

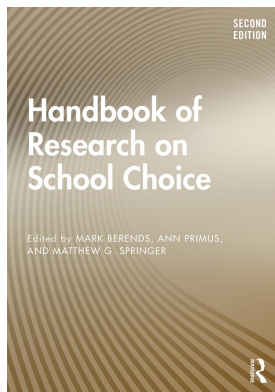
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THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CHARTER SCHOOLS

Zachary W. Oberfield

People have strong opinions about public charter schools (hereafter “charter schools”). Supporters see them as taking power away from sclerotic bureaucracies and setting the stage for more dynamic, nimble public schools (Osborne, 2017). Critics portray them as opaque, chaotic, and unaccountable to the public (Ravitch, 2013; Burris, 2016). The strident nature of the charter debate, while emblematic of the larger polarized political climate, is curious for two reasons.

First, the charter school sector is remarkably diverse, including schools with varied student bodies, missions, and pedagogical approaches. Also, states have different charter laws, funding schemes, and oversight processes. From this perspective, it would seem hard to generalize from one school, or set of schools, to all other charter schools. Second, scholarly research on charter school outcomes, like test scores or graduation rates, is mixed. (See Chapter 12 in this volume.) There is evidence that particular types of charter schools are succeeding for particular types of students. But at the national level, some charter schools appear to be doing better than comparable public district schools (hereafter “district schools”), some are doing worse, and a lot are about the same. Because of this variation, it is hard to say for certain whether charter schools, as a group, represent a new and improved approach to public education.

Thus, this chapter takes a different approach to assessing the charter experiment. Moving away from test scores and graduation rates, it asks about the social context of charter schools. While “social context” could mean a great many things, for the purposes of this chapter it refers to lived experiences of people associated with charter schools. More specifically, this chapter examines research comparing the subjective experiences and demographic characteristics of four sets of stakeholders—administrators, teachers, parents, and students—in charter and district schools. In doing so, the chapter helps draw a more complete understanding of how the charter experiment has unfolded.

The chapter begins by contemplating the expectations and claims of early and current charter school proponents. Understanding these helps us establish a set of criteria with which we can judge the experiment. It then discusses the difficulty of making inferences about differences between charter and district schools using observational data and specifies how studies were selected for inclusion here. Turning to research, its review starts with studies of administrators, envisioned by charter proponents as bold and unchained relative to their district peers. Following that, it explores research examining who teaches in charter schools and what they experience relative to district teachers. Finally, it widens the lens to ask about the students who attend charter and district schools and the experiences reported by their parents.

In sum, the chapter argues, charter schools have achieved many of the goals set forth by early theorists and proponents. However, this is not to say that the full promise of charter schools has been fulfilled or that stakeholders' experiences with charter schools have been uniformly positive. The chapter closes by identifying holes in our understanding of the social context of charter schools and suggesting areas for future research.

Imagining Charter Schools

At the outset, charter schools were understood as a different approach to public education. Ray Budde (1988), who is thought to have come up with the term "charter school," articulated 12 goals for reorganizing public school districts. At the heart of these goals was an interest in giving teachers more control over instruction and planning while, at the same time, asking them to accept greater responsibility for student learning and behavior. In addition he hoped that administrators in such schools would work to create safe, positive learning environments.

Although Budde expected that charter schools would test ideas, which could then be implemented in district schools, competition between charter and district schools was central to early proponents' hopes for the sector. For example, Albert Shanker (1988) envisioned a system in which charter and district schools would compete, driving system-wide school improvement and bottom-up accountability. Similarly, Ted Kolderie (1990) hoped that these schools would act as a spur to, but not a replacement for, existing district schools. In his advocacy, he encouraged states to take away what he called the "exclusive franchise" that school districts had over owning and operating local schools. In effect, he proposed schools that would be publicly funded and overseen, but privately operated and owned. He hoped that this approach would encourage "enterprising people—including teachers and other educators—to start innovative public schools" (p. 4). Although charter schools would challenge district schools, Kolderie believed that this competition was a net positive for public schools: It would help keep money and students in the public sector (as opposed to voucher proposals).

