

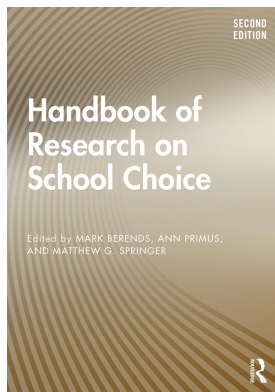
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## **Handbook of Research on School Choice**

Mark Berends, Ann Primus, Matthew G. Springer

### **Hopes, Fears, and New Solutions**

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## 8

# HOPEs, FEARS, AND NEW SOLUTIONS

## Charter Schools in 2018

*Betheny Gross, Christine Campbell, Sivan Tuchman,  
and Roohi Sharma*

Charter schools, in their almost 30 years of existence, have moved from experimental schools to a mainstay of the nation's educational landscape. Legal in all but six states, they educate over 3 million students nationally (David & Hesla, 2018). Local, state, and federal policymakers have incorporated charter schools into policy and school improvement plans (McGuinn, Berger, & Anderson, 2012). Advocates hoped that these schools would not only be effective but also provide families with choice, fuel innovation, and exhibit strong accountability. Critics, however, noting the pressures of competition and strict accountability, feared that charter schools would fail to serve students equitably, especially our nation's most challenging ones, and further destabilize struggling districts.

Reality seems somewhere between these predictions. The evidence on the impact of charter schools on student outcomes remains mixed—highly varied nationally, but more consistent and positive in specific locales and with specific student demographics. There is no clear answer on whether the initial hopes or fears have come to pass. Instead, existing evidence shows variation with context and conditions. Accordingly, debate over the value of charter schools persists.

Still, charter schools not only remain but are taking on new roles in their cities and sparking new solutions. They are collaborating with school districts to provide families and educators with a range of options while trying to manage the complications of multi-sector systems. They have partnered with states and districts to turn around persistently low-performing schools. The high demand for choice has prompted some cities to focus on providing comprehensive information on schools to support families and to seek more streamlined systems through which parents can apply.

In this chapter we review the growth of the charter sector and evidence of impact on student learning. We then reflect on existing evidence on how the hopes and fears surrounding charter schools have played out and introduce the new issues and solutions that have emerged as this sector continues to evolve.

### **The Charter Landscape: A Sector Increasing in Number and Influence**

The National Alliance of Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) reports that in 2017–2018, about 7,000 charter schools were located across 44 states (David & Hesla, 2018). Federal data from the 2015–2016 school year show that charter schools, nationally, serve a diverse student body. Thirty-three percent identify as White, 27 percent as Black, 32 percent as Latinx, and eight percent as Asian or Pacific Islander, Native American, Alaskan Native, or two or more ethnic or racial identities (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2017).

In certain cities, charter schools have made a substantial footprint in the local educational landscape. In a 2017 analysis of the charter school enrollment market share, the NAPCS reported that charter schools in 34 cities enrolled more than a quarter of the city's public school students. In seven cities—Detroit, Flint, Gary, Kansas City, New Orleans, Queens Creek (Arizona), and Washington, D.C.—charter schools enrolled more than 40 percent of the city's public school students (David, Hesla, & Pendergrass, 2017).

For the last 15 years, the charter sector has grown in influence at the federal and state levels. In 2009, the Obama Administration viewed charter schools as a potential lever for school improvement and incorporated them into major federal policy through the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top. This initiative challenged states to innovate and improve schools state wide. “Ensuring successful conditions for high-performing charter schools and other innovative schools” was one of several selection criteria for the grants (USDOE, 2009, p. 11). States like Louisiana, Tennessee, and Michigan now have policies that allow state entities to assume control of failing schools and leverage the charter mechanism to turn them around (Smith, 2015).

## Outcomes

Whether charter schools are effective for students is a point of much debate. In the last two decades, numerous researchers have estimated the impact of attending a charter school on students' academic outcomes. Most have measured the effect of charter school enrollment on state standardized assessments, though scholars also considered the impact of charter school enrollment on students' likelihood of graduating and attending college. Overall, these studies, which vary in their design and locale of focus, show mixed results.

