Summary of Review

The study addresses questions of who authorizes charter schools and how it is done. Based on a national survey of charter authorizers, the study concludes that authorizers base their decisions to renew on student achievement, that authorizers have become more careful over time in authorizing charters, and that two authorizer types—nonprofits and independent chartering boards (ICB)—do a better job of authorizing. The study has some significant flaws. The survey had a very low return rate that raises questions about how representative the sample is. In addition, the conclusion that nonprofits and ICB are better authorizers seems to be contradicted by the survey data.

Review

I. INTRODUCTION

For the past decade charter schools have been one of the most popular educational reforms in the US. This study of charter school "authorizing" was sponsored by the Fordham Institute, a nonprofit group that strongly supports charters. In the foreword to the study, Fordham's Michael Petrilli and Chester Finn say, "Charter school authorizing and the act of chartering schools are the most promising contemporary educational innovations….the charter movements credibility depends on bad schools being put out of business" (p. vii, viii). The mixed record compiled by charter schools is leading to attempts to control their quality by authorizing good ones and eliminating bad ones. This study is a national survey of the authorizers and was conducted by Rebecca Gau of Goal One Research in Arizona.

II. CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

The study presents the following conclusions based on a national survey:

- The agencies that authorize charter schools often do not renew the schools because of poor academic performance.
- Authorizers have grown more careful over time about approving charter schools.
- Half of all authorizers exercise only limited oversight.
- Most authorizers are small-scale, school district sponsors.
- Most authorizers say they would use additional staff to monitor academics.
- Nonprofits and independent chartering boards do better authorizing than other authorizer types.

III. THE REPORT'S RATIONALES FOR ITS CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

Although the study is partly descriptive—who is doing the authorizing—it is also evaluative in seeking to discover which are the most effective types. "Are there some types of authorizers that appear to be more effective than others?" (p. 1). Or, in the words of Petrilli and Finn in the foreword to the study, "Are there organizations that should not be given the task of authorizing schools…? What types of sponsors do the best job….?" (p. viii).

The study introduces five practices "that we believe are hallmarks of effective charter school authorizing….we suspect, but cannot yet prove, these practices lead to charter school quality and ultimately strong student achievement" (p. 1):

- Data-driven decision making and rigorous, objective, selection and renewal processes.
- Sound working relations between the authorizer and school.
- Skilled personnel.
- Adequate resources and autonomy.
- Parent and community input.

A national survey based on these criteria was sent to authorizers around the country.

IV. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S USE OF RESEARCH LITERATURE

The study does not cite previous research literature to any extent. However, the author(s) seem to be aware of the issues involving charter schools and assert that not much research has been done on authorizers.

V. REVIEW OF THE REPORT'S METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the five practices or criteria listed above, with emphasis on the criterion of data-driven rigor. The five criteria seem reasonable, though in an evaluation, the researcher should fully justify the criteria on which the study depends. If there is a problem, it often resides in what criteria are missing. Is the list complete? If even one important criterion is omitted, the results can be quite different.

How were these criteria derived? Apparently, they came from two teleconferenced focus groups consisting of 13 people. How were the people selected and the focus groups conducted? How were the findings assembled? There are few details provided in the study about how the data collection and analysis were handled. The study would be stronger if these key criteria were more thoroughly justified.

Individual items for the national survey were based on the five criteria. For example, there were seven items for the data-driven decision making criterion, with a sentence or two justifying each item. The survey was sent to 561 authorizers the researchers identified. (The National Association of Charter School Authorizers says there are 850. The Fordham researchers note the discrepancy and speculate that perhaps these extra ones were very recent additions.) The survey return rate was 33 percent (184). This is a low return, especially since the responses were not representative across the primary categories of analysis. The researchers subdivided the sample into authorizer types: intermediate education agencies (n=14, a 100% return); higher education institutions (n=20, a 100% return); independent chartering boards (n=3, a 75% return); local education agencies (LEA) (n=118, a 24% return); municipal offices (n=2, a 100% return); nonprofits

(n=6, a 75% return); and state education agencies (SEA) (n=21, a 100%).

Based on the low non-representative return, they compare the types to one another. In other words, they compare responses of the 118 LEAs to responses of the six nonprofits and the three independent chartering boards to see which is best on the criteria. The LEA and SEA supervise 442 and 568 schools respectively compared to 22 schools for the nonprofits. The low response and quite different numbers involved make comparative inferences somewhat problematic.

In the most complex data analysis, the authors construct two scales consisting of selected survey items—one for "quality" and one for "compliance." The quality scale crossed with the compliance scale yields a two-by-two table and four types of authorizing approaches:

- "hands on"—high attention to quality and compliance.
- "tight-loose"—strong attention to quality, but weak attention to compliance.
- "bureaucratic"—weak attention to quality, but strong attention to compliance.
- "limited"—weak attention to quality and compliance.

The best authorizing is from the "hands on" approach down, though a case can be made for the tight-loose approach, according to the authors. Certainly, attention to quality is critical, meaning the first two approaches are best. Examining the authorizer percentages for these two approaches combined, higher education authorizers do best (60 percent), followed by nonprofits (50 percent), municipals (50 percent), SEA (50 percent), and LEA (42 percent). Independent boards (33 percent) and intermediate agencies (28 percent) do somewhat worse. How-

ever, these analyses seem contrary to a major finding of the study.

