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COMMENTARY

Is Charter School Competition Associated with Increased Organization and Achievement in Traditional Public Schools?

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Proponents of market models of education assert that providing families with the power to choose schools will significantly improve the American educational system, in part because choice will generate *competition* among schools that will force poorly performing schools to improve their academic practices. Indeed, embedded in the market model of education is the assumption that competition leads to institutional isomorphism among service providers in the educational marketplace that would compel traditional public schools to mimic charter schools or similar models of education reform that are believed to be more effective. However, some have criticized this model, arguing that choice and market reform do little to enhance achievement or ameliorate educational inequality.

Although several studies have examined whether competition from charter schools improves the achievement of traditional public school students, less research has focused on *how* schools respond to charter competition, i.e. which specific practices within traditional public schools are related to competition. Moreover, the few studies that address this process fail to link these responses to achievement. Are the practices associated with competition also associated with achievement? In this study, recently published by *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, I used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Kindergarten Class (ECLS–K) as well as information on school location from the Common Core of Data (CCD) to examine whether distance from a charter school is related to school practices, what I refer to as *school organization*, and whether changes in school organization associated with charter school competition are related to increases in math and reading achievement.

My results indicate that distance to a charter had little impact on school organization. Distance to a charter was related to only three of the ten school organization practices that I tested, and not always in ways predicted by the market model. Although administrators in traditional public schools closer to charters reported that teacher absenteeism was lower and that instruction was more aligned with high standards than schools facing no charter competition, in the end, these practices had little effect on reading or math achievement.

Contrary to the market model of education reform, there are good reasons to expect that competition from charter schools would *not* induce public schools to change their organizational practices. Rather than compelling traditional public schools to compete and change, institutional theories suggest that charter school growth will not lead to changes in organization among public schools because of deeply entrenched cultural and institutional rules that press charter schools to mimic traditional public schools and not the reverse. Indeed, some research suggests that many charter schools' instructional, classroom, and

administrative practices are more similar to traditional public schools than they are different. Moreover, others note that there are no mechanisms in place for charter schools and regular public schools to learn from one another. In addition, charters may not lead to increased organization among traditional public schools if charters locate in economically disadvantaged areas where traditional public schools lack the resources to serve students well, regardless of competition.

These findings draw attention to some of the limits and possibilities of market ideology as a solution to the problems plaguing American education. This study highlights the importance of considering the connections between competition/organization and organization/achievement in tandem, since the few organizational factors influenced by competition did not necessarily influence achievement, particularly reading achievement. This connection between organization and achievement is important, since policy efforts devoted to using charter competition to improve practices that have no impact on achievement would potentially waste valuable resources.

The full study (ungated) can be found in Davis, T. (2013). Charter School Competition, Organization, and Achievement in Traditional Public Schools. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 21(88)

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