In Kolderie's and Shanker's visions, the competition spurred by charter schools would benefit parents and children, whom district schools could no longer take for granted. Put differently, like other markets, public school choice would empower parents to vote with their feet. Also, echoing Budde, the scholars expected that charter schools would change the workplace dynamics for teachers and administrators in both charter and district schools. Since district schools were no longer the only option for families, school personnel would inevitably be more accountable for their work. More concretely, as the forces unleashed by competition entered schools, staff would be rewarded or punished for the quality of their results.

Another early writer on charter schools, Joe Nathan (1996), struck a similar set of themes. For Nathan, charter schools were a continuation of the American tradition of expanding opportunity to the less fortunate. The problem with district schools in poor areas, he argued, was that they were not sufficiently accountable. The success of charter schools was that they would be accountable, to parents and public bodies, in a way that district schools were not. With enhanced accountability, and tighter connections between families and schools, would come better student achievement—it would be, he argued, the condition that determined whether charter schools would stay open or not. Nathan (1996) also expected that charter schools would change the role and behavior of teachers, whom he characterized as frustrated, bitter, and burned out by the bureaucracy that "stifles their creativity" and fails to "remove mediocre teachers" (p. xv). In charter schools, teachers would have the power to use their abilities as they saw fit; along with this freedom would come higher levels of scrutiny and teacher accountability.

Since the early years of the experiment, the charter school sector has grown rapidly and evolved in unforeseen ways. For example, Nathan (1996) warned that charter schools should not adopt the

“corporate model,” in which teachers were “hired to simply carry out a play that someone else has designed” (p. 8). However, today around a third of charter schools are run, at least in part, by centrally controlled management organizations: 20 percent are affiliated with or run by nonprofit charter management organizations (CMOs) and about 10 percent are affiliated with or run by education management organizations (EMOs) (Woodworth et al., 2017; Berends, 2018). In this respect, some charter schools have exchanged pressures from “district central” for those that emanate from “network central” (Buchanan & Fox, 2017).

Despite this, proponents today make a number of claims that resonate with those made at the outset of the sector. For example, the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2016) argues on its website that charter schools provide “high-quality instruction from teachers who have the autonomy to design a classroom that fits their students’ needs. They are led by dynamic principals who have the flexibility to create a school culture that fosters student performance and parent satisfaction.” Similarly, the Center for Education Reform (2018), on its “Just the FAQs-Charter Schools” webpage, notes that charter schools are “designed by educators, parents, or civic leaders,” “free from most rules and regulations governing conventional public schools,” and “accountable for results.”

This review of how charter schools have been imagined by proponents highlights a number of compelling, testable expectations. In particular, proponents expect that charter teachers and administrators have more freedom and control but are also more accountable because they cannot take their “customers” for granted (Miron & Nelson, 2002). They also expect that parents and students, as empowered customers, will report more engagement and higher levels of satisfaction with their schools. The majority of this chapter explores what research shows about whether these expectations have been fulfilled.

Self-Selection and Studying Charter-District Differences

Before embarking on a review of research that has explored the social context of charter schools, it is important to briefly discuss self-selection and the decision rules used to include works in this review. As many scholars have noted, because students are not randomly assigned to most charter or district schools, it is difficult to infer whether any differences in student performance derive from what students are experiencing in school or influences related to the school selection process (Epple, Romano, & Zimmer, 2016). The same is true for principals and teachers, who choose to which schools they apply, and parents, who choose where to send their children to school.

To understand why this could create inferential problems for studying reported experiences, imagine a principal who favored greater autonomy and chose to seek work in a charter school. Expectancy-disconfirmation theory suggests that the principal’s initial expectations would have the potential to positively or negatively frame her experiences (Van Ryzin, 2013). As a result, it would be difficult to know how the principal’s stated level of autonomy compares with that of, say, a principal who was not seeking greater autonomy and chose to work at a district school.

Although this problem is not unique to studies that compare charter and district schools (due to various types of response bias [Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003], it is often difficult to know how to evaluate the veracity or accuracy of reported behaviors or experiences), it is important to try to control for it. As such, whenever possible, this chapter relies upon quantitative charter-district research that covers a wide geographic area and whose models include observable individual- and school-level correlates (studies that do not include such correlates are explicitly identified). These choices cannot fully dispel concerns that self-selection drives the findings in this literature; however, using such studies represents a minimum threshold for attempting to make inferences about how the social contexts of charter and district schools compare.

