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COMMENTARY

Is There Empirical Evidence Consistent with the Claim that Charter Schools 'Push Out' Low-Performing Students?

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A major concern among opponents to charter schools is whether these schools will serve all students. Some have raised concerns that charter schools will "push out" low-performing students in hopes of improving the schools' academic profile while minimizing costs by educating fewer challenging students In this study, an article published in the *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* journal, we used data from an anonymous major urban school district with a large number of charter schools to examine whether we see exit patterns consistent with the claim that charter schools are more likely to push out low-achieving students than are traditional public schools.

In general, it is difficult to demonstrate definitively that charter schools, or public schools, push out low-achieving students as it is unlikely that schools would be so bold as to expel students outright for low achievement performance. If students are being pushed out, it is more likely to occur in subtle ways—for example, through counseling students and their families to seek a better fit for their needs or having more stringent disciplinary consequences or requiring certain commitments that are associated with higher student achievement such as family involvement and student attendance requirements.

However, we can examine empirical data to see if we observe patterns consistent with the claim that charter schools are pushing out low-performing students. While we do not know why students transfer out of a school and cannot determine whether a student is being pushed out of a school rather than exiting for some other reason, we can see whether patterns in the data are consistent with claims that charter schools push out low-performers and thus provide some of the first empirical insights into this debate.

We first examined the exiting patterns of students descriptively by examining the average achievement level of students exiting schools (both charters and traditional public schools) relative to their peers in the school they exited. Overall, we found that students exiting charter schools are, on average, lower-performing students relative to their peers, but this is true in traditional public schools as well. In a more formal set of analytical analyses, controlling for the characteristics of the students including race and Limited English Proficient (LEP) and special education status, we found no evidence that low-performing students are more likely to transfer out of charter schools than above-average students or that they are more likely to transfer out of charters than out of traditional public schools.

While we do believe our analysis provides initial insights refuting the claim that charter schools are pushing out low-performing students, we do not believe this is the definitive word in the matter as our analysis was only in one district. It may be that these results would vary across districts and states and hope that others will provide empirical evidence across a variety of

locations. However, we do argue that claims of pushing out low-performing students or any other claims in the debate around charter schools (positive or negative) should be supported by evidence before these claims are made or accepted.

The full study (gated) is in Ron W. Zimmer and Cassandra M. Guarino, "Is There Empirical Evidence That Charter Schools "Push Out" Low-Performing Students?" Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, December 2013, vol. 35, no. 4, 461-480.

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