

# A DEMOCRATIC GUIDE TO PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS: CHARTER SCHOOL OUTCOMES

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Cover Images (clockwise from top left): College-bound seniors at KIPP Renaissance (New Orleans, LA), 2017; Phillips Academy Charter School (Newark, NJ) students on their first day of school, 2018; Chicago Urban Prep Academy students, 2015; Mastery Cramer Hill Elementary School (Camden, NJ) students, 2017.

Across the country, public charter schools have given low-income students and children of color an alternative to the chronically low-performing traditional public schools to which they would have otherwise been assigned. Being a progressive charter school supporter, however, does not mean believing that autonomy or choice are “magic bullets” for improving public education. It does not mean having to unqualifiedly defend the charter school sector in states or districts where public charter schools underperform or in cases where individual charter schools misuse public funds.

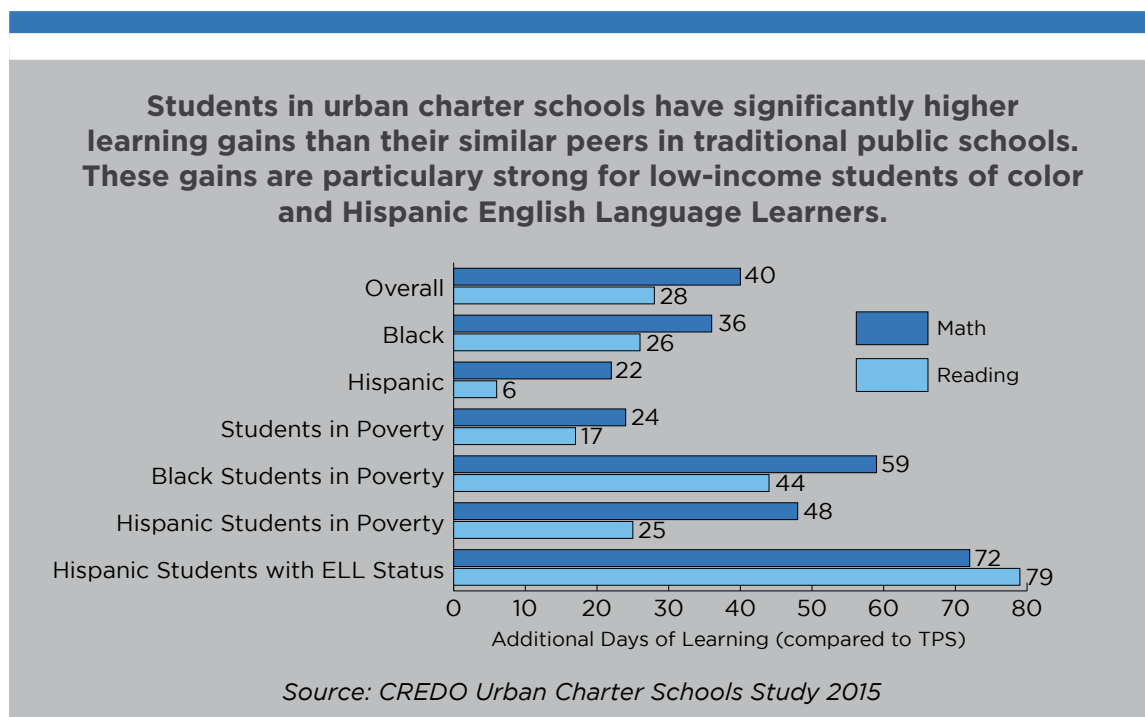
There’s both good news and bad news when one looks at charter school outcomes, but the former far outweighs the latter, especially when it comes to the students whom public charter schools were designed to serve. The most rigorous and methodologically sound studies of charter school outcomes indicate that Black students, students in poverty, and English Language Learners (ELLs) enrolled in public charter schools make significantly greater academic progress as compared to their peers with similar demographics in traditional public schools.

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Stanford’s Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) studies are the gold standard for judging the performance of students enrolled in public charter schools compared to their peers in traditional public schools. This is because CREDO compares demographically matched sets of students enrolled in public charter schools with their peers who are enrolled in traditional public schools. CREDO matches students in charter schools to students in district schools according to: gender, race/ethnicity, level of English proficiency, family income, and baseline test scores.