Administrators: Bold Leaders of the Realm?

In the education literature, there is strong support for the notion that school administrators play a major role in determining a school's success (Deal & Peterson, 1999; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). For example, Kelley, Thornton, and Daughterty (2005) argued that "principal leadership is possibly the most important single determinant of an effective learning environment" (p. 17). From the early days of the charter school experiment, administrative leadership was seen as a crucial component—if not *the* crucial component—of why these schools would operate differently (Gawlik, 2016). Specifically, charter principals were expected to have more freedom to experiment with how their schools were organized and run and greater latitude in personnel hiring and firing. At the same time, they would also be held more accountable for their work. So what does the research say about the characteristics and experiences of charter school principals?

Principal Qualifications, Demographics, and Turnover

A number of studies have sought to understand what characteristics and experiences, if any, distinguish charter and district school administrators. Ni, Sun, and Rorrer (2015) examined principals in Utah from 2004 to 2011 and found that charter administrators were less likely to have graduate degrees and had less experience teaching in (five years less) or leading (two to four years less) public schools. They also found that charter administrators turned over more rapidly: The average administrator tenure at a charter school was a year less than the average administrator tenure at a district school. When they left their schools, charter principals were more likely than their district counterparts to leave public education.

Zimmer and Buddin (2007) focused on charter and district principals in California in the early 2000s. Their study found no charter–district differences in the length of leadership at a school for elementary and middle school principals; however, high school charter principals reported a shorter tenure than their district colleagues. The study also found that charter principals reported less administrative experience (in elementary and middle schools) but no differences in charter–district principal teaching experience.

More recent and geographically wide findings come from a study by Sun and Ni (2016) that used national data from the 2007–2008 school year. It found that charter principals were less likely to be White, less likely to have a master's degree, and more likely to have non-educational management experience. The study also found that charter principals were paid less, were more likely to work in a school without a collective bargaining agreement, and more likely to turn over (21 percent in district schools versus 29 percent in charter schools). However, the turnover difference evaporated when the authors controlled for individual- and school-level correlates. Also, they found that principal leadership quality—as rated by teachers—was negatively associated with charter principal turnover. Simply put, the study showed that in charter schools higher quality principals were less likely to turn over.

Another way of understanding principal qualifications is licensure. Hedges, Ruddy, Boyland, Swensson, and Kennedy (2018) examined this issue by studying state policy documents to understand whether or not there were differences in what states expected from charter and district principals. They found that in all states and Washington D.C., district principals were required to be licensed. To achieve their licenses, principals had to earn a Master's degree, complete a principal training program, teach for two or more years, and pass a licensure exam. The study found that over half of the states with charter laws exempted charter principals from licensure requirements.

Principal Experiences and Teacher Perceptions

Outside of how principals differ in background, turnover, and licensure, do they report different experiences on the job? More concretely, do they feel, relative to district principals, that they have more autonomy to run their schools as they see fit and that they are more accountable for their school's success? Also, how do other stakeholders in schools—namely teachers—experience charter school leaders?

The aforementioned Zimmer and Buddin (2007) study of California principals found that, across a number of relevant areas—like setting disciplinary policy, assessment policy, and hiring/firing—principals in charter schools reported considerably more autonomy than their district colleagues. Gawlik's (2008) study, drawing on national survey data from the 1999–2000 school year, examined principal influence using a latent variable that included questions about setting standards, establishing curricula, determining professional development and teacher evaluation, hiring, disciplinary policy, and spending. The study found that the principals of start-up charter schools reported higher levels of autonomy relative to conversion charter and district schools. The earlier-discussed Sun and Ni (2016) study found that, relative to district school principals, charter school principals reported having more influence on hiring and evaluating teachers and were less likely to report barriers to the dismissal of poor-performing or incompetent teachers.

Another useful analysis from Barghaus and Boe (2011) compared principals in district and charter schools using national data from the 2003–2004 school year. Specifically, they looked at principal autonomy from state and district influence in seven areas, including the setting of performance standards, establishing curriculum, and spending. They found that charter principals were more likely to report having freedom from state and district influence over school decision-making.

