



## Human Capital Key to Charter Success

**SUCCESS ACADEMY IS A BIG-TIME SUCCESS STORY**, as Charles Sahn makes clear (“What Explains Success at Success Academy?” *features*, Summer 2015). But what are the general lessons to be learned from the many case studies of successful chartering? Does it take the exceptional leadership of Success Academies’ Eva Moskowitz? Are school uniforms and a “no excuses” ethos the decisive ingredients (KIPP schools)? Are longer school days and an extended school year critical? Is data-based instruction the solution (Achievement First)? How important is a demanding academic curriculum (BASIS Schools)? Are class-integrated schools the key (Rhode Island)? Or is personalized instruction the crucial element (Carpe Diem and Summit Schools)? Or is the one essential ingredient the capacity to recruit high-quality teachers and administrators (all of the schools above)?

That last thought came to mind upon reading the latest study on urban charter schools from CREDO (Center for Research on Education Outcomes), which tells us that students in charter schools in 41 metropolitan areas are, on average, outperforming the district-run schools that charter students would otherwise have attended by about “40 days of additional learning per year in math [0.055] and 28 additional days of learning per year in reading [0.039].” (Numbers indicate the average difference in the performance of charter and district students in standard deviations.)

But the overall findings, encouraging as they are, struck me as less telling than the city-by-city comparisons. The cities with the highest-performing charters in math are, in order, Boston (0.324), Newark (0.233), Bay Area [San Francisco] (0.190), New York City (0.145), District of Columbia (0.134), Memphis (0.135), New Orleans (0.119), Detroit (0.090), Milwaukee (0.091), and Southern California [Los Angeles area] (0.080).

Charter students in the top seven of these areas are gaining at least 80 days more of math learning each year, and, in Boston, students are gaining an extra year!

By contrast, the 10 urban areas in which charter students are underperforming by the widest margin relative to their district peers include, in order, Fort Worth (-0.140), Las Vegas (-0.114), El Paso (-0.089), Phoenix (-0.080), Fort Myers (-0.063), Mesa (-0.063), West Palm Beach (-0.033), San Antonio (-0.030), Orlando (-0.014), and Austin (-0.011).

Results for reading are broadly similar, although New York City, Milwaukee, and Southern California fall out of the top 10, to be replaced by Nashville, Indianapolis, and South Bay (Silicon Valley).

Others may wish to perform statistical tests that estimate the

economic and social factors that correlate with urban charter performance, but the “eyeball” test—that is, what hits one straight in the middle of the eye at first glance—points directly toward the availability of young, energetic, capable teachers, administrators, and entrepreneurs within the metropolitan areas.

Certainly, the top five locales—Boston, Newark, San Francisco, New York City, and the District of Columbia—serve as hothouses of young talent for charter operators. Even the second-tier cities are suggestive. Charters in Memphis and New Orleans are known for attracting Teach for America teachers and others no less talented. Milwaukee and Detroit benefit from two of the most prestigious state universities in the country. Given the talent in Los Angeles, one wonders why charters there are not doing even better.

By comparison, the cities in which charters are trailing district schools typically find it difficult to attract well-educated young people. That fashionable, rapidly growing Austin, Texas, made the poor-performing list is perhaps the biggest surprise. A partial explanation for its presence (and that of three other urban Texas areas) is the relatively high quality of Texas public schools, which rank among the country’s best for African Americans and Hispanics on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). If the public schools are pretty good, then the charter schools need to be that much better if they are to show up as high-performing.

Phoenix is another surprise. In this case, the cause might be Arizona’s early “Wild West” charter law, which allowed for the creation of a plethora of poor-performing charters that nearly destroyed the charter movement nationwide.

The latest CREDO results deserve further analysis. But the initial takeaway, at least for me, is that we cannot create great charter schools without great entrepreneurs, great administrators, and great teachers.

That will not happen at scale until our schools of education, or alternative training institutions, turn out high-quality educators by the bucket full. And until charters have the opportunity to recruit and retain the best teachers, free of artificial licensing constraints.

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**MISSION STATEMENT** In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

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