, and culture that are needed to turn around a failing institution.

Charter advocates have long hoped that competition from charters would spur improvement in traditional schools. In Washington, D.C., this has actually happened! Last year, DCPS was the fastest-improving major urban school district in the country. Charter schools keep improving as well due to the efforts of talented teachers and leaders, and the charter board's aggressive closing of low performers.

Some have attributed these gains to a gentrifying city. But

facto segregation, as they reflect the demographics of their neighborhood. But integrated schools can be fostered by reserving slots for out-of-boundary children, and by the presence of a robust set of citywide schools of choice.

If charter schools took over the whole city, there would be tremendous pressure for them to become fully, or partly, neighborhood schools of right. That's what we see in New Orleans, where half of the slots are reserved for neighborhood children and schools must accept new children at any time during the year.

We would rather not see that happen to D.C. charters. It would change their fundamental character as schools of choice, limit their educational and operational flexibility, make them harder to close for low performance, and open them to wider and wider regulation.

Turning charters into neighborhood schools could constrain their educational approaches. Charter schools that are immersive bilingual, have a military theme, offer a no-excuses culture, or promote a Waldorf philosophy where children do not begin reading until age seven all might be considered inappropriate for a neighborhood school that is the default choice for all neighborhood children.

Moreover, neighborhood schools are often heavily influenced

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Families have little power. Educators are trapped in a Kafkaesque maze of contracts, rubrics, and rubber rooms. And government is tasked with the overbroad mandate of both

regulating and operating schools.

How do we right these relationships? My hypothesis is that we should transition our public education systems into charter districts, systems with the following structure:

- Educators form nonprofit organizations to operate schools.
- Families can choose from any school in the city, with reasonable limitations, such as neighborhood set-asides, being determined by community values.
- Government holds nonprofit school organizations accountable for both performance and equity; it no longer operates schools itself.

The Nation's First All-Charter School District

New Orleans is the first city to build an education system based on these three principles. As a result, student achievement is on the rise; equity is increasing; and New Orleans citizens strongly back the reform efforts.

Before Hurricane Katrina decimated the city and most of its schools in 2005, 64 percent of public school students in New Orleans attended a school designated as “failing.” Currently, only 9 percent of students attend failing schools. High school graduation rates have increased by more than 20 percentage points, from below 50 percent to more than 70 percent. And, in 2013, a study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes

transformation, to continue for at least two more years. Yet, while New Orleans has seen unprecedented gains in student achievement (see Figure 2), the city's schools are far from excellent. Much remains to be accomplished. Nonetheless, the city has been undeniably and positively transformed by the structural reform of its public education system.

Confusing Structure with Rules

My colleagues in Washington, D.C. (see “D.C. Students Benefit from Both Sectors,” forum, Spring 2015) contend that the best educational model is one in which charter schools coexist with traditional district schools. The main thrust of their argument is that they prefer the rules that currently govern district and charter schools in Washington, D.C., over the rules that govern the New Orleans charter system. They argue that neighborhood traditional schools should coexist alongside charter schools of choice; that charter schools should be able to benefit from special enrollment rules, such as not admitting students midyear; and that districtwide policies in areas such as expulsion should be avoided.

These arguments confuse structure with rules. A charter district can operate under a variety of regulatory regimes. Different rules concerning geographic boundaries, enrollment, expulsions, and admissions can be applied to a charter district based on a community's values. Moreover, the same rules need not apply to every school. For example, a city might desire a mix of neighborhood and citywide choice schools; if this is the case, city leaders could regulate their charter district in this manner.

We have witnessed what the best of district reform can give us. And we have seen that, even with talented district leadership, charters can give us better. In numerous cities, students in charter schools gain 4 to 12 months of extra learning per year compared to students in traditional schools.

(CREDO) found that New Orleans charter schools deliver five months of extra learning per year when compared to similarly situated traditional schools.

New Orleans's most at-risk students are also benefitting from the new system: CREDO found students with special needs achieve nearly two months of extra learning per year. And, despite New Orleans schools serving an extremely at-risk population, the expulsion rate is below the state average. Performance increases have not been achieved by ignoring equity; rather, New Orleans has become one of the most equitable urban school districts in the country.

