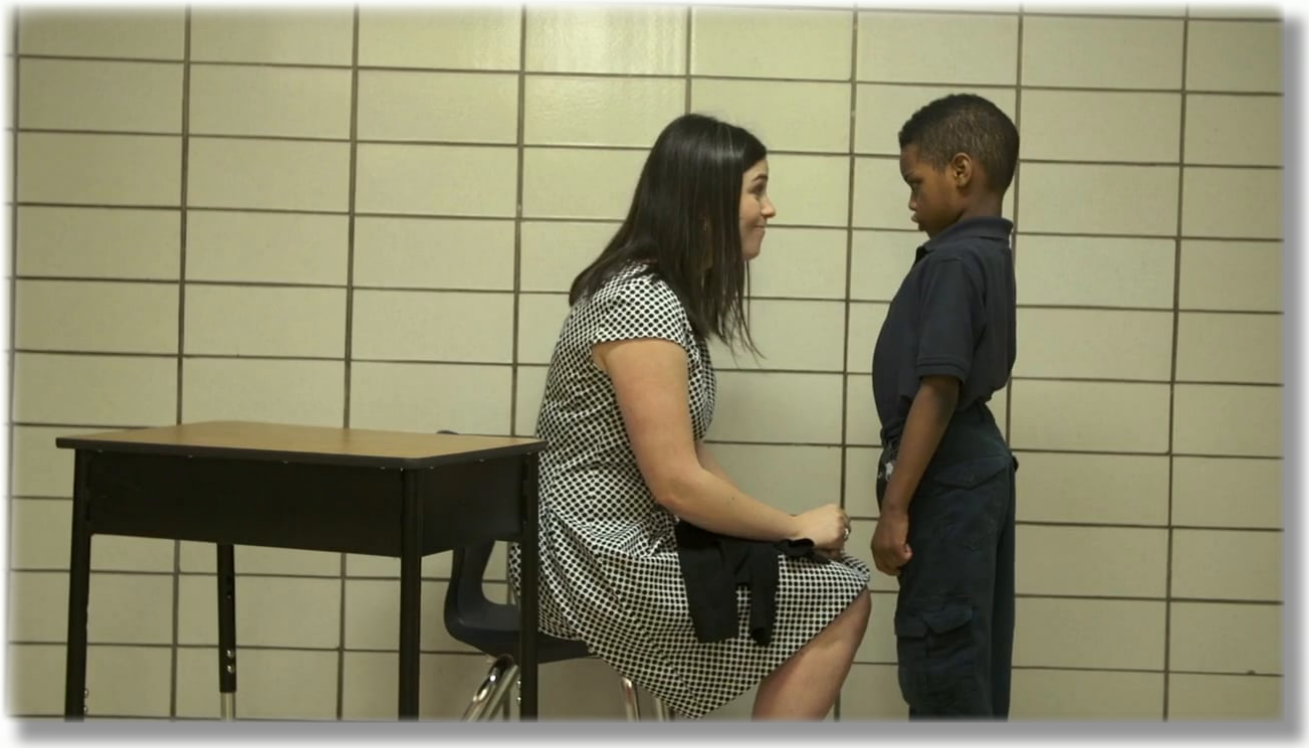
NEPC Review: Charter Schools and the Achievement Gap



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Summary of Review

A recent report, *Charter Schools and the Achievement Gap*, finds that, though charter schools on average perform no better than traditional public schools, urban "no-excuses" charter schools—which often use intensive discipline to enforce order—demonstrate promising results. It recommends that these schools and their practices be widely replicated within and outside of the charter school sector. We find three major flaws with this conclusion. First, the report's recommendations are based solely on the academic success of these schools and fail to address the controversy over their use of harsh disciplinary methods. No-excuses disciplinary practices can contribute to high rates of exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions that push students out of school) and may not support a broad definition of student success. Second, the recommendation that schools replicate no-excuses practices begs the question of what exactly should be replicated. It does not confront the lack of research identifying which school practices are effective for improving student achievement. Third, the report does not address many of the underlying factors that would allow no-excuses schools and their practices to successfully replicate, such as additional resources, committed teachers, and students and families willing and able to abide by these schools' stringent practices. Thus, while the report is nuanced in its review of charter school impacts, it lacks this same care in drawing its conclusions—greatly decreasing the usefulness of the report.

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I. Introduction

Charter schools were originally conceived to be laboratories of innovation and vehicles for teacher autonomy and empowerment.[1] First created in Minnesota in 1993, charter schools now serve over six percent of the nation's youth[2] and are concentrated in urban areas.[3] Charters claim they will close achievement gaps for low-income students of color by increasing school choice for families and promoting competition between schools.

Despite this aim, charter schools, on average, perform at similar levels as traditional public schools.[4] Charter advocates, however, point to the success of a group of urban charter schools commonly referred to as "no-excuses" schools. These schools are often managed by charter management organizations (CMOs) that operate networks of schools that typically share a common vision and instructional model: high expectations for both academics and behavior, longer school days and school years, frequent observations of teachers to give feedback, intensive tutoring, and the recurrent use of student assessment data to drive instruction.[5] No-excuses schools like KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Success Academies, and YES Prep have attracted considerable attention due to their touted academic success and have been featured in media outlets like the *New York Times, The Washington Post, Newsweek, Forbes, Oprah, 60 Minutes*, and a popular documentary, *Waiting for Superman*. Over the last decade, they have also expanded after receiving millions of dollars from corporate foundations and federal grants. Growth in the charter sector is increasingly driven by the flow of money towards these and other CMOs.[6]