Particularly in urban areas, research shows that public charter schools serve the Democratic goals of equalizing educational opportunities:

- A 2015 CREDO study found that students in urban public charter schools gained, on average, the equivalent of 40 additional days of learning in math and 28 additional days in reading compared to their traditional public school peers. Across all urban regions, Black students from low-income families enrolled in public charter schools gained the equivalent of 59 days of additional learning in math and 44 days of additional learning in reading compared to their peers in traditional public schools. Hispanic English Language Learners saw the largest gains of any group, with 72 additional days of learning in math and 79 days of additional learning in reading, compared to similar students in traditional public schools.<sup>1</sup>

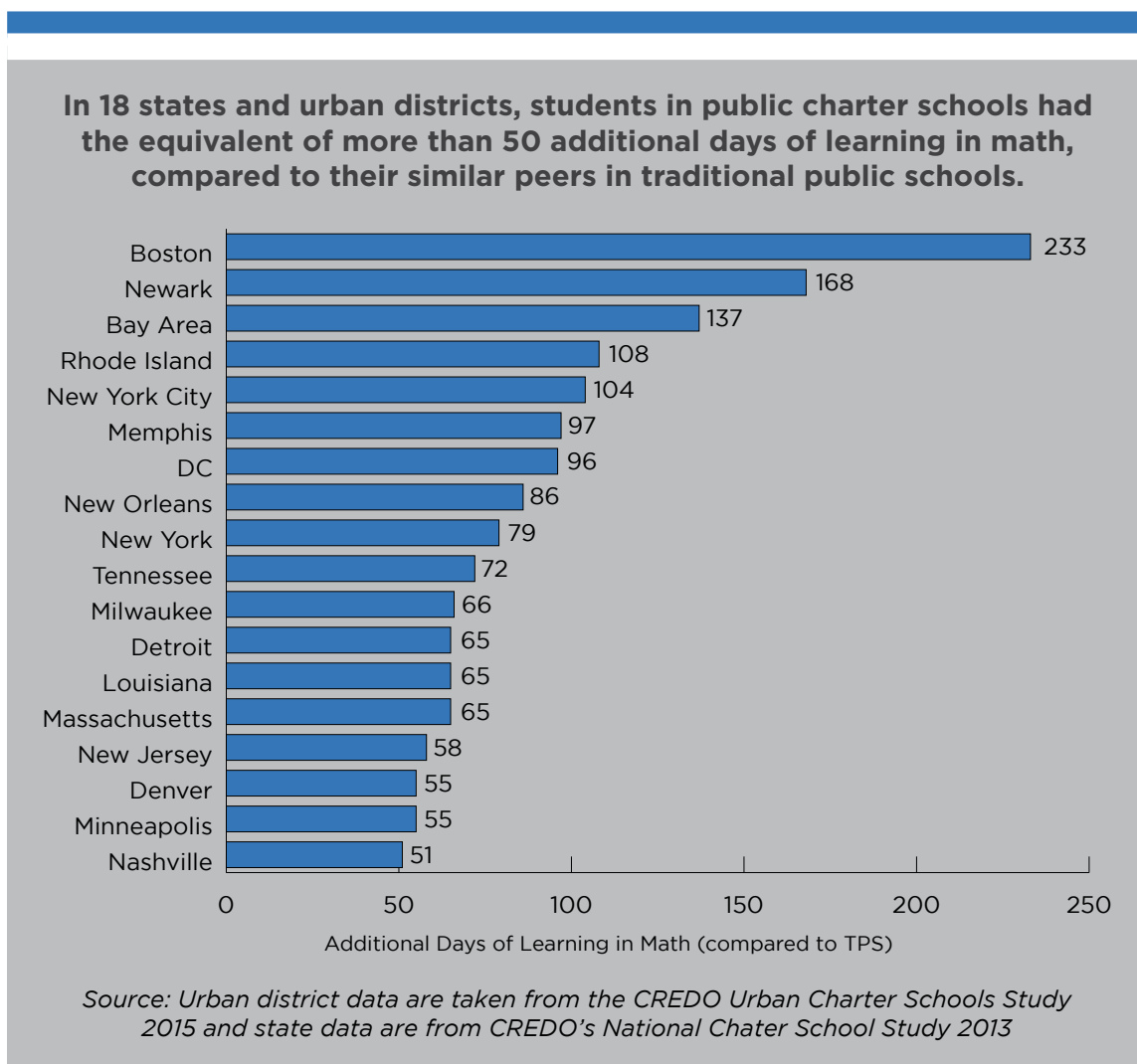


- Public charter school students in the San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Washington D.C., Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, and Newark had equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning in math compared to students in traditional public schools. In terms of reading, charter students in San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, Memphis, Nashville, and Newark received the equivalent of more than 80 additional days of learning.<sup>2</sup>
- Boston and Newark charter students had especially large learning gains compared with their traditional public school peers, with the equivalent of over 150 additional days of learning in reading and math.<sup>3</sup>