Oberfield (2017) took a different tactic by asking how charter and district teachers across the nation perceived their principals. He found evidence that performance management techniques were used more by charter school principals. Specifically, charter teachers were more likely to be observed and more likely to indicate that their students' test scores would be incorporated into their yearly evaluations. However, the study found no differences between charter and district teachers' perceptions of principal support or articulation of a school mission.

Teachers: Autonomous and Accountable? Bedraggled and Burned Out?

The prior section suggests that charter school principals reported having more autonomy than district school principals. Does this heightened autonomy reach down into teachers' classrooms? According to charter school proponents, teachers in charter schools work in a vastly different environment relative to their district peers. In particular, they have elevated levels of autonomy—in order to innovate and meet student needs—while at the same time being held more accountable for their work. Critics of charter schools paint a much more negative picture of what the experiment has meant for teachers: lower pay, more work, and chaotic school environments (Ravitch, 2013; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014).

Although the tones of these portraits are different, they need not conflict: Charter school teachers may have higher levels of autonomy and accountability while also working more for less. As such, in addition to studying autonomy, accountability, and workload, it is important to examine teacher satisfaction as a way of gaining a broader understanding of teachers' experiences with charter schools. This section contributes by looking at empirical research about who teaches at charter schools, what they experience, and how often they turn over relative to teachers in district schools.

Teacher Qualifications, Experience, and Demographics

Many of the studies in the charter school literature that have examined teachers have focused on qualifications and experience (Burian-Fitzgerald, Luekens, & Strizek, 2004; Podgursky, 2008; Brewer & Ahn, 2010; Stuit & Smith, 2012; Epple et al., 2016). In general, findings suggest that charter teachers are less likely than their district school peers to be certified or have a master's degree and have less teaching experience; they also show that charter teachers work more and are paid less.

Because these findings are well known and covered in prior reviews (Epple et al., 2016), we will not dwell on them here. However, two points are worth making. First, there is a highly contested debate over how (or whether) teacher certification and experience are associated with student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2006). Put simply, although there is agreement about differences in qualifications and experience, the implications of such differences are not settled. Second, though charter teachers are less credentialed, some studies have shown that they may have attended more highly ranked colleges relative to their district peers (Baker & Dickerson, 2006). In short, works like this suggest, charter schools are using the flexibility accorded to them to hire more qualified candidates.

Overall, it seems clear that teachers in charter schools have fewer formal qualifications, but it is an open question how meaningful this distinction is for student learning.

Teacher Satisfaction and Burnout

If charter school teachers are paid less and work longer hours, we might expect that they would be more likely to experience diminished satisfaction and higher levels of burnout; as a result, they might be more likely to leave their schools or the teaching profession. In fact, a number of observers suggest that the pace of work and level of pay in charter schools is unsustainable for maintaining a high-quality teaching staff (Ravitch, 2013; Kahlenberg & Potter, 2014; Fusco, 2017). Despite this, empirical accounts suggest a more complicated reality.

Finn, Manno, and Vanourek (2000), in an early multi-state study that did not account for school or teacher correlates, found that over 90 percent of charter school teachers reported being satisfied with their work. Another study used in-depth interviews to ask why teachers sought work in charter schools and what they experienced in their work (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003). The study found that teachers chose charter school jobs because they were interested in having higher levels of freedom in the classroom, were motivated by the mission of the school, and wanted to work in a school setting that emphasized collaboration. But they also found that charter teachers were dissatisfied with their salaries and benefits, their school's facilities, and their workload.

Renzulli, Parrott, and Beattie (2011) used data from the 1999–2000 school year to examine differences in teacher satisfaction. Their study measured satisfaction using a latent variable that combined answers to four questions, including those measuring school satisfaction and interest in pursuing/maintaining a teacher career. It found that, when controlling for the racial characteristics of students and teachers, as well as aspects of teachers' characteristics and experiences, there was no statistically significant difference between teacher satisfaction in charter and district schools.