Lottery studies utilizing random assignment from oversubscription to charter schools generally found large positive impacts on student achievement in math and/or English language arts (Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2009; Hastings, Neilson, & Zimmerman, 2012; Angrist, Pathak, & Walters, 2013; Dobbie & Fryer, 2013; Tuttle et al., 2013; Curto & Fryer, 2014). Even though randomized lottery assignment eliminates selection bias, these studies only include oversubscribed charter schools, which tend to be high-performing and thus do not provide a picture of the entire charter school sector.

Fixed-effects studies, which include a wider range of charter schools than the lottery studies, offer mixed assessments (Ballou, Teasley, & Zeidner, 2006; Betts, Rice, Zau, Tang, & Koedel, 2006; Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Sass, 2006; Imberman, 2011). These studies, however, have their own limitations because they identify effects based on students who switch schools and do not readily generalize to students who enroll and stay in charter schools.

Finally, from the Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), a 2013 analysis of the impact of charter schools on math and reading assessments in 27 states compared charter school students to their “virtual twin” in feeder traditional public schools. Researchers found a very small positive advantage for charter schools, but only because traditional public schools had actually gotten worse.

A 2018 meta-analysis of 38 studies that included lottery or rigorous nonexperimental designs concluded that charter schools did not on average impact reading outcomes but did have a positive effect on math outcomes (Betts & Tang, 2018). A wealth of evidence suggests that charter schools, especially in urban settings and those serving minority students in high poverty areas, have the potential to generate positive gains (Angrist et al., 2013; Betts & Tang, 2018; Cohodes, 2018).

The few studies that have examined longer-term student outcomes found that charter school students are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in a college (Angrist et al., 2013; Sass, Zimmer, Gill, & Booker, 2016). Students attending charter high schools are also more likely to persist in college and experience higher earnings in their mid-20s (Sass et al., 2016). That said,

opposite results were found for Texas charter schools, which saw decreased four-year college enrollment and negative effects on early life earnings (Dobbie & Fryer, 2017). The literature on attainment is still sparse.

### **Hopes for a Better System of Schools: More Parent Choice, Innovative Schools, Accountability, and Positive Competitive Pressure**

The central premise of charter schools is that a balance of *autonomy* (provided by allowing schools to operate independent of existing local school districts) and *accountability* (enforced through both performance expectations of the charter authorizer as well as demand pressure from parents' choice) would yield a sector of innovative and effective schools for families (Bulkley, 2001; Lubienski, 2003). Proponents proposed charter schools as an alternative to traditional public schools to create a more flexible and responsive educational system (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Further, they expected that, by challenging the monopoly control of local school districts, charter schools would exert performance pressure on those districts, compelling them toward improvement as well.

Fully realized, this balance of autonomy and accountability would feature:

- parents actively choosing schools that suit their child's interests and educational needs;
- authorizers setting a high bar for applications, establishing performance expectations, and creating reliable review systems;
- schools leveraging their autonomy to respond innovatively to parents' demands and authorizers' expectations with quality school programs;
- local school districts improving in response to competitive pressures.

We review the extent to which these hopes for a better system of schools have been realized.

#### ***Do Parents Become Active Choosers?***

Substantial numbers of parents are actively choosing schools, but evidence suggests that engagement in choice remains uneven in some locales and that important barriers to choice persist. In 2014, the NAPCS estimated that in addition to the 2.5 million students enrolled in charter schools, more than 1 million student names were on waitlists, suggesting strong demand (Kern & Gebru, 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Analysis of school choice applications, which reflect parents' "revealed preferences" for schools, has found that signals of school quality (e.g., test results, school rankings) are important factors in school choosing. This is essential if families' demand pressure is to drive student outcomes, as the choice theory proposes (Harris & Larsen, 2015; Denice & Gross, 2016; Glazerman & Dotter, 2017). These same studies and others, however, revealed additional factors influencing choices that may dampen the demand for quality. These factors include school safety (Goyette, 2014; Pattillo, 2015; Billingham & Hunt, 2016), the racial and economic composition of the school's student body (Denice & Gross, 2016; Abdulkadiroğlu et al., 2017), distance from home to school (Denice & Gross, 2016; Glazerman & Dotter, 2017), and extracurricular offerings (Harris & Larsen, 2015).

Parents also report differences in barriers to accessing school choice. In a 2014 survey of parents in eight cities with charter and district choice opportunities, those with less education, with students with special needs, and minority parents were more likely than their peers to report difficulty finding the information they needed to make a school choice, managing the application, and meeting its deadlines. The survey further found that parents with less education more frequently reported that finding transportation to school for their children was a barrier to making school choices (Jochim, DeArmond, Gross, & Lake, 2014).

