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The Impacts of New Charter Schools on Existing Public School Classrooms in the East
Bay, California

Introduction

Is the school system broken? This question can be answered any number of ways.

Does the school system function the way it is supposed to function? Does it educate all

children? Does it educate all children equally? Once people delve into questions of "the

school system," they are bound to realize that there are many more questions than they

likely expected and that no one really agrees on any of the answers. No one agrees

whether the school system is broken or not, and of those who agree that it is broken, few

agree on how to fix it. Even popular and famous educational theorists and policy makers

change their minds. Diane Ravitch, once a prominent charter school and school choice

advocate, has since written a book titled *The Death and Life of the Great American*

School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education. In her opening

chapter she writes, "Over time, my doubts about accountability and choice deepened as I

saw the negative consequences of their implementation" (p 13). More important than

Ravitch's critiques and suggestions is the fact that she has changed her mind and

continues to explore school reform from an open, curious perspective. Through

researching schools, I hope I can contribute to open, curious minds by providing more

information about how schools work.

In this paper I will be using a couple of terms that it will be important to define. I

will use Diane Ravitch's definitions of school choice and charter schools. She defines

school choice: "In the 1980s, a few local school districts adopted public school choice

plans… permitting students to transfer to public schools in districts other than their own…" (p. 118) School choice refers to a market based solution, relying on the idea that if schools are held accountable to more than just their local families that live in the district, schools will either close or get better. This was a plan largely pushed by economist Milton Friedman and President Ronald Reagan during his first term (Ravitch 2010). Ravitch defines charter schools as schools that, "are created when an organization obtains a charter from a state-authorized agency… Charter schools may be managed by nonprofit groups or for-profit businesses. They may be managed by a national organization or by a local community group" (Ravitch 2010). Charter schools are another option that when paired with school choice models, many conservative educational policy makers hope will create an educational system that will mirror a free economic market. The end goal of such a plan is to better education for everyone, including students in public schools. This paper, like Ravitch's book, aims at problematizing that notion somewhat, using recent research on charter schools from across the United States and data I collected from teachers in the Oakland Unified School District and the Hayward Unified School District.

While the question of "the school system," which is really a loosely tied system made up of many tiny systems that rarely work together, is too broad for any one person to hope to address in a lifetime, I hope to address one very small portion of it in this project: What impacts do charter schools, an increasingly popular school reform strategy, have on nearby public schools? I have asked teachers in Oakland and Hayward, California some questions about their classrooms over time, their students' activities and desires, and their own opinions about charters, and I have found that while they feel their

classrooms are in some ways getting better, they mostly think that charter schools hurt

the school system. In this paper I will discuss how public school teachers see their

classrooms changing, whether they think their students would attend charter schools, and

what impacts they see the charters as having on the overall system.

Literature Review

Though there is much research and debate around charter school education,

relatively little exists on the direct impact a charter school has on local public schools

with respect to public school classrooms. Not surprisingly, much of the research focuses

on the impact charter schools have on the students who attend charter schools (Belfield

and Levin 2005; Dingerson 2008; Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2012; Lake and Gross

2012). A fair amount of this research also focuses on the moral concerns associated with

charter schools more broadly, especially in terms of access (Saltman 2000; Bracey 2002;

Kozol 2005; Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang 2011). Still, few if any delve into

what happens to students once they have been affected by that lack of access.

Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang (2011) focus on charter schol access.

They point out that a family's ability to acquire a particular quality of education relates

not just to financial means but also social connections, language skills, and ease of

transportation. Such issues of access are extremely important when considering that much

of the debate surrounding charter schools is centered on the idea of "choice." Parents and

policy makers argue that if only families were to have more choices in terms of

education, their students would be better off. Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang

(2011) and Saltman (2000) point out that research actually shows that "choice" is

somewhat a myth, not taking into account the barriers to such choices faced

disproportionately by isolated social groups, English language learners, and low-income families. The inherent issue with claiming that more choices means better education is that, when we consider social and economic capital, there does not exist an equal opportunity to choose. In the case of public versus private or charter education, public education equalizes the playing field, rather than assuming all students will have better chances if only there are more options from which to choose. Charter schools, while creating more choices for the socioeconomically powerful, can be shut off to those without such luxuries.

Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley (2012) also point out that charter schools are segregated, often by race. They write, "White students make up just 39% of charter school students, even though they still comprise a majority of traditional public school students (56%)… One-third of charter school students are black, while only one-sixth of traditional public school students are black." (p. 6) This disproportionate representation is important to my research in public schools because segregation in charter schools contributes to segregation in public schools by disproportionately moving students of certain races. If we assume that segregation harms all parties and research shows that charter schools are segregated, then we must question if charter schools are socially good. Others argue that charter schools actually do a financial good for public schools by drawing away students with special needs or students in need of costly services, thereby reducing the need for public schools to fund certain expensive programs (Bracey 2002). Gerald Bracey (2002) clarifies that, "Even where a charter restricts membership to students in the 'host' public school district, it draws from many schools." (p. 101) When considered in practice rather than in theory, we see that charter schools draw students

from many different districts and schools; thus, they often do not reduce the load on any one school significantly. If charter schools do not help the nearby public schools financially, then the remaining reliable argument for their implementation is that charter school students have better academic outcomes.

Belfield and Levin (2005) point out that their research shows that generally charter schools are of similar effectiveness to their similar public counterparts. If charter schools on average tend to be fairly similar in terms of effectiveness when compared to traditional public schools, we must ask ourselves what the draw to create them is. We must also ask whether they have an impact, positive or negative, on their public counterparts.

Research compiled by Leigh Dingerson et al. (2008) use D.C. charter schools as an example of a potential problem with charter and public school resource redistribution, "Every time a new charter school opens, students and resources leave the public schools, programs and teachers are cut, and the stage is set for another exodus the following year." (p. 57) If charter schools tend to take resources via students (because many schools are funded on a per pupil basis) from public schools yet yield no measurably better results, a better justification that just "choice" must exist to continue to fund them. Robin Lake and Betheney Gross (2011), however, complied research that seems to suggest that charter schools, when implemented correctly, can have a positive effect on a community. They propose, "Once a school district begins to think about the charter schools as part of a larger portfolio of effective public school options... the school district can no longer make sense of treating the charter schools with opposition or even indifference just because the schools are not operated directly by the district." (p. 24) They further posit

that when charter schools work together with their public districts more equally good, if not even better, options can be created for all families within that district. It is then assumed, though not thoroughly proven, that more choices mean a better outcome than having good schools to begin. Such an assumption leaves out the possibility that public school students suffer just because a new option exists.

Much of the research and debate on charter schools today centers on similar themes of access, funding, and the efficacy of choice. While there are many comparisons made between charter and public institutions, few researchers have delved deeply into the impact a specific charter school has on the local public school classrooms surrounding it. With my research I hope to consider whether charter schools have an impact, positive or negative, on local public school classrooms rather than whether charter schools benefit their own students or not.

Setting

The East Bay and specifically Oakland in California served as an idea setting for this research because demographics largely align racially with other areas of recent charter growth with similar black and white populations—close to 30% and 40% respectively (US Census 2010; Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2012). Additionally, in my own search, I had a difficult time finding a charter in Oakland or Hayward that was more than 7 years old, indicating that while charters have existed in the USA for at least three decades (Ravitch 2011), most of the currently operating charters in the East Bay are relatively new. This allows for easier access to data about changes in public schools before and after nearby charters existed.

Oakland has an educational history related to charters largely because it has had what has been called a "failing" school system over the last two decades, and reformers have used charters as a reform strategy. As of 2008 Oakland had 32 charter schools and 111 mainstream public schools serving 46,000 students, and while testing results indicate that 22 of the 32 charters have better test scores than their average public counterparts, some teachers and researchers attribute this to charter schools' selective and small classes (Ravitch 2011). I chose Oakland and nearby similar Hayward because of the abundance of new charters, the history of use of charters as a reform strategy, and the similarity of the East Bay to charter demographics nationally.

Methods

The purpose of this research is to answer, if so, how public school classrooms feel the affects of new charter schools in their communities, focusing on three schools in the East Bay, California: Mt. Eden High School, Oakland High, and Life Academy. To get a better picture of how classroom dynamics change, if they do, teachers were given a short, online survey about how they perceive the changes, if any, in their classrooms over time. Additionally publically available school wide test scores have been used to give an idea of community change over time.