A similar study used national data from the 2007–2008 school year to examine differences in teacher satisfaction between charter and district schools (Roch & Sai, 2017). Also, interestingly, it sought to understand differences in satisfaction within the charter school sector among schools that were and were not part of centralized networks. It measured satisfaction using a latent variable formed from seven questions, including those about enthusiasm, transfer intent, and stress. It found that teachers in charter schools were less satisfied with their work relative to their district peers and that teachers in network charter schools were less satisfied relative to those who taught in standalone charter schools.

Another study used nationally representative teacher survey data from over a decade to study teacher satisfaction and burnout in charter and district schools (Oberfield, 2017). It used four single-item measures of satisfaction: salary, personal, group, and class size. It found mixed results for salary satisfaction, no differences in personal or group satisfaction, and, for charter teachers, higher levels of satisfaction regarding class size. The study examined burnout with four single-item measures: teacher fatigue, lost enthusiasm, whether teaching was “worth it,” and whether teachers would choose the same career again. It found no differences in fatigue, lost enthusiasm, and whether teaching was “worth it.” However, in three of the four years, charter teachers were more likely to agree that they would become teachers again. The study also examined satisfaction and burnout within the charter sector in one year (2011–2012) by measuring any differences based on whether the teacher’s school was part of a network and based on its profit status. It found that network and profit status had little relationship with charter teacher burnout or satisfaction.

Teacher Turnover

With mixed results on charter teacher satisfaction and burnout, we now turn to teacher turnover. Stuit and Smith (2012) examined turnover rates in charter and district schools in 16 states in the 2003–2004 school year. They found that the charter school turnover rate was twice as high as district schools; this difference persisted even when controlling for school and personnel factors, like urban location, teacher experience, and student characteristics. Another study examined attrition among Wisconsin teachers from 1998 to 2006 (Gross & DeArmond, 2010). It found that charter teachers were 40 percent more likely to move schools and 50 percent more likely to leave teaching relative to district teachers. However, when the authors controlled for school and personnel characteristics, this gap disappeared. In fact, the study found that charter schools did a better job of retaining teachers in high-poverty, low-performing schools.

Two nationwide studies made similar findings. One focused on the 1999–2000 school year and controlled for the characteristics of teachers and students (Renzulli et al., 2011). Its most comprehensive model found no differences in the turnover rates of district and charter teachers. The other study used nationwide data from four school years (2000–2001, 2004–2005, 2008–2009, and 2012–2013) to explore turnover differences (Oberfield, 2017). It found that charter teachers had somewhat lower turnover rates in 2000–2001, higher turnover rates in 2004–2005 and 2008–2009, and similar turnover rates in 2012–2013. When school and teacher-level control variables were included in the analysis, most differences in turnover disappeared.

These results show that it is not clear that charter teachers turn over more. They also show the importance of controlling for where charter schools are located—and who works in them and attends them—in analyses of teachers. That said, decisions about what to control for are not straightforward: Modeling requires analysts to explicitly indicate what counts as measuring “charterness” and what does not. Because this issue cuts across all sections of this chapter, it is a topic to which we will return in the conclusion.

Teacher Experiences with Autonomy, Accountability, and Leadership

Another crucial element of the claims of charter school proponents—and the social context of charter schools—is teachers’ reported experiences with autonomy, accountability, and school leadership. Crawford (2001) examined teacher autonomy in district and charter schools in a sample of 37 primary schools in Michigan and Colorado without controlling for school or teacher correlates. In his combined analysis (including both states and around 400 teachers), he found no differences in autonomy. Powers (2009) used nationally representative data from the 1999–2000 school year to compare teacher autonomy and accountability in district and charter schools. Without controlling

for individual- or school-level correlates, the study found that charter teachers reported higher levels of control over the selection of instructional material and content, techniques, and discipline relative to district teachers; however, Powers found no differences in control over grading or discipline. In terms of accountability, the study found that charter teachers were less likely to indicate that they would be rewarded for doing a good job and were no different in terms of having their job security tied to the performance of their students.

Barghaus and Boe (2011) examined teacher autonomy and leadership using national data from the 2003–2004 school year. Specifically, they examined seven aspects of input on school decision-making—including input about establishing curriculum and setting disciplinary policy—and classroom control over curriculum and technique. The study found that charter teachers were more likely than district teachers to report having control over school decision-making and classroom control over curriculum; however, they were equally likely to report having control over classroom techniques.