Not surprisingly, voters surveyed in 2014 by the Cowen Institute at Tulane University agree, by a two-to-one margin, that the schools are getting better. And 82 percent of voters want the state intervention, which has enabled the system's structural

In New Orleans, we designed a set of rules to govern our charter district that reflects our community's values. Elementary schools can allocate up to 50 percent of seats to students within a defined neighborhood, while high schools have no geographic boundaries; all open-enrollment schools with available seats must admit students at any time of the year; selective schools can employ test-based admissions; and expulsion policies (but not all discipline policies) are standardized. Currently, 72 percent of New Orleans parents voice support for this specific choice model.

These are by no means perfect rules. They are simply the rules New Orleans has designed to govern the city's education system. Moreover, under these rules, the diversity of New Orleans schools

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by local community members, as opposed to parents, with concerns that can at times distract a school from the single-minded focus that we see in truly great schools.

And neighborhood schools take on a permanence that is out of keeping with the charter model. If a charter school is a neighborhood school, it may be more difficult to move the school out of the neighborhood, to a larger building, for example. And, from an authorizer's perspective, it may be more difficult to close a low-performing neighborhood school because of the added community and political dimension involved.

New Orleans, of course, offers no true neighborhood schools

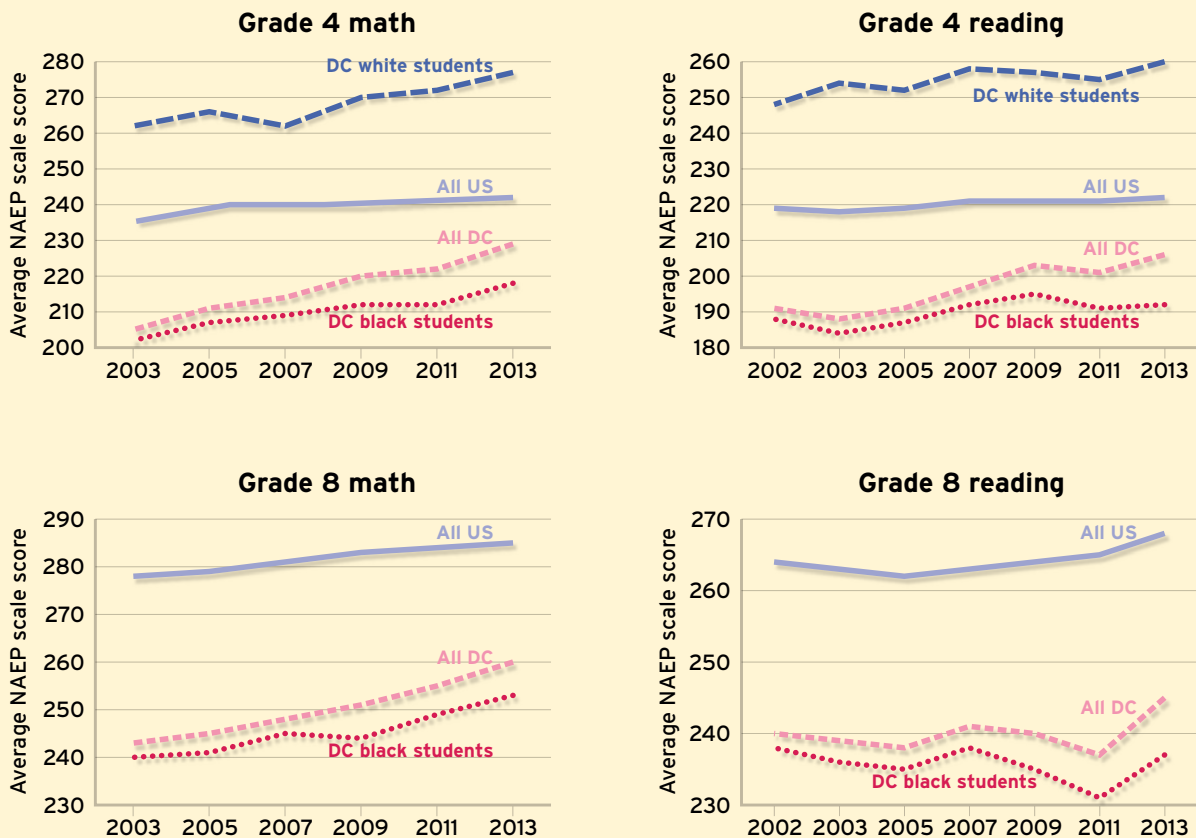
of right. The solution there is to have large school zones within which certain students are given preference. That denies communities true neighborhood schools. But worse, it imposes new burdens and restrictions on charter schools.