### ***Have Authorizers Held Charter Schools Accountable?***

Charter schools are granted autonomy but they remain accountable for results. Charter authorizers are expected to routinely review the performance of the schools they oversee and close underperforming schools. Research has found that authorizer policy, commitment to, and execution of performance accountability have been inconsistent.<sup>2</sup>

Each state determines the type of agency or agencies that can become authorizers. In 2016, about 90 percent of charter schools were authorized by their local school district, with the remaining 10 percent authorized by higher education institutions, independent chartering boards, non-profit organizations, state education agencies, and noneducational government entities (NACSA, 2016). Each charter authorizer determines its own conditions for charter approval and standards for renewal, so specificity and expectations vary across authorizers (Gau, 2006).

To date, however, it is unclear whether authorizers have effectively leveraged their oversight authority for performance management. Nationally, authorizers closed few schools through 2008, with the rate of closure increasing in recent years, though it varies by state. Critical requirements for closing schools—measuring school quality and managing the politics of closing—have proven difficult for them (Grady, 2012; Osborne, 2012). One study found that authorizers were more likely to close a school for financial mismanagement than academic underperformance (Paino, Renzulli, Boylan, & Bradley, 2014). Another study, however, found that charter schools that closed were clearly low-performing and experienced a loss in enrollment (CREDO, 2017).

Research offers little insight on the conditions that yield better and worse authorizer accountability policy. There is some evidence that those who oversee a large portfolio of schools are more likely to have well-developed policies for charter authorization than those with small portfolios (Anderson & Finnigan, 2001; Gustafson, 2013). A Minnesota study found no relationship between authorizer type and student outcomes, but a large variation in student outcomes within authorizers (Carlson, Lavery, & Witte, 2012). An Ohio study found a negative relationship between nonprofit authorizers and student outcomes (Zimmer, Gill, Attridge, & Obenauf, 2014). A study of Indianapolis charter schools authorized by the mayor's office found positive effects on student achievement but also higher rates of suspension (Berends & Waddington, 2019). In short, there is a good deal of variation in the relationships of charter school authorizers and student outcomes.

### ***Have Charter Schools Ushered in New Instructional Models?***

The point of choice is not to just opt out of a school; it is to opt *into* a school that is a good fit for a child. Charter schools were expected to use their autonomy to provide more distinctive and innovative programs than available in more centralized districts. On balance, charter schools' instructional approaches do not appear to differ much from their district counterparts, though the latitude offered to charter schools has allowed individual schools and networks to experiment with nontraditional models.

A 2012 study found no evidence that charter schools were differentiating themselves from district schools with innovations in academic support for students (Preston, Goldring, Berends, & Cannata, 2012). To date, the "no excuses" instructional model is the most prominent to emerge from the charter sector, featuring traditional teacher-directed classrooms, attention to time on task, high expectations for academic outcomes, and strict behavioral expectations. Though effective when applied consistently (Miron, Urschel, & Saxton, 2011; Angrist et al., 2013; Gleason, 2017), this model is not innovative.

Some evidence suggests that charter schools frequently offer some specialization in their programs. A 2015 review of charter schools nationally found that about 50 percent offered some sort of curricular or pedagogical specialization (McShane & Hatfield, 2015). Two other studies, one focused on New Orleans and another focused on New Orleans, Denver, and Washington, D.C., found that

half or more of charter schools displayed a conventional college prep model, but many offered curriculum specialization (e.g., STEM, arts, global studies) (Arce-Trigatti, Lincove, & Harris, 2016; Gross, McCann, Murtagh, & Campbell, 2017).

Within the charter sector, small pockets of innovation have emerged. Virtual charter schools enroll more than 200,000 students, though to the detriment of student outcomes (CREDO, 2015; Pazhouh, Lake, & Miller, 2015; Ahn & McEachin, 2017). In addition, charter schools have been among early leaders in exploring personalized learning—an effort to provide students with instruction tailored to their interests and needs as part of the Next Generation Learning Challenges (Bingham, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2018).