Another study examined teacher autonomy, accountability, and leadership using over a decade of nationally representative survey data (Oberfield, 2017). The study found that charter teachers were more likely to report high levels of control over the selection of texts and content but were, in essence, no different in the amount of classroom control they exerted over techniques, grading, discipline, and homework. In terms of accountability, it found no differences between charter and district teachers' expectations that they would be rewarded or punished for their work. Turning to school leadership, the study found that charter teachers reported higher levels of involvement in all aspects of school operations except for setting the budget. Finally, the study showed that, although much has changed in public education over the past decade, the reported experiences of charter and district teachers have remained largely consistent.

This section suggests that charter teachers, in at least some ways, have more autonomy in their classrooms and play a greater leadership role in their schools. However, scholars have yet to show that there are meaningful differences in accountability across these school types.

Students and Parents: Further Segregation? Empowered, Satisfied Customers?

Thus far, we have seen that research confirms and challenges charter school proponents' claims about the experiences of charter principals and teachers. The third and final set of stakeholders we consider is students and parents. As noted above, parents are central to charter school proponents' claims about how these schools are different. Because charter schools see them as customers, school staff are thought to do more to engage with parents and satisfy them about their choice. Although such an advance would be welcomed, observers have raised the possibility that this experiment with choice has had a negative effect on public schools by furthering segregation by race and class (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). This section begins by considering this latter claim. Following that, it considers the evidence that charter schools are associated with higher levels of parent engagement and satisfaction.

Charter School Students and Segregation

Since the beginning of the charter experiment, the racial and class demographics of the students attending charter schools has been an important focus. In large part, charter schools were intended to provide options for low-income, minority families stuck in failing public schools (Nathan, 1996; Finn et al., 2000). However, as Gary Orfield (2013) has noted, the idea of school choice originated with the effort to resist the racial integration of public schools in the South; as the idea has taken hold more recently, Orfield and others have argued, it has contributed to segregation.

In assessing such claims, it is useful to recall that charter schools emerged at a time when there were already relatively high levels of racial and class segregation across many aspects of American society including, of course, public schools (Weitzel & Lubienski, 2010). Thus, the real question is whether charter schools have ameliorated, furthered, or had no effect on already high levels of public school segregation. Also, it is worth noting that there are a number of dimensions and measures of segregation (Massey & Denton, 1988; Reardon & Owens, 2014). Because this is a massive topic—perhaps worthy of its own chapter in subsequent editions of this volume—and has been reviewed well elsewhere, this section is brief and focuses on the findings from a high-quality analysis and review of this literature.

Epple and colleagues (2016) examined the characteristics of students in charter and district schools from 2001 to 2010. The study found that, at the national level, charter schools enrolled fewer White students and more Black and Latinx students. But, as the authors note, this cannot tell us about school-level segregation. Thus the study also compared the percentage of district and charter schools with more than 80 percent of one race; it found that 38 percent of charter schools met this threshold relative to 41 percent of district schools. However, in these high concentration schools, charters were much more likely to be majority minority, relative to district schools (which were more likely to be majority White). It also found that a third of charter schools had student populations in which 80 percent qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) relative to less than a quarter for district schools.

The review then examined city-level data for the 30 cities with the highest charter school enrollment. It found that in nearly two-thirds of these cities, there were more charter schools with 80 percent FRL students than district schools. When looking at racial segregation in these cities, the study found that in around half of such cities, charter schools had a higher racial minority concentration; correspondingly, in half of such cities, charter schools had a lower racial minority concentration relative to district schools. It also found that, at the neighborhood level, charter schools enrolled a lower proportion of English language learners and a lower proportion of special needs students relative to district schools.

Synthesizing their analysis and the broader literature, the study concluded that charter schools tend to have high degrees of segregation by race and class because they are located in urban areas. However, it also noted that parent decisions, following entry into charter schools (who stays and who goes), can accelerate segregation. This conclusion highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of parents with a child in a charter or district school.