The survey administered to public school teachers gathered their perceptions and opinions on change in their classrooms over time, to understand the potential impact of a new, nearby charter school on their classroom environment. Survey questions related to the motivation of students in these public school classrooms and any relation or change perceived with respect to the presence of charter schools in the same community. Other questions related to what direct connections students at their public schools have with

local charter schools—whether with students, the building, or faculty and staff. Lastly the teachers were asked an open-ended question about their opinions of charter schools in general, providing the context of expert opinions of our changing school system.

The self-administered nature of the survey respected respondents' privacy and allowed them to answer as truthfully as possible, minimizing any possible affect on their community status as a teacher. All teachers with publically available contact information were contacted from three schools, which were specifically chosen for their age and proximity to a new charter school. Teachers were contacted using publically available email addresses, and the teachers were informed about how they were chosen, the scope of the project, and where the data are to be used.

The responses were collected using Qualtrics and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. 30 respondents answered some range of questions about their teaching practice, and 16 of those respondents answered an open-ended question about charter school impacts. The open-ended question was coded as qualitative data and analyzed considering attitudes about charter schools generally and effects of charter schools on the greater school system.

Results and Discussion

Teacher Perceptions of Classroom Change

The only consistent person in a classroom over time is the teacher. Therefore, it makes sense to ask teachers what they believe happens in their classrooms over time. While there is some concern of retrospective bias affecting how teachers perceive their classrooms, my data actually suggest that the teachers surveyed believe their classrooms are getting better. While this was perhaps not the most expected outcome of this survey,

it may indicate that teachers believe they have a positive effect on their classes over time and that they may be improving. While all of the teachers indicated a positive change over time, experienced teachers (teachers of more than 5 years at the same school) indicated the biggest positive change. These data more likely suggest a perceived teacher impact rather than an impact of some kind of outside force like a charter school. At the very least, these data do not suggest a strong connection in this way.

Peer-to-peer helpfulness was selected as a measure of classroom change because it encapsulates issues of classroom demographics, dynamics, and atmosphere. Teachers were also asked about students' academic motivation and academic engagement, with similar results, indicating that these three phenomena may be in some way related. Figure 1 shows how all teachers in the sample, also broken down by number of years teaching, perceive the peer-to-peer helpfulness in their classrooms over time.
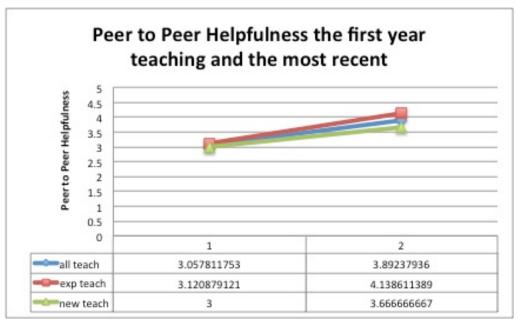
Peer to Peer Helpfulness the first year teaching and the most recent

	1	2
all teach	3.057811753	3.89237936
exp teach	3.120879121	4.138611389
new teach	3	3.666666667

Figure 1

Teacher Ideas about Students' Possible Enrollment at Other Schools

The short answer to the question of whether teachers think students would leave for a charter or private school if they could is not really. On a Likert scale (1 being definitely would not attend and 5 being definitely would), teachers answered 2.2 and 2.8 for charters and private schools, respectively. This indicates that teachers believe students mostly would not leave or are neutral about leaving to go to either a charter or private high school. It is largely unclear whether this is because of some kind of factor in the students' lives or because the charter schools are simply not better than their public counterparts. For example, it could be a matter of exposure: every teacher asked which schools their students interacted with most other than their own answered another public school rather than a charter or a private, even if a charter or private is closer. In short, the students may just not have the exposure to know that they might enjoy the education at another school. Another possibility, however, is that the teachers believe (as may or may not be true) that the charters nearby are not better than their public schools. It is worthy to note that there was no difference in the perceptions of experienced teachers and new teachers on this question, indicating that this is not a perception colored by experience or "jadedness" but rather one that spans across different teaching abilities and experiences.

