“Beat the Odds” Charters: A Summary

Charter advocates frequently tout the achievements of a handful of “Beat the Odds” schools, which generate academic performance greater than would be predicted given those schools’ demographic makeup. However, a number of facts are often omitted from this narrative:

- “Beat the Odds” schools are a minority of charters, and even account for a minority of enrollment in high-poverty, segregated charters. Most charters with similar demographic makeup performance abysmally, at least as bad as than similarly-composed traditional public schools.
- Performance at these schools is rarely better than middling in absolute terms. Even minimally racially and economically integrated schools regularly outperform “Beat the Odds” charters.
- “Beat the Odds” schools enroll student bodies that are much more homogeneous than other schools. They are often 100 percent segregated by race and income, and include very low numbers of special education students.
- Discipline at these schools is extremely harsh, even at very young ages, and falls disproportionately on children of color, particularly black students. The heavy segregation at charters likely contributes to these disparities.
- Racial and economic homogeneity, heavy discipline, and the low prevalence of special education students all suggest that “Beat the Odds” charters are using soft pressure mechanisms to tailor a student body which will be most receptive to their pedagogical techniques, a system which cannot be applied to traditional public schools and leaves many students falling through the cracks.

In short, the “Beat the Odds” educational philosophy is to construct highly segregated schools in which expected performance is extremely low. When a variety of techniques slightly improve test scores in a subset of these schools, these schools are celebrated as successes that validate the model. The many failed schools are ignored, as is the reality that even small progress towards greater racial and economic integration would quickly generate even greater gains. The following elaborates on each of these points.

Overall Charter Performance Comparisons

Although charter advocates prefer to focus on a handful of “Beat the Odds” schools, this approach omits the performance of the majority the charter sector. Most relevantly, it omits the performance of the many schools that have attempted to adopt a “Beat the Odds” model – admitting a high-poverty, hypersegregated student body – and then failed, producing test scores as low as similarly disadvantaged public schools, and in some cases lower.

When all elementary charters were included in the multivariate analysis for IMO’s 2013 Charter School Update, charter proficiency rates were 11.2 percentage points lower for math and 5.9 percentage points lower for reading than in traditional elementary schools after controlling for student poverty, race, special education needs, limited language abilities, student mobility rates and school size. Of course, ignoring low-performing schools would badly distort measures of overall charter school performance.

Low-performing schools constitute the majority of enrollments in high-poverty, segregated charters. In 2012-13 there were 6,181 students in high-poverty charters with reading pass rates well below what one would expect given their poverty rates, but there were only 4,320 students in charters that performed above expectations—the schools that the Star Tribune calls “Beats the Odds” schools.
Similarly, there were 5,694 students in high-poverty charters with math pass rates well below the predicted rate given their poverty rates, but only 4,997 in schools with rates above expectations.\footnote{Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, \textit{Charter Schools in the Twin Cities: 2013 Update}, http://www1.law.umn.edu/uploads/16/65/1665940a907f0be31337271af733353d/Charter-School-Update-2013-final.pdf.}

Although the charter sector is currently lobbying for an exemption from the state’s integration rule, segregated charters actually perform worse than segregated traditional schools. Attached below are charts showing math and reading proficiency rates in 2014-15 graphed against non-white student shares. Elementary and middle/high schools are shown separately since average pass rates differ significantly between the two segments. The lines on the charts show the expected pass rates for traditional schools and charters for every possible non-white share.

The lines showing expected performance demonstrate that charters under-perform their traditional school peers at every level of racial diversity (from 0 percent non-white to 100 percent non-white) in elementary school reading pass rates, middle/high school math pass rates and middle/high school reading pass rates. Charters only out-perform traditional schools in elementary school pass rates by a few percentage points at extremely high levels of segregation (85 percent or greater).

Charter advocates try to divert attention from these negative overall findings by focusing on a few success stories while ignoring the many failures. This is because, if low-performing schools are ignored, a small number of heavily segregated charters do outperform heavily-segregated public schools in the aggregate. However, these schools still perform poorly compared to the vast majority of traditional public schools. Even a mildly-integrated traditional public school (e.g., with a nonwhite share of 60 to 75 percent) could be expected to outperform these beat-the-odds charters.

This small degree of integration is easily achievable at traditional public schools. While traditional public schools are becoming more diverse and segregated, the vast majority still retain some share of white or middle-income students. There are no single-race traditional public schools in the metropolitan area.

Charters, however, are a different story. Dozens of charters are 98 percent segregated or greater; this includes a number of true single-race institutions (including several single-race white schools). This reflects the fact that the “Beat the Odds” charter education model explicitly relies on student body homogeneity and does not readily allow for even small degrees of integration. This philosophy is reflected in charters’ admission policies, their explicit embrace of homogeneous racial and economic student bodies, their tendency to bill themselves as sources of racially- and ethnically-focused instruction, their disciplinary policies, and their comparative lack of difficult-to-educate student subpopulations, such as special education students.

