

INTRODUCTION

At the center of the Obama administration's education agenda is the goal of reducing the number of persistently failing schools across the country. All of the Department of Education's high-profile grant competitions—Race to the Top (RttT), Teacher Incentive Fund, Promise Neighborhoods—have required grantees to address the problem of low-performing schools. Most relevant is the \$3.5 billion in Title I School Improvement Grants (SIGs), aimed at helping states intervene in their lowest-performing schools—“an unprecedented sum” intended to stimulate “fundamental changes.”⁷

Charter schools play a pivotal role in the administration's school-improvement strategy. The president's proposed 2010 budget included an additional \$52 million in charter-school funding—a 25 percent increase from 2009. And the \$4.25 billion RttT competition favored charter-friendly states, a carrot which succeeded in convincing many previously reluctant charter states to change course.⁸ Secretary of Education Arne Duncan envisions a role for the charter sector not just in improving its own schools but also in improving district schools. In a 2009 address to the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS), he challenged charter leaders to “adapt your educational model to turning around our lowest-performing schools.”⁹

Duncan presumably places such faith in charter schools because of the underlying premise of the charter movement. In theory, charter schools are subject to greater results-based accountability in exchange for wide-ranging operational autonomy. One might, therefore, expect the charter sector to have a better track record of eliminating low-performing schools, because they either close or improve. But does this really happen?

Critics cite evidence that charter schools fail systematically to outperform district schools and question the rationality of spending millions of federal dollars to turn around low-performing charters, which by design should be shuttered.¹⁰ Moreover, the hope that the charter sector will be a strong partner in turning around failing district schools would be little more than wishful thinking if that sector cannot keep its own educational house in order.

This study, then, aims to answer two key questions: How successful is the charter sector relative to the district sector in eliminating or turning around bad schools? And what's the evidence that low-performing schools in either sector dramatically improve over time?

Research on Turnarounds

Are school turnarounds even possible? The question has sparked a great deal of debate. In an early 2010 article, Andrew Smarick, then a think-tank analyst and now a senior official in New Jersey's education department, cites scores of failed turnaround efforts and concludes, "The history of urban education tells us emphatically that turnarounds are not a reliable strategy for improving our very worst schools."¹¹

Also in 2010, Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution examined California test scores from 1989 to 2009 and found that schools rarely make large jumps in their statewide rankings. He writes that "much of the rhetoric on turnarounds is pie in the sky—more wishful thinking than a realistic assessment of what school reform can really accomplish."¹² Indeed, a comprehensive literature review by Ronald C. Brady in 2003 found that no factors or practices are guaranteed to accomplish successful turnarounds.¹³ In 2008, a federal panel reached the same conclusion as it

WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT SCHOOL CLOSURES?

Closing a school as a result of substandard performance is one tool in the school reformer's toolbox. In theory, school closures can benefit students by transforming a low-performing school into a higher-performing reconstituted school or by moving students to better schools in the neighborhood.¹⁴

Unfortunately, that does not always happen. Tom Loveless (2003) examined the performance of conversion schools—low-performing district schools that close and reopen as reconstituted charter schools—in California and found that the new schools performed at about the same level as regular public schools.¹⁵ Brian Gill and colleagues (2007) examined the achievement of Philadelphia public-school students in schools taken over by private management companies and did not find a statistically significant effect on students' math or reading achievements.¹⁶ However, Paul Peterson and Matt Chingos (2009) also examined the Philadelphia experience and concluded that takeover had a positive effect on math achievement worth nearly 60 percent of a year's learning.¹⁷

Two Chicago studies examined the city's high-profile school closure initiative, implemented during Arne Duncan's tenure as CEO, and its impact on students. Duncan led the city's Renaissance 2010 campaign and systematically closed dozens of the city's lowest-performing schools, reopening many as charter schools. The Consortium on Chicago School Research compared the test performance of displaced students in eighteen closed elementary schools to a matched group of students in similar schools that did not close.¹⁸ The authors did not find a statistically significant difference in growth rates, except for displaced students who transferred to schools that were academically stronger. A second study of the Chicago experience, conducted by SRI International, tracked students in 2006-07 and 2007-08 who moved from twenty-three closed schools and did not find a statistically significant difference between transferring students and their matched control group.¹⁹

All of these studies examine impacts of closure in the short term, not the extent to which closure, as a school-improvement strategy, yields long-term benefits for communities. While school closures may not immediately benefit currently enrolled students, closures may provide better educational options for future generations by eliminating failing schools and incentivizing other schools to improve.

was unable to find any studies on turnarounds that met the rigorous evidentiary standards of the What Works Clearinghouse.²⁰

The handful of turnaround success stories that do exist suggest that such school transformations are possible but rare. Turnaround experts Bryan Hassel and Emily Ayscue Hassel of Public Impact observe that school turnarounds, while feasible, are uncommon because the intensive interventions that are necessary to yield successful outcomes are seldom attempted.²¹

What no research has done yet is compare turnaround rates in the charter and district sectors.²² This is a particularly important question in light of the Obama administration's education-reform priorities. One would expect the two sectors of public education to display markedly different strategies—and results—in addressing their low-performing schools. Authorizer oversight and the threat of closure should create stronger incentives for charters to improve even as their greater autonomy and operational flexibility (e.g., personnel, budget, and curriculum) should allow school leaders to make necessary changes more swiftly and surely. But do these hypotheses hold true? Are turnarounds, in fact, more likely to occur in the charter sector?