Table 1: Whether Teachers Believe Students Would Attend Other Schools

Statistic	Most of my students would choose to attend a charter school if they could.	Most of my students would choose to attend a private school if they could.
Min Value	1	2
Max Value	4	5
Mean	2.20	2.88

Teacher Opinions of Charters

As may not be surprising, the teachers surveyed largely dislike charters. Of the respondents who gave an answer to the question "Please include any perceptions, opinions, desires, comments, suggestions, or complaints you have about charter schools" 43.75% offered response that included a negative attitude towards charters generally. Of the total responses to the question, 37.5% indicated a belief that charters are bad for the school system as a whole. Some themes that came up more than once included that charters do not offer the extracurricular activities that their students love and that keep them motivated, that charters drain resources without providing a better service, and that charters either seem unattainable for their students or actively push out students they do not find compelling enough. One teacher wrote:

> Charter schools are part of a divide and conquer strategy for those who wish to privatize all public services as families who choose charter schools become less concerned for the welfare of public schools; thus, are less inclined to see tax dollars raised or used to improve public education. There really is no reason for charter schools to exist as anything that a charter school does could just as easily be done at a regular public school.

This response shares ideas with a number of responses from the survey and opinions of researchers (Bracey 2002; Kozol 2005; Baker, Libby, and Wiley 2012). It is significant because it highlights tension and a perception of a zero-sum school system, where funding and resources at one school directly impact all schools nearby.

In this survey, the teachers were not primed with any ideas about charter schools, only told that they would be asked about changes in their classroom and schools over

time. That is, these teachers provided these ideas about charter schools, many of which

are in line with the above response, without knowing that they would be asked about

charter schools.

Table 2: Attitudes about Charters in Open-Ended Responses

Attitudes about Charters generally	Number of Responses (/16)	Percent of Total Responses
Positive Attitude	1	6.25%
Negative Attitude	7	43.75%
Neutral Attitude	5	31.25%

Table 3: Effects on School System in Open-Ended Responses

Effects on Whole School System, including publics	Number of Responses (/16)	Percent of Total Responses
Positive Effect	1	6.25%
Negative Effect	6	37.5%
Neutral Effect	1	6.25%

While teachers indicated a dislike for charters, mostly there seemed to be distrust

or a sense that the charters were not and are not good for the existing school system,

particularly public schools. Another teacher wrote, "Charter schools drain our district of

resources and create a more segregated school system. We find it harder to attract and

retain academically motivated students because these students tend to choose charter

schools leaving non-charter schools as a tracked school environenment (sic), de facto."

This response offers another alternative to why teachers believe most students might not

go to a charter if they could: those students have likely already left. Resources, funding,

and public attention are main concerns of the respondents: these teachers want to see their

public schools treated well—at least as well, anyway, as their charter counterparts. One

teacher's response, while seemingly neutral towards charters by omission, sums up many

of the teachers' feeling about charters and school choice. They wrote only this: "I support

public schools." This response, without directly stating anything about charters, implies

that supporting public schools is something that has to do with charters and may be in contradiction to the presence or running of charters.

The Connection between Apparently Bettering Classroom Environments and Public School Teacher Opinions of Charters

There may be a number of reasons teachers might indicate that their classrooms are doing well but that charter schools are harming the school system. The teachers who agree to take part in a Stanford student's research may be particular kinds of teachers with particular kinds of opinions on the school system; this cannot be ruled out. Other options exist, too: teachers may be well informed or even ahead of the curve on school policy generally, teachers that feel they are improving may begin to feel negatively about the school system as a whole, or teachers may be perceiving a generally positive change in their schools simultaneously accompanied by a negative shift in district, statewide, or even national policies.

It is possible that while teachers may believe that charters are bad for the students and bad for the school system that the impacts have not hit their classrooms yet; it has only been at most 7 years since charters started with great force in the East Bay. Teachers in the survey indicated that their students almost exclusively interacted with students at other public schools when interacting with students from other schools. This may explain why charter impacts are more slowly occurring in individual public school classrooms: segregation is a factor. While it is possible that charters are not having the effects on the public school system that these teachers have indicated they see, it is also possible that change is slowly coming and that school segregation is overshadowing the possible

effects (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, and Wang 2011; Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2012).