But by embracing segregation, many charters have foreclosed themselves from adopting the simplest and most effective method for reducing the achievement gap and improving performance. And when examined in the aggregate, this educational model has produced worse overall outcomes than equivalently segregated traditional public schools. The existence of a handful of outlier schools, which, in absolute terms, still only yield mediocre student performance, does not outweigh the wider damage to educational outcomes created by the overall increase in racial and economic segregation that has been produced by these schools.
Segregation and Math Proficiency Rates
in Twin Cities Elementary Schools, 2014-15
(correlation = -.76)

![Graph showing the relationship between the percentage of students non-white and the percentage of students proficient in math, with data points and linear regression lines for traditional and charter schools.](image)

Segregation and Reading Proficiency Rates
in Twin Cities Elementary Schools, 2014-15
(correlation = -.80)

![Graph showing the relationship between the percentage of students non-white and the percentage of students proficient in reading, with data points and linear regression lines for traditional and charter schools.](image)
Segregation and Math Proficiency Rates
in Twin Cities Middle and High Schools, 2014-15
(correlation = -.70)

Segregation and Reading Proficiency Rates
in Twin Cities Middle and High Schools, 2014-15
(correlation = -.75)
Special Education at Charter Schools

Charters’ commitment to maintaining a homogeneous student body extends beyond race and income. Charters typically have a lower number of special education students than traditional public schools, a trend that is particularly apparent in high-poverty, high-segregation schools.

While lower-income, heavily nonwhite traditional schools tend to have many more special education students than higher-income traditional schools, lower-income, heavily nonwhite charter schools tend to have many fewer special education students than higher-income traditional schools. During the 2013-2014 school year, in charter schools with a poverty rate of 80 percent or greater, 39.4 percent had a special education rate of 10 percent or greater. The same year, in public schools with a poverty rate of 80 percent or greater, 82 percent had a special education rate of 10 percent or greater. This figures are illustrated in the graph below.

In the mid-2000s, public school systems underwent a rapid increase in the number of special education students. This increase was particularly acute in segregated, high-poverty central city schools. In charter schools, including many “Beat the Odds” charters, the number of special education students remained flat. These trends are illustrated in the graphs below.
These trends are troubling for several reasons. First, they demonstrate that the students being educated by charter schools differ in meaningful ways from those being educated in traditional public schools, making straightforward comparisons difficult or impossible. They also may suggest a level of screening by high-poverty charter schools, which have somehow managed to retain relatively
homogeneous student bodies even while the number of special education students in traditional schools has increased rapidly.

These disparities also raise basic equity questions about who charter education is intended to serve: while charters are used to educate white, affluent special education students at a greater rate than public schools, poor, nonwhite charter students are disproportionately concentrated in the traditional public school system. This dynamic not only raise concerns about high-poverty charters, it risks destabilizing traditional public schools, which must educate ever-greater concentrations of the most disadvantaged students.

Finally, the relative scarcity of special education students in charters, particularly the highly segregated schools that are attempting to “Beat the Odds,” demonstrates how this model of education is not intended to be either scalable or universally applicable. Instead, it relies on applying a selection of blunt-force educational techniques to a population that has been carefully selected because they respond well to those techniques, while other groups either fall through the cracks or are forced to seek education elsewhere.

### Segregation and Discipline at Charter Schools

Overall discipline rates at many segregated charters are exceptionally high, far greater than discipline rates in traditional public school systems. This appears to be a direct consequence of the high degree of segregation in charter schools.

For instance, one noteworthy feature of charter discipline rates is that they tend to be particularly elevated at lower grade levels and ages. (This is dramatically illustrated in the attached chart below.) In Minneapolis Public Schools, which has the second highest suspension and discipline rate for K-5 students in a traditional school district in the metro area, 7.4 out of every 100 K-5 students were suspended or expelled in 2014. Of the 25 metro area charter schools for which grade-level data is available, 22 have higher suspension rates than the Minneapolis district. In eight of these schools, over 30 of every 100 K-5 students were suspended in 2014.

Moreover, while high-suspension charter schools include many supposed “Beat the Odds” schools such as Harvest Prep, Best Academy, and KIPP Minnesota, most of the highest-performing traditional public schools have lower suspension K-5 rates overall. For instance, the Minnetonka and Edina public school districts suspend less than one-half of one percent of K-5 students annually.
Charters typically justify their high discipline rates as part of a “no excuses” instructional policy. However, data suggest that, in fact, these high rates are primarily the result of the same racial disparities that afflict discipline in traditional public schools. For particular racial categories, overall discipline rates in charter schools are only slightly higher than those in public schools. However, in charter and public school systems alike, minority students, and black students in particular, are disciplined at a much higher rate than white students – ten times as frequently or more, in the aggregate.

**Suspensions and Expulsions per 100 students (2014)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charters</td>
<td>20.1 - 25.2</td>
<td>1.9 - 2.5</td>
<td>11.9 - 13.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
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*Charter figures are presented as ranges because data suppression makes determining precise figures impossible.

Because charters have much higher concentrations of minority students and reflect these disparities, their overall discipline rates are extremely high.
For black children at least, this problem is likely exacerbated by the segregation in charter schools, because the black-white “discipline gap” is not consistent among all school systems. Districts with higher degrees of segregation have a much larger black-white gap. This correlation is quite strong, as the chart below shows.

![Minority Pop. v. Black-White Suspension Rate Gap in Metro School Districts (2014)](chart.png)

In short, segregated charters, with levels of segregation far exceeding even the most segregated public school districts, are therefore likely to discipline black children extremely harshly compared to white peers, both in the same school and elsewhere in the region.

High levels of discipline at charters are relevant for several reasons. First, because discipline is so deeply interwoven with race, it raises basic questions about fairness. Is it appropriate for black elementary schoolers at highly-segregated charters to be suspended at extremely high rates, while children in integrated public school systems suffer much less harsh discipline? But discipline might also be one mechanism through which the subset of higher-performing segregated charter schools squeeze better performance out of their student bodies. By suspending students repeatedly, charters can place soft pressure on students who do not fit the school’s pedagogical mold, encouraging those students to move back to the traditional public school system.