The executive summary says, "Some types seem more able to practice quality authorizing than others—the nonprofit organizations and the independent chartering boards...tend to do well on both counts….(p. v). And Petrilli and Finn say in the foreword, "…nonprofit organizations and Independent Chartering Boards (ICB) show the greatest promise" (p. ix). In fact, the ICB rank poorly, and the nonprofits do about the same as SEA, LEA, and municipals, all of which come in behind the higher education authorizers on this data analysis, the most quantitatively rigorous in the study.

The other major data analysis presented in the report profiles each type of authorizer separately on each of the five criteria. The researcher(s) judged each type on each criterion and summarized their judgments about types in a final table. This is where the nonprofits and independent boards come out strongest. But again, some of these judgments seem contrary to the data. Here is an example. Throughout the study, "data based decision making and objective rigor" is the dominant criterion. Two survey items closely associated with this criterion are "authorizers use of data analysis models," and "sources of input for renewal decisions." Here are the "use of data analysis model" findings for three authorizer types (p. 34).

Table 1: Authorizer's Use of Data Models

	Public universities	ICB	Nonprofits
Fixed/mixed effects	21%	33%	20%
Value added	29%	0%	40%
Longitudinal	29%	67%	0%
None	0%	0%	20%
Don't know	21%	0%	20%

Source: Gau, R. (2006) *Trends in charter school authorizing*. Fordham Foundation, pg. 34.

Importantly, the data models are ordinarily ranked with the 'best' options first. That is, the author(s) consider fixed-effects models to be superior to value-added and both superior to longitudinal. (Some experts might dispute their ranking.) In the author(s) judgment the universities are downgraded on this criterion because they rate "scoring rubrics" only "somewhat important," and they "use the least sophisticated model to analyze student achievement data" (p. 21). The "verdict" is, "they get data directly from schools but don't use it in a sophisticated way." Accordingly, in the final summary,

universities are rated only "moderate" on this criterion. However, as can be seen above, in the "data models" table public universities ranked comparably: equal to nonprofits in the highest category, better than ICB in the top two combined, and better than nonprofits on the three combined.

The comparison between ICB and universities is particularly revealing concerning the author(s) use of judgment. Like the universities, the ICB are downgraded for rating the scoring rubric only "somewhat important." But the researchers say, "they use a sophisti-

cated model for data analysis." The verdict is, "they put a strong emphasis on the importance of data and data collection. They could update their models for data analysis" (p. 27). Universities are judged unsophisticated on data models, whereas independent boards need simply "update" their data analysis. In the report summary ICB are judged "Strong" on this criterion while universities moderate. However, as just noted, the public universities are superior to the ICB on the two best methods, 50 percent to 33 percent.

What about the nonprofits? The nonprofits rated the scoring rubric the same as universities and ICB, but the verdict is, "they collect a lot of data from their schools and appear to use it well." Nonprofits are awarded a "strong" on this criterion in the final summary. However, 20 percent nonprofits state they have no method of data analysis at all. If one calculated a mean over categories (treating "don't know" as the lowest category), the nonprofits would come out worst of the three. How can they be judged stronger?

What about the other survey question on "sources of input for renewal?" If one averages across the ten categories of response for this item, the universities have a mean score of 4.65, the ICB of 4.82, and the nonprofits 4.52 (these are calculated for purposes of this review; the means are not provided by the study). There is not much difference among them, it would seem, and no reason to declare the first one moderate and the last two strong. By selectively interpreting, the study arrives at conclusions contrary to some of the data. In the summary table comparing types of authorizers, the author(s) award nonprofits and ICB four "strongs" and two "moderates," while universities receive no "strongs," five "moderates," and one "weak" rating overall.

Pertrilli and Finn, in the report's foreword, seem a bit uncomfortable with these conclusions, which elevate nonprofits above where the evidence seems to place them. "Yes, this could be our own bias—after all, Fordham is one the handful of nonprofits studied here. And we think highly of our hometown authorizer in Washington, D.C." (p. ix). It is unclear whether Fordham was one of the six nonprofits in the study, but if so that would seem an important consideration, given that they know the "correct" answers. Even if they were not included, the influence of the sponsor does loom over the report.

VI. REVIEW OF THE VALIDITY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The credibility of the findings is weakened by the poor and differential return rate on the survey. How representative was the sample? If one accepts this limitation, the following conclusions seem reasonable: agencies often do not renew charter schools because of poor academic performance; authorizers have grown more careful over time; most authorizers exercise only limited oversight; most authorizers are small-scale; and, most say they would use additional staff to monitor academics. However, the conclusions comparing authorizer types are deeply flawed. The conclusion that nonprofits and independent boards are better able to handle the authorizing process seems contradictory to the data.

VII. THE REPORT'S USEFULNESS FOR GUIDANCE OF POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study would best be used as a starting point for other investigations into the important problem of how charter schools should be authorized. The study is not conclusive enough to guide policy, though it might point to future directions for consideration.