The Research on Charter Schools: An Introduction

By Joshua Goodman and Paul E. Peterson 01/25/2017

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Two professors from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government give a quick explanation of charter schools and other education policy issues facing the Trump administration in a short interview conducted by Doug Gavel, Director of Media Relations at the Harvard Kennedy School.

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Question: What are the benefits of charter schools, and how do they supplement conventional schools in the public education system?

Goodman: We have two very clear pieces of evidence about charter schools. First, there is wide variation in their effectiveness, with some charters substantially underperforming and other charters substantially outperforming their traditional public school counterparts. Second, the most successful charter schools, such as urban charter schools in Massachusetts, have large, positive impacts on test scores, high school coursework and college enrollment. As such, it's important to take the potential of charter schools seriously.

State legal frameworks governing charter schools vary widely. Some states hold charter schools strongly accountable for results, closing any schools that fail to make progress with their students. Other states have weaker accountability schemes. Designing an effective charter school policy therefore requires attention to details about accountability and other features, such as whether enrollment in charters is unified with traditional public school enrollment processes and whether charter schools provide transportation for students. Choices along all these dimensions affect the extent to which charters can be a positive choice for

students whose options are otherwise limited.

Peterson: More than 40 states have authorized charters, but their distribution across the country is uneven. Charter enrollments are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas. The demand for charters in rural communities is limited, because rural Americans regard their district-operated schools as valuable institutions for reasons that go beyond their academic worth.

The story is different within central cities. Big-city public schools are in big-time trouble, and many families send their children to their local schools more out of necessity than choice. For these families, the charter school option often holds strong appeal. They perceive charters to be smaller, safer, friendlier, and, more often than not, a better place to learn. In contrast to charters in suburban areas, which tend toward a progressive pedagogy, central-city charters typically embrace the "no-excuses" model of teaching and learning, emphasizing strict dress codes, rigorous discipline, extended school days and school years, and high expectations for performance on standardized tests. In general, these urban charters are outperforming their traditional public-school counterparts. The charter advantage seems to be particularly striking for African American students from low-income families.

Question: What are the downsides of the charter school model, in particular for serving the needs of inner-city children and those from families in the lower socioeconomic sector?

Goodman: Proponents of charter schools rightly point out that economic disadvantage generally limits families' educational options, with charter schools providing one way to expand the choices available to such children. The major potential downside of this model occurs in jurisdictions that do not monitor school quality carefully. In such education markets, low-quality charter schools can persist for much longer than they should, as low-income families in particular may lack the information to judge whether their children are progressing educationally. That said, this holds true of traditional public schools as well, many of which can be allowed to fail for years on end. In a sense, all schools should be on notice that they may be subject to closure or other interventions should they repeatedly fail to improve.

Peterson: Despite strong signs that charters are of particular value to disadvantaged families, teacher unions are claiming that charters harm students remaining in district-operated schools. Recent data for the 2011-2015 period from the U.S. Department of Education's Trial Urban District Assessment in 17 cities provides no support for these claims. Student gains in math and reading were actually larger in those school districts where a larger percentage of students were enrolled in the public sector. While the number of observations is too small to yield statistically significant evidence that charters are helping the district schools, they offer no help for the claim that they are having a negative impact.

The exception to this general pattern is the City of Detroit in DeVos's home state of Michigan. Detroit has experienced both high charter enrollments and a decline in school district performance since 2011. Some blame the District's problems on charters, but it is more likely that charters have expanded in response to the collapse of city government in the former auto capital of the world.

Question: Besides charter schools, what are the most important education policy challenges facing the Trump administration?

Goodman: I see three major challenges. First, the administration will need to decide how to enforce states' compliance with the Every Student Succeeds Act, the successor to No Child Left Behind that defines states' school accountability schemes going forward. Second, it will need to clarify its vision of school choice, given President Trump's and Betsy DeVos' clear interest in school vouchers and charters, both of which can be implemented in a variety of ways. Third, the Trump administration will need to figure out the federal government's role with respect to higher education, in terms of financial aid provision, regulation of post-secondary institutions, and provision of information about student outcomes by institution through

the College Scorecard website. The Obama administration invested much effort into attempts to improve the return both students and the federal government were receiving on their investments in higher education. Whether the Trump administration plans to continue these efforts remains to be seen.

Peterson: Secretary of Education DeVos will interpret the 2015 federal education law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), as a barrier to federal oversight of state and local decisions. Federally mandated testing will continue under the law, but the best way to respond to test results will be left to the states. States will be asked to identify their lowest-performing schools, but the federal government will be reluctant to instruct states as to the steps that need to be taken to improve them. Regulations on how districts allocate their own funds to schools recently promulgated by the Obama administration will be rescinded.

Trump's appointment of a new member of the Supreme Court will constitute his major contribution to education reform. With a new member, the Court may decide that states may not collect collective-bargaining agency fees from non-members of teacher unions. That issue evenly divided the Court in 2016.

The Obama Administration's propensity to legislate "by pen and phone" will give Trump many opportunities to change direction quickly. Letters from the Education Department's Office of Civil Rights to school district officials, threatening prosecution if disparities in discipline rates and resources across racial and ethnic lines are not justified, will be withdrawn or simply ignored.

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