### ***Have Charter Schools Introduced Different Educators and New Approaches to Talent?***

Charter proponents expected charter schools to take advantage of their flexibility to rethink the teacher and the structure and job of teaching. Most charter school laws allow for employment of nontraditionally certified teachers, and few charter school teachers and schools are affiliated with unions or operate under a collective bargaining agreement (Bulkley & Fisher, 2002). Both policy conditions provide charter schools with considerable opportunity to hire different types of educators and to structure their work differently (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003). In practice, charter school teachers are younger, more ethnically and racially diverse, less likely to hold a master's degree (Taie & Goldring, 2017), but more likely to have attended selective colleges than their district peers (Baker & Dickerson, 2006).

Charter schools, though compelled by competition to mimic the pay policies of nearby districts (Podgursky, 2006; Gross & DeArmond, 2010a), do differentiate somewhat from local districts in their approach to hiring and tenure. A 2012 national study found that 92 percent of charter schools do not offer teachers tenure, which is nearly universal in district schools, and 32 percent offer pay for performance compared to 19 percent at traditional public schools (Preston et al., 2012). Additionally, charter schools dismiss their staff more frequently than do traditional districts (Stuit & Smith, 2012).

Studies of teacher satisfaction and mobility have presented a mixed view of working conditions in charter schools. While teachers report having more autonomy and appreciate the coherence around the charter school mission (Malloy & Wohlstetter, 2003), they appear to be less satisfied than their district school peers (Roch & Sai, 2017). In addition, charter school teachers, on average, are more mobile and more likely than those in traditional public schools to leave their school and/or profession—outcomes driven mostly by the younger workforce (Gross & DeArmond, 2010b; Stuit & Smith, 2012), concerns about job security (Gross & DeArmond, 2010b), lower pay, and nonunion status (Stuit & Smith, 2012; Roch & Sai, 2017).

### ***Do Local Districts Respond to Charter School Competition with Improved Performance?***

Charter schools, by operating outside the district structure, were intended to challenge the monopoly school districts held over local education and force districts to improve in order to retain students. Theory aside, there are many reasons competition might not yield a response from school districts. Districts may not lose enough students to feel the pain of lower enrollments if “hold harmless” provisions (i.e., agreements under which no one is held responsible for damages) delay financial losses. Schools may lack the capacity to substantially change their practices in order to improve student learning. And the region the charter schools draw from may be diffuse and difficult to recognize as a competitor to any particular district school. Most studies examining the impact

of charter competition have found null to small positive effects on math and English language arts achievement (Cohodes, 2018). (See Chapter 11 on charter school competition for a more detailed review of these effects.)

### **Fears of an Unfair System: Unequal Access, Underserved Students with Special Learning Needs, and Increasing Segregation**

Charter schools' autonomy and performance incentives led critics to worry about how they would operate and affect the local districts around them. Specifically, critics worried that charter schools facing accountability pressure and left to manage their own enrollment would select the "best" students and dissuade, push out, or harshly discipline the most challenging students, increasing segregation in cities (Ravitch, 2012; Brown, 2013). Critics also worried that charter schools would provide poor support of and accommodations for students with special needs (Ramanathan & Zollers, 1999) and divert needed resources away from local school districts (Lafer, 2018). Here we discuss the evidence on the extent to which these concerns have come to pass.

#### ***Do Charter Schools Cream-Skim or Push Out Students?***

Pressure to compete for students and control costs can incentivize schools to prioritize higher-performing students who generally offer the greatest outcomes at the lowest cost (Lacireno-Paquet, Holyoke, Moser, & Henig, 2002). Critics have worried that charter schools could "cream-skim" the best students in ways that do not necessarily violate their open enrollment obligations, such as by locating in more affluent areas, recruiting students from higher-quality feeder schools, or dissuading lower-performing students from applying. Schools could also "push out" challenging students already enrolled through frequent discipline or by otherwise convincing parents that the school is a bad fit for their child. To date, analyses do not consistently show patterns that reflect cream-skimming or pushout.

Overall, charter schools do tend to locate in areas with large minority populations, though not necessarily the poorest neighborhoods (Henig & MacDonald, 2002; Gulosino & d'Entremont, 2011). Nationally, when compared to district schools, they have been found to enroll a similar or higher share of less affluent students (CREDO, 2013), minority students (Butler, Carr, Toma, & Zimmer, 2013), and at least in Tennessee, low-performing and poorly behaving students (Kho & Zimmer, 2017).