Parent Engagement

As noted above, the higher level of parent engagement remains central to arguments in favor of charter schools. In fact, this aspect of the charter school experiment has been written into a variety of state charter laws (Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell, 2013). This section reviews the evidence examining whether charter schools have done a better job, relative to district schools, of getting parents engaged in school life.

Nathan (1996), in an early tour of the charter sector, found that charter schools were achieving the goal of enhanced parent involvement. Citing research in California charter schools, the study found that charter teachers were discussing strategies for engaging hard-to-reach parents, giving parents ideas about what they can do at home to engage students, and assigning homework that involves parents. Another early report echoed this finding: “If charter schools can declare any clear-cut victory today, it is in the battle against adult disengagement. One of the secrets of these schools’ success is their knack for tapping vast resources of parental involvement” (Finn et al., 2000, p. 93).

Using a survey of principals, Becker, Nakagawa, and Corwin (1997) studied parent engagement in California district and charter schools. Without controlling for school or individual correlates,

they found that charter school principals reported higher levels of parent involvement relative to their district school peers. For instance, charter principals were more likely to report that parents helped out or taught in their child's classroom and worked on a school committee or governance board. A survey of principals in Michigan made a similar set of findings: Charter principals reported higher levels of parent volunteering and meeting attendance but no differences in parent-teacher conference attendance (Mintrom, 2003). A third principal study, also focused on California, found that charter principals in elementary, middle, and high schools reported higher levels of parent engagement than comparable principals in district schools (Zimmer & Buddin, 2007). Because these three studies focus on two states, Bifulco and Ladd (2006) made a helpful contribution by examining a nationwide survey of principals in charter and district schools. The findings from their study matched those from the statewide studies and suggested that charter schools foster a higher level of parent engagement, especially in primary and middle schools.

Differences in parent engagement have also been considered by looking at the experiences of teachers. One study used nationally representative teacher survey data from four times between the 1999–2000 and 2011–2012 school years (Oberfield, 2017). It found that teachers in charter schools reported significantly higher levels of parent support and involvement than teachers in district schools.

Curiously, relatively few studies have rigorously studied parent engagement in charter and district schools from the perspectives of parents. One paper that tried to do so drew from a nationally representative survey of parents, fielded in the 2003–2004 school year (Buckley & Schneider, 2007). Specifically, it compared levels of engagement in public schools that were assigned and chosen; this latter category included charter schools, magnet schools, and other schools of choice. It measured engagement in terms of the number of activities parents participated in and the hours they spent in their child's school. When controlling for location, school, and family characteristics, it found that parents in public schools of choice reported volunteering more hours than parents in assigned schools; however, these two groups were indistinguishable in terms of the number of activities that they reported.

Parent Satisfaction

A number of studies have sought to understand the charter experiment by examining parent satisfaction in charter schools (Finn et al., 2000; Miron & Nelson, 2002; Miron, Nelson, & Risley, 2002; Wohlstetter, Nayfack, & Mora-Flores, 2008). Buckley and Schneider (2007) examined charter and district parent satisfaction in Washington, D.C. They found that parents with a charter school student graded their schools higher relative to parents with a district school student. In response to concerns that this result was driven by self-selection into charter schools, the authors conducted a propensity-score-matching analysis using a model that included family background characteristics and other potentially relevant control variables. The results of this analysis revealed that self-selection was not the major driving force for differences in parent satisfaction. Complicating the picture, they also looked at how parent satisfaction evolved over time. Although charter parents were more satisfied initially, these gains receded over a number of years such that, at the end of a four-year period, there were no differences in satisfaction.

Another study examined parent satisfaction in eight cities with high levels of school choice (Jochim, DeArmond, Gross, & Lake, 2014). It found no statistically significant difference in satisfaction between parents with children in a neighborhood district school (i.e., assigned) and those with children in a non-neighborhood school (i.e., a school of choice). Barrows, Cheng, Peterson, and West (2017) studied parent satisfaction using two nationally representative surveys. The study found that parents with a student in a charter school were more satisfied than parents in assigned district schools and about equally satisfied as parents with a child in a chosen district school.