For example, every charter school in New Orleans has been effectively deemed a school of right. Each must offer the same number of seats in every grade, and admit new students whenever a vacancy occurs, at any time of year (what some refer to as "backfilling" seats). This significantly limits the flexibility of charter school design and consequently reduces the choices available to parents and students. Immersive bilingual programs, for example, are more difficult to maintain

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D.C.'s Improving System (Figure 1)

Though large achievement gaps remain, relative to the nation as a whole, student performance in Washington, D.C., has improved since 2003 for all students as well as for black students, especially in math.



NOTES: Data for the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) are drawn from the Trial Urban District Assessment. Beginning in 2009, data for D.C. exclude charter schools.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics

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continues to increase. Allowing some geographic preference has not forced every school to adopt the same model; the “one size fits all” days of old have not been brought

back. From language-immersion schools to blended-learning schools to selective magnet schools to socioeconomically integrated schools, innovation is on the rise. Sound regulation has not led to homogenization. The exact opposite is true.

The point is this: structure and rules should not be conflated. A charter district can operate under any number of regulatory models as long as the basic structure is maintained. Washington, D.C., or any other city, can harness the benefits of a charter district structure while still maintaining a set of rules that meets the needs of the community.

Confusing Better with Optimal

My colleagues also argue that the coexistence of charter and district schools has led to academic increases across both sectors in Washington, D.C. This is true. As a result of the impressive leadership of Michelle Rhee and Kaya Henderson, the traditional sector has indeed improved.

But there’s another way to interpret the Washington, D.C., reforms. The district, with the traditional and charter sector each serving about 50 percent of students, is as close to a systemwide experiment as you can get in a dynamic education environment. What happens when the best of district reforms take place alongside the best of charter reforms? A recent CREDO study found that students who attend charter schools in Washington, D.C., achieve roughly four months of extra learning per year. Moreover, the charters are achieving these results for less money per student than the district schools.

All boats may be rising, but too many kids are still sinking.

We have witnessed what the best of district reform can give us. And we have seen that, even with talented district leadership, charters can give us better.

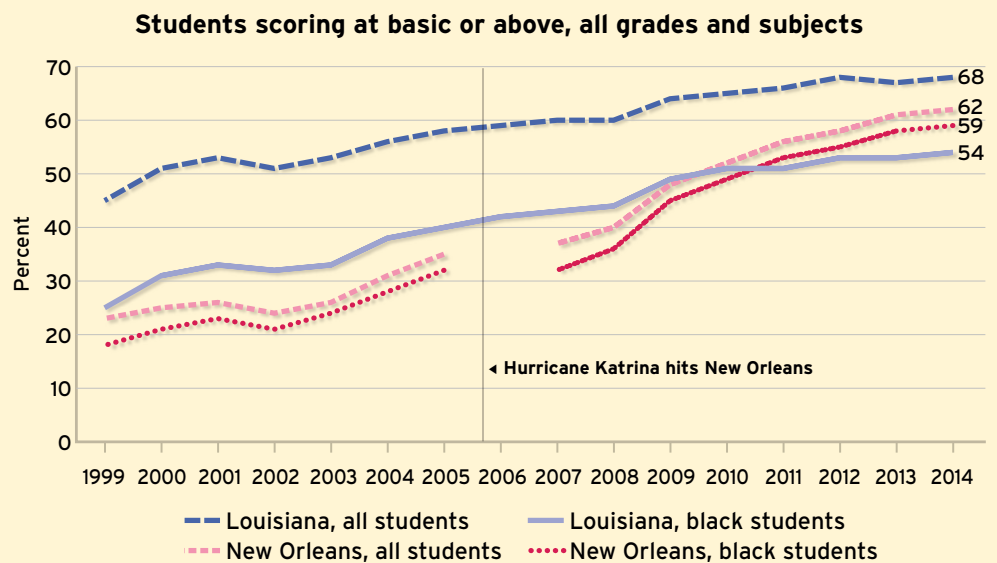
New Orleans and D.C. Charters Are Not Aberrations

A large body of evidence supports the notion that charter schools will deliver better outcomes for at-risk students. The 2013 CREDO study covered 95 percent of charter students in the country. The study found that African American students in poverty who attended charter schools achieved nearly two months of extra learning per year relative to their district school peers. CREDO has conducted similar studies in urban areas across the country, most of which have demonstrated that students learn more in charter schools than in traditional schools. And, in numerous cities, such as New Orleans, Newark, Boston, Los

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Closing the Gap (Figure 2)

Student performance in New Orleans has trended steadily upward over time and has improved more rapidly in the city than statewide, particularly in recent years and particularly among black students.