Charter schools also enroll smaller shares of special education students than traditional districts across the country (GAO, 2012). Cases of dissuasion and pushout have been recorded for students with disabilities, though research has shown that this maltreatment is likely limited. Studies of special education enrollment in charter schools in New York City (Winters, 2013), Denver (Winters, 2015; Winters, Clayton, & Carpenter, 2017), Boston (Setren, 2015), and Louisiana (Wolf & Lasserre-Cortez, 2018) found that charter schools de-identify students for special education at higher rates than traditional public schools. This, along with lower kindergarten enrollment of students with disabilities as well as the transfer of general education students into charter schools, contributes to lower overall enrollment rates of special education students (Winters, 2013). Aside from anecdote, it is difficult to disentangle targeted recruitment efforts and practices of pushing students out of charter schools.

Pushout is understood by examining the mobility patterns of low-performing and/or low-income students. Analysis of the rate at which low-performing students exited charter schools in multiple locations across the country<sup>3</sup> did not find a relationship between students' prior academic performance and the likelihood of leaving a charter school (Zimmer & Guarino, 2013; Winters, 2015; Nichols-Barrer, Gleason, Gill, & Tuttle, 2016; Winters et al., 2017). However, a 2017 study

of mobility in Tennessee found that low-performing students were more likely to exit charter schools than their high ability peers (Kho & Zimmer, 2017).

### ***Do Charter Schools Suspend and Expel Students at Disproportionate Rates?***

Charter schools develop their own discipline policies based on their individual school mission and goals (Lake, 2010); some have become known for their strict approach to discipline. Critics have worried that strong accountability pressure on charter schools could compel schools to remove disruptive students through suspension or expulsion rather than addressing their behavior in the school (Dudley-Marling & Baker, 2012; Welner, 2013). The rise of no excuses charter schools—known to suspend students for short spells to enforce basic school rules—contributes to these concerns. Given the difficulty of obtaining reliable data on discipline, the question of whether charter schools suspend or expel students at significantly higher rates than district schools remains unsettled.

Analyzing school discipline is difficult because there is no uniform definition of suspension. One school may record any incident in which a student is sent home as a suspension, while another records a suspension only when the student misses an entire day. Though expulsions may seem more definite, a school could avoid recording an expulsion if the family chooses to withdraw under threat of expulsion. Consequently, discipline data suffers from considerable bias (Witte, Weimer, Shober, & Schlomer, 2007; Imberman, 2011).

Challenges in reporting notwithstanding, several studies have compared discipline incidents in charter schools relative to district schools. A large-scale, lottery-based study compared 36 charter middle schools across 15 states to traditional public schools and found no difference between them in the proportion of students suspended, the number sent out of class five or more times, or the number of parents notified about behavior (Gleason, Clark, Tuttle, & Dwoyer, 2010). Analyzing Boston charter schools, Angrist et al. (2013) found that charter middle schools suspended students about one day more each year than district schools, while charter high schools suspended students just over one day more than the district schools. In contrast, one quasi-experimental study utilizing longitudinal student level data (Imberman, 2011) found that the disciplinary infractions for students moving into charter schools reduced by 0.2 to 0.4 per year.

Two additional studies did not attempt to correct for the selection bias that occurs when comparing students in charter and traditional public schools. Rausch (2014) found that charter school students were 50 percent more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension than their peers in traditional public schools. Roch and Pitts (2012) found that the racial representation of teachers in Georgia corresponded with more in-school but fewer out-of-school suspensions for students. The lack of clear evidence about the relationship between charter school attendance and school discipline begs for further study

### ***Do Charter Schools Increase School Segregation?***

Concerns about cream-skimming and pushout gave rise to worries that charter schools would leave historically underserved students behind in district schools. Opponents imagined that the wealthiest White students would go to charter schools, leaving traditional public schools to educate students of color. Charter proponents, by contrast, imagined charter schools as an opportunity to disentangle residential location from schooling, potentially upending segregation. It appears that neither side of the debate anticipated what was to come. In practice, many charter schools have located in disadvantaged communities and have adopted school missions associated with serving students who have historically been underserved by traditional public schools. Indeed, critics are now concerned that



minority students are more racially concentrated in charter schools than they are in nearby district schools. Evidence, however, suggests that segregation effects may differ across cities and regions.