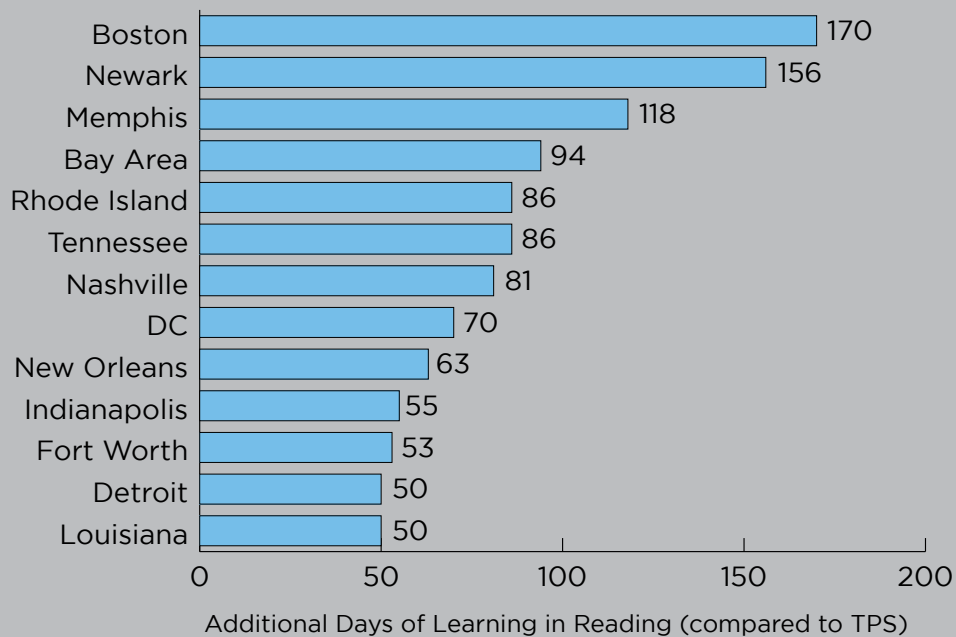
Results do vary greatly by state.

CREDO has found that:

- In nine states—Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Tennessee—plus the District of Columbia—charter students did significantly better than their matched peers in traditional public schools in both reading and math (2013).<sup>4</sup>
- However, in eight states—Arizona, Arkansas, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Utah—public charter students did significantly worse than their counterparts in traditional schools in both math and reading.<sup>5</sup> Note, however, that these data are now six years out-of-date, and a 2017 CREDO study saw—following reforms to the Texas charter sector— public charters performing on par with traditional public schools.<sup>6</sup>



**In 13 states and urban districts, students in public charter schools had the equivalent of 50 or more additional days of learning in reading, compared to their similar peers in traditional public schools.**



*Source: Urban district data are taken from the CREDO Urban Charter Schools Study 2015 and state data are from CREDO's National Charter School Study 2013*

Online charter schools almost invariably provide a substandard education. CREDO (2015) found that students in online charter schools lagged behind their peers in traditional public schools, equating to a loss of 72 days of learning in reading and 180 days of learning in math.<sup>7</sup> Online charter performance can also mask the high performance of “brick-and-mortar” charters. For example, CREDO (2019) found that Ohio charter students received the equivalent of 50 fewer days of learning in math and no differences in reading when compared to peers in traditional public schools. However, when online charter schools were removed differences in math achievement disappeared and students in charter schools gained an additional 29 days of learning in reading compared to their peers in traditional public schools.<sup>8</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1 Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2015). Urban Charter School Study 2015. Retrieved from <http://urbancharters.stanford.edu/download/Urban%20Charter%20School%20Study%20Report%20on%2041%20Regions.pdf>

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2013). National Charter School Study 2013. Retrieved from <https://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>

5 Ibid.

6 Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2017). Charter School Performance in Texas 2017. Retrieved from <https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Texas%202017.pdf>

7 Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2015). CREDO Online Charter School Study 2015. Retrieved from <https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/Online%20Charter%20Study%20Final.pdf>

8 Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2019). Charter School Performance in Ohio. Retrieved from [https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/OH\\_state\\_report\\_2019.pdf](https://credo.stanford.edu/pdfs/OH_state_report_2019.pdf)

**Cover Images (clockwise from top left):** College bound seniors at KIPP Renaissance (New Orleans, LA), 2017 <https://www.kipp.org/news/exclusive-data-show-charter-school-students-graduating-college-three-five-times-national-average/>; Phillips Academy Charter School (Newark, NJ) students on their first day of school, 2018 <https://www.nj.com/opinion/2019/04/murphys-troubling-failure-to-defend-charter-school-success-moran.html>; Chicago Urban Prep Academy students, 2015 <http://yourblackworld.net/2015/02/10/chicago-charter-school-sends-100-students-college-5-years-row/>; Mastery Cramer Hill Elementary School (Camden, NJ) students, 2017 <https://why.org/articles/camden-timeless-time-capsule-celebrates-new-charter-school/>.