NOTES: Data combine scores for all grades on all subjects of LEAP, iLEAP, and GEE/EOC. Data are presented by calendar year in which the school year ends. New Orleans data include Orleans Parish from 1999 to 2005, and for 2007 to 2014 combine Orleans Parish with the Recovery School District. Data are not presented for New Orleans for 2006. Data for New Orleans do not include charters authorized by the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE), which can accept students with residence outside of New Orleans. BESE charters account for less than 5 percent of overall enrollment in New Orleans schools.

SOURCE: Louisiana Department of Education

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with new monolingual students arriving midyear. D.C. has a highly successful college-prep charter high school that depends on a rigorous 9th-grade academy that prepares

students for the rigors of grades 10 through 12. This model also works less well with students arriving midyear or after the 9th grade.

“Aha!” a charter opponent might say. “You are defending charter schools’ structural advantage over traditional schools. Why should only traditional schools bear the burden of being schools of right?”

Perhaps we are. But in a robust system of choice, parents should have real choices of high-quality alternatives, not various pastel versions of the same basic offering.

We should say that many D.C. charters embrace being open to all grades: some admit students midyear, and most have a mission to serve the city’s most disadvantaged students. The D.C. approach permits all sorts of models and allows many paths to success. Under a New Orleans scenario, only a few of these paths are allowed.

Two-Sector Advantage

The New Orleans model has other drawbacks. As charters approach 90 percent market share, the authorizer has standardized discipline rules, “spread around” special education students rather than offering them full choice, and imposed common admission procedures. All of these contribute to the homogenization of charter schools and limit the very essence of what makes charter schools so promising.

We are seeing some of this in Washington, D.C., too. Just

in the past three years, new rules were enacted specifying how charter schools must evaluate their teachers and mandating prescribed systems for addressing truancy. ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) waiver rules were applied to D.C. charters, rather than exempting them as they were in many states. And there have been countless legislative proposals that would require charter schools, for example, to hire specific types of teachers, communicate with parents in specific ways, or limit their choice of which students to promote from grade to grade.

Having two strong systems reduces the pressure to regulate charter schools as though they were the only public schools in the city. It raises the odds that charter schools can retain the freedoms and flexibilities that underpin their success, and it provides families with more choice as they select among charters, a local neighborhood school, and other specialized DCPS options.

As the charter authorizer, our job is to keep our strong focus on quality—closing low-performing schools, helping promising schools improve, encouraging our best schools to expand, and applying rigorous oversight to approve only the most-promising new applicants. Our goal is not to “flood the zone” but to carefully and thoughtfully build a charter sector of unimpeachable quality that, along with DCPS, keeps improving and adding more families to the District.

Of course, it is easier to support a two-sector solution when we have a strong and successful traditional public-school system as a partner. If we were talking about a city with toxic education politics and a hopeless traditional school system, we might have a different view. But for Washington, D.C., we believe two strong sectors—charter and traditional—offer the best prospect that families will have many quality educational choices for their children. ■

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Angeles, and Washington D.C., the impacts are on the order of 4 to 12 months of extra learning per year.

Ignoring these results comes with the same risks as ignoring

other scientific findings: those who are most vulnerable to bad policy will suffer the most. In this case, as in most cases, those most vulnerable are those living in poverty.

The Future of Urban Districts

Structural reform is not a silver bullet. We should provide additional income to families living in poverty. We should invest in the improvement of teacher recruitment, preparation, and compensation. But these changes will not be enough. To provide children with the educational opportunities they deserve, we must tackle the structure of urban school districts.

New Orleans overhauled its public school structure by transitioning to a system where nonprofits operate schools and government regulates the system. In doing so, it has developed

a set of rules that ensure that charter schools eschew inequitable practices. Unlike my colleagues in Washington, D.C., I do not believe that charter schools should play by different rules than district schools. Governance status should not shield inequitable practices. New Orleans provides evidence that charter schools can maintain superior performance even when they are subject to many of the same rules as district schools.

Yet, given the current limits of our knowledge, I do not believe all urban districts should transform into charter districts immediately. Rather, the next phase of the work should be focused on learning how best to build these systems. Ideally, within a decade, 5 to 10 additional cities will make the transition to all charter systems. From these cities we will learn what works, what does not work, and whether structural change continues to deliver performance gains across a variety of contexts.

Transforming the structure and performance of urban education systems will not, and should not, happen overnight. Radically overhauling complex systems entails significant risk. But change can happen over time. New Orleans has transformed its education system for the better. Other cities should follow. ■