Two national studies found increased racial isolation (Miron, Urschel, Mathis, & Tornquist, 2010; Ritter, Jensen, Kisida, & McGee, 2010), while two others found no difference (Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Zimmer et al., 2009). Scholars have utilized a range of approaches, including comparing the racial composition of charter schools to their surrounding district (Miron et al., 2010), to the schools students would have otherwise attended (Zimmer et al., 2009), and to schools in the greater metro area (Swanson, McKenzie, & Ritter, 2016). These, too, have yielded mixed results.<sup>4</sup>

Several studies used longitudinal data to track individual students as they moved in and out of charter schools. Those in North Carolina, St. Louis, and Kansas City schools showed increased segregation (Bifulco & Ladd, 2006; Parker, 2012), but research in California found no difference in racial isolation (Booker, Zimmer, & Buddin, 2005).

### ***Do Charter Schools Poorly Serve Students with Special Learning Needs?***

Charter schools, which commonly operate as local education agencies, are required to provide any service specified on a student's learning plan unless they make arrangements to share responsibility for that student with a local district (Rhim & O'Neill, 2013). Whereas urban school districts often operate specialized educational programs to serve high-needs students at specific schools, allowing them to concentrate resources by specialization, charter schools often must find ways to serve students across a range of needs with a range of services. This raises a concern about their ability to serve students with special—especially higher—needs well.

Only a handful of studies have considered the quality of service charter schools offer to special education and ELL students. One analysis showed that charter schools retained their special education students at higher rates than nonspecial education students (Winters, 2015). Another found that charter schools were more likely to place special education students in inclusive settings (Setren, 2015). The only study to provide a causal estimate of the impact of charter schools on special education and ELL students found that charter schools had large positive effects on English and math scores, similar to those of students without disabilities (Setren, 2015). CREDO's 2013 study of charter schools in 26 states found small positive academic achievement results for charter school students in special education.

### ***Do Charter Schools Financially Drain School Districts?***

When students shift from school districts to the charter sector, so do financial resources. As noted earlier, charter schools in some cities now enroll over 40 percent of the city's public school students. Analysis from Detroit and Washington D.C. has shown that enrollment declines predated the entry of charter schools, and some charter school students transferred into the sector from private schools. However, a large share of charter school enrollment reflects students transferring out of local school districts (Center on Reinventing Public Education, 2017).

As of 2014, 22 states<sup>5</sup> had some type of hold harmless provision to address declining enrollment (Atherton & Rubado, 2014). In the short term, such provisions are meant to support districts by reducing central office and teaching staff. In the long term, districts are expected to adjust costs to account for the lost students. In practice, districts have struggled to financially adapt. In Michigan, districts failed to change their resource allocations as students moved to charter schools (Arsen & Ni, 2011). In New York, per-pupil expenditures declined as enrollment fell (Bifulco & Reback, 2014). In Ohio, school districts saw federal revenue decline with the growth of charter schools; the savings from educating one less student only accounted for a fifth of the state funding the district lost from student departures to a charter school (Cook, 2017).

## **An Evolving Sector: New Collaborations and Supports for Choice**

As charter schools have grown in number, influence, and demand across the country, new partnerships and solutions have developed. In recent years, charter schools and local districts have started to collaborate, and fresh systems and strategies to support parent choosing have been tested and implemented. Only limited research on the impact of these solutions exists. Still, they reflect important directions as the charter sector rounds out its third decade.

### ***Collaboration***

Intense battles between charter and district schools have played out in many cities, with both sides refusing to share practice or data and strategically positioning themselves to undermine each other's success. Even so, some cities are shifting toward a more collaborative posture. A number of districts are incorporating charter schools into a comprehensive selection of schools or leveraging charter schools for school improvement. And some individual schools are reaching across the sector divide to form programmatic partnerships.

One notable trend is the portfolio strategy, in which school systems coordinate a portfolio of traditional public and charter schools in a city, and families have broad opportunity to choose among them. Typically, portfolio district schools, like their charter school counterparts, have the autonomy to make their schools distinctive through their staff, design, curriculum choices, and budget control. In return, all schools—district and charter alike—are held accountable for performance (Hill, Campbell, & Gross, 2013). In some cities, they operate under very similar accountability frameworks (Yatsko, Opalka, Sutter, Weeldreyer, & Stewart, 2016).

Cities pursuing the portfolio approach include large ones like New York City and Los Angeles, midsize ones like San Antonio and Tulsa, and small ones like Camden. Their approaches to and degrees of collaboration across sectors differ (Campbell, Heyward, & Gross, 2017), making it difficult to assess each one broadly. Presently, rigorous studies are still limited to New York City (Kemple, 2011) and New Orleans (Harris, 2015; Harris & Larsen, 2018), both of which find positive effects. (For more on portfolio models, see Chapter 22 in this volume.)