Perhaps the strongest evidence about differences in parent satisfaction emerged from a study of over-subscribed charter middle schools (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010). The research examined schools that held admission lotteries to allot student seats in 36 schools across 15 states. It found that charter schools positively affected lottery winners' parent satisfaction; winners were 33 percentage points more likely to rate their child's school as excellent relative to lottery losers.

Conclusion and Discussion

This chapter aimed to gather research and shed light on the social context of charter schools. Specifically, it asked about the experiences of people who work in or send children to charter schools. These stakeholders' experiences are no mere afterthought: The charter school experiment is aimed at fostering different school environments—and stakeholder behavior and experiences—relative to district schools. Understanding whether this promise has been met requires attention to outcomes, like test scores and graduation rates, as well as examinations of how stakeholders experience charter and district schools.

There are, as noted above, a number of thorny methodological problems with using observational data to make inferences about how these schools operate. Also, there are several areas of this literature with conflicting findings. Nonetheless, in sum this chapter's findings suggest that charter schools have met some of the promise set forth by early theorists and proponents. There is evidence to suggest that principals and teachers enjoy higher levels of autonomy relative to their district peers. Also, though they work more and are paid less, they do not appear more burned out or less satisfied with their work. In addition, research suggests that parents who send a child to a charter school tend to be more engaged and satisfied relative to parents who send a child to a district school. Though we cannot know for sure whether these differences were due to self-selection or actual differences within charter schools, they offer some encouragement that the experiment is developing as expected.

However, this is not to say that charter schools have achieved all of the ambitious goals claimed by supporters or that there are not some findings here that are cause for concern. One of the important ways the charter model seems not to have succeeded is with regard to teacher accountability. Teachers in charter and public schools are equally likely to report that they would be rewarded or punished based on their work. Because charter schools are premised on enhanced autonomy and accountability, this finding suggests that these schools are only fulfilling part of their mission. Also, the chapter showed that charter school principals and teachers have less experience and fewer qualifications. Although there is real debate over whether these differences affect student learning, it is worth asking what the combination of greater autonomy and less training and certification might mean for school climates. It also seems clear that, although charter schools are not the major driver of racial and class segregation in public education in the United States, they may be contributing to greater racial and class isolation.

The review also highlighted a number of areas in need of greater scholarly attention. First, although there has been considerable study of charter principal autonomy, there has been less focus on accountability. We see that charter principals rated unfavorably by teachers are more likely to turn over. But there are a number of other ways we should study charter principal accountability, including understanding how they understand the rewards and punishments that accrue based on their performance. Second, there needs to be greater consideration and investigation of the experiences of parents and students. What do they experience from teachers, administrators, and schools writ large? How do their experiences in charter schools compare with those in district schools? Third, one of the stated reasons for granting charter school staff higher levels of autonomy was to encourage innovation. Studies have examined the innovativeness of school programs (Lubienski, 2003), but we have little indication if staff perceive that their freedom to experiment has led them to

innovate. Future research could contribute by examining this topic. Fourth, the literature needs further research examining variation within the charter sector according to differences in network- and profit-status as well as by state law. This literature is beginning to develop (Torres, 2016; Oberfield, 2016, 2017; Hamlin, 2017; Roch & Sai, 2017; Gill et al., 2018), but due to the great diversity of the charter sector, more work here is needed.

This review raises theoretical and methodological questions for comparisons of charter and district schools. Perhaps most important among them is “Which aspects of the people and characteristics of these schools are part of a theorized charter model?” Take the case of teacher experience. Research shows that charter schools are located in urban areas with high rates of poverty and minority students; such schools tend to hire teachers with fewer years of experience. Teachers with less experience are, all else equal, more likely to turn over. As scholars try to understand if charter schools have higher levels of turnover, should teacher experience be included in such models? Put differently, is teacher inexperience a part of, or exogenous to, the charter model? Since different scholars will come down on different sides of this question, one solution is for charter-district inquiries to present four sets of findings: 1) differences that are unadjusted for school- or staff-level characteristics; 2) differences that are adjusted for school-level characteristics; 3) differences that are adjusted for staff-level characteristics; and 4) differences that are adjusted for school- and staff-level characteristics. In doing so, scholars can help explain what about charter schools is different, and the extent to which this experiment is meeting its lofty goals.

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