Conclusion

While in some ways the public school teachers in my sample in the East Bay feel their classrooms are getting better, they mostly think that charter schools hurt the school system. Charter schools and the larger reform strategy of school choice purportedly aim to help children get a better education, but still issues of which children deserve and receive the best education remain. My research indicates a disconnect between what teachers see happening in their classrooms and communities and what policymakers value and implement. In the United States we must ask ourselves: what do we want our school system to accomplish? This answer is not yet solidified. My answer is that we must strive for the best, most equitable education for all students, and listening to educators is a necessary tool to help policymakers achieve this end. Our school reform strategies should move us towards our goals, not away from them.

This research has significant limitations because of the scope and size of the project. I relied on a small sample and only a survey of the teachers because of limited time and resources. For the same reason, the questions about classroom change were questions I created and have not been tested in a large or peer reviewed study. I also did not have access to students because of limitations in researching with minors. In order for my findings to be more telling or generalizable, research on charter impacts on public schools must be carried out with a larger and broader sample, a more widely tested metric, and the addition of interviews. My research has shown that at least some teachers

have ideas that could be useful for policymakers about school reforms and has highlighted that teachers know their classrooms very well.

Future directions of researching should likely include research on community change related to charter schools more broadly, including after school programs, church groups, or other similar initiatives. It will likely also be important to include private or parochial schools in future research. While I touched on it briefly in my literature review, an aspect of schools that should be further researched is demographic change because it could be driving policy decisions and testing outcomes inadvertently. In short, research on charter schools should include not just students in charter schools but rather students in our school system more broadly.

Because in some ways the public school teachers that I surveyed feel their classrooms are getting better and simultaneously most of them think that charter schools hurt the school system, including their schools, I believe I have found a topic that could use more research. My research has indicated that what teachers describe as happening in their classrooms and what policymakers implement in those classrooms do not necessarily align, and I suspect that there will be better overall outcomes if they did (Bracey 2002; Ravitch 2011).

Appendix A: Questionnaire

1. At what school do you currently teach? _____

2. What subjects do you currently teach? (Check all that apply)
_ Math
_ Language Arts
_ Foreign Language
_ Science
_ Social Studies/ History
_ Health/ PE
_ Music/ Arts
_ Other, please specify _____

3. What class years do you currently teach? (Check all that apply)
_ 1st year
_ 2nd year
_ 3rd year
_ 4th year
_ 5th+ years

4. Do you teach any AP or Honors courses?
_ Yes, please specify _____
_ No

5. Have you been teaching at your current school for 5 or more years?
_ Yes, → Skip to question 7
_ No

6. What year did you start teaching at your current school? _ _ _ _ → Skip to question 10

7. **For questions 7-9, please consider your classroom(s) 5 years ago.** How would you rate the overall academic motivation of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unmotivated   Very Motivated

8. How would you rate the overall academic engagement of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unengaged   Very Engaged

9. How would you rate the peer-to-peer helpfulness of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unhelpful   Very Helpful

10. **For questions 10-12, please consider your classroom(s) your first year teaching at your current school.** How would you rate the overall academic motivation of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7

Very Unmotivated   Very Motivated

11. How would you rate the overall academic engagement of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unengaged   Very Engaged

12. How would you rate the peer-to-peer helpfulness of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unhelpful   Very Helpful

13. **For the remaining questions, please consider your classroom(s) <u>this past year</u>.**
How would you rate the overall academic motivation of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unmotivated   Very Motivated

14. How would you rate the overall academic engagement of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unengaged   Very Engaged

15. How would you rate the peer-to-peer helpfulness of your classroom(s)?
1   2   3   4   5   6   7
Very Unhelpful   Very Helpful

16. How often do your students interact with students who attend another school?
_ Always
_ Often
_ Sometimes
_ Rarely
_ Never → Skip to question 18

17. What schools do the other students in question 16 attend? List all that apply
_____
_____

18-19. **Please rank your agreement with the following statements.**
Most of my students would choose to attend a charter school if they could.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Inclined to Agree
Inclined to Disagree
Disagree
Strongly Disagree

Most of my students would choose to attend a private school if they could.
Strongly Agree
Agree
Inclined to Agree
Inclined to Disagree

Disagree
Strongly Disagree
20. Please include any perceptions, opinions, desires, or comments, suggestions, or complaints you have about charter schools.

_____
_____
_____
_____

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