### ***New Supports for School Choice***

The promise of school choice has been tempered by the reality of access and equity challenges. A vastly opened and continually changing landscape of choices can make it difficult to know which schools at which grade levels a parent can consider. Beyond that, seeking better schools can mean some students must travel significant distances. As these challenges arose in cities like New Orleans and Denver, new solutions to address access and equity were devised.

### ***Unified Enrollment and Information Systems***

Unified, or cross-sector, centralized enrollment systems allow parents to apply to both district and charter schools with a single application. These systems employ a deferred acceptance model that reduces the number of schools to which students are accepted to one, thus reducing the number of students who must be placed on waitlists (Gross, DeArmond, & Denice, 2015b). In 2018, seven cities had such systems in place (Chicago Denver, New Orleans, Newark, Camden, Indianapolis, and Washington D.C.).

Analysis of application data from Denver's system has shown that its unified enrollment policies almost eliminated the instances whereby students gained acceptance to a school through nonregulated means or personal favors (Gross, DeArmond, & Denice, 2015a). Analysis from New Orleans'

enrollment system, however, has shown that these policies can be difficult for families to navigate, leaving parents to miss critical enrollment deadlines (Harris, Valant, & Gross, 2015). Interviews with parents in both cities revealed “nonstrategic” choosing, further suggesting that the system remains complicated to many (Gross et al., 2015b).

### *Parent Advocates*

Low-income and minority parents, and those with children who have special needs, are more likely to report that they face barriers in finding suitable schools for their child, and that they have difficulty navigating the application process (Jochim et al., 2014). Increasingly, cities have sought to bridge this gap with more direct support. In New Orleans and Boston, EdNavigators has connected with service sector employers to provide skilled education advocates to employees of these organizations. Advocates help parents choose schools and face myriad other challenges, such as special education services, discipline issues, and college preparation. In Washington D.C., DC School Reform Now pairs advocates with families living in poverty, offering supports like short video tours of dozens of schools, transportation, and nudges to help them make registration deadlines (Jochim, Gross, & McCann, 2017). Similar advocate models have been launched in Cleveland via the Cleveland Transformation Alliance as well as in Houston and San Antonio via Families Empowered. Like the other emerging solutions to school choice challenges, no formal evaluation of the impact of these reforms exists.

### **Conclusion**

In the first edition of this volume, charter school scholars called for more continued and comprehensive research efforts. Nearly ten years on, the literature base has grown substantially, but whether the hopes for charter schools have come to overshadow the fears seems still unsettled. Across the range of issues discussed above—parents’ access to and use of choice, charter school innovation and accountability, competitive benefits across charter and district sectors, equal access to all students, and segregation—the evidence remains mixed. In many cases the results apparently differ by context, which is a function of many factors, such as state, local, and authorizing policies, labor market conditions, and the supply of schools. The extent to which these factors drive the results, however, remains unclear; sorting out their relative contributions to the critical concerns of school effectiveness and equity should be the direction of future research.

Even as the verdict on charter school hopes and fears remains unclear, the educational landscape and the role of the charter sector within it continue to evolve. In many cities, the charter school footprint is not only large but increasingly seems set. Collaborations with local school districts and new solutions serving multi-sector systems appear to be further establishing charter schools in the local education landscape.

We look forward to the version of this chapter that will be produced in yet another ten years, with the hope that it will offer insight into the interaction between local context and charter school outcomes and an accounting of the new roles, solutions, and players in this evolving sector.

### **Notes**

- 1 One million names on waitlists may indicate strong demand for charter schools but, because students could be on more than one waitlist, fewer than one million are actually represented.
- 2 In addition to authorizer accountability, charter schools have been subject to federal accountability guidelines as specified in No Child Left Behind and the Every Student Succeeds Act.
- 3 Specifically, 19 KIPP middle schools around the country, Denver schools, and data from an anonymous district.

- 4 Research in Little Rock, Arkansas showed decreased racial isolation, and in California showed no difference in racial isolation.
- 5 AK, AL, CA, CO, FL, ID, IL, KS, KY, MT, NC, NJ, NV, OK, OR, SD, TN, TX, UT, VT, WI, and WY.

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