Charter Schools and the Achievement Gap,[7] written by Sarah Cohodes at Teachers College (Columbia University) and published in the journal, *The Future of Children*, which is associated with both Princeton University and the Brookings Institution, reviews studies on these schools and encourages charter and traditional public schools alike to adopt these practices

as a means to close or narrow the achievement gap. Although the article captures and clearly describes the technical merits and drawbacks of existing studies of charter schools, it falls short of recognizing the limits—and potential problems—of expanding no-excuses charters.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

As a primer for understanding and interpreting the studies, the report begins by explaining the advantages and disadvantages of lottery and observational studies, which are considered the most methodologically rigorous quantitative designs available to study charter school impacts. Lottery studies allow researchers to compare the outcomes of those who were offered a seat in a charter school to those who were not. Observational studies match pairs or groups of students who theoretically differ only by their charter attendance. This report's review of the literature determines that the average impact of attending a charter school on test scores, college attainment, and earnings is no different than traditional public schools with the exception of a subset of high-quality urban charter schools. Lottery-based studies of urban charter schools in Boston, New York City, Denver, and Chicago find "large, statistically significant impacts on test scores, in contrast to the evidence on overall charter school effectiveness… [and] where it's possible to look at longer-term outcomes, the same schools that have beneficial impacts on test scores also boost college preparation and college-going outcomes" (p. 7).[8]

Next, the report focuses on describing a small subset of studies that estimate the association between charter school impacts and specific school practices. Charter schools with the largest impacts use "no-excuses" practices, such as comprehensive student behavior policies.

Finally, the report reviews studies of KIPP's expansion and an experiment implementing or "injecting" no-excuses practices in 20 low-performing traditional public schools in Houston. According to the report, these studies provide sufficient evidence that these schools and their practices can be widely replicated to achieve positive results. The report concludes: "That's why adopting the practices of successful charter schools in traditional public schools, or turning around struggling traditional public schools with charter organizations, may be a farther-reaching way to improve student achievement in poorly performing traditional public schools and narrow the achievement gap" (p. 14).[9]

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The recommendation to expand no-excuses urban charters is based on advanced lottery-based statistical analyses that demonstrate large, statistically significant impacts on student test scores for this subset of charter schools. Because the charter sector is relatively small, however, replicating no-excuses charters would not have a large enough impact on the achievement gap. The report therefore recommends expanding no-excuses practices to traditional public schools through efforts to turn around low-performing schools (for exam-

ple, by incorporating no-excuses practices into school improvement plans required under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for the lowest-performing five percent of schools in the state).

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

Overall, the article presents a comprehensive review of quantitative studies that measure charter school impacts on academic achievement. Although the report is focused primarily on lottery-based studies of urban, no-excuses charter schools, it also reviews important studies that can speak to the charter sector more broadly, including the well-known CREDO study and an interesting fixed effects study that compares test scores for students who switch between traditional and charter schools.[10]

Our main concern is less with *how* studies are reviewed than with *what* is excluded from the review. The report focuses on no-excuses schools and no-excuses practices, but the reader is left without a clear sense of what these schools do and what they look like inside. No-excuses schools share many practices, as the report briefly mentions, but they are distinguished by their disciplinary approach, which the report alludes to but never clearly elucidates. Although some no-excuses schools strive for progressive pedagogy and deeper learning (e.g. higher-order thinking), Sarah Fine, an author of a new book researching these efforts, concludes: "...the experiments in deeper learning were highly bounded—and are likely to remain so. This is because control, micromanagement, and adultism are core to the school's identity."[11]

No-excuses schools "sweat the small stuff."[12] That is, they focus on eliminating minor signs of disorder to prevent more serious infractions from occurring. Teachers are encouraged to "constantly monitor child behavior and give quick, sometimes severe, feedback and consequences to behavior" such as talking out of turn or not following directions immediately (p. 27).[13] Strategies like "Do it Again" and "100 percent" emphasize repeating procedures until teachers receive full student compliance with behavioral expectations.[14] In what seems a striking oversight, the report makes no mention of these practices despite growing concern voiced in recent years by civil rights advocates, researchers, and the media.[15]

Ethnographic and critical accounts of these schools describe a highly regulated environment where students are tightly controlled, and demeaned or even humiliated for small behavioral missteps. At a KIPP elementary school in New Orleans, where the student body was 93 percent African American, "silence was expected during bus rides, morning and afternoon assemblies, transitions into and out of the building, the last 10 minutes of lunch, and the entire lunch period the following day if they failed to comply" (p. 181).[16] At Mastery middle schools in Philadelphia, students carried blank merit and demerit cards for teachers to mark, with six infractions resulting in a three-hour detention.[17] At two unnamed no-excuses middle schools in the Northeast, students found school rules to be arbitrary and unfair, and learned that they could be reprimanded for speaking out.[18]

No-excuses disciplinary practices can also contribute to the Black-White disciplinary gap. Many no-excuses schools have policies where students can be suspended for any violation, no matter how small.[19] One report found that New York City charters suspended students at almost three times the rate of traditional public schools, with several of the largest no-excuses charter networks suspending more than 20 percent of their students at least once.[20] The fact that these schools are typically comprised of White teachers and students of color is also part of the story, with some researchers decrying these disciplinary practices as a form of racism.[21]

Furthermore, it is not clear that these no-excuses disciplinary practices are integral to the success of these schools. In the section, "Characteristics of High-Quality Charter Schools," the report describes a few studies that find positive correlations between no-excuses impacts and no-excuses disciplinary policies. However, these correlations tend to be stronger for math than reading scores and range in magnitude depending on the study and model specification. Our own reading of these studies[22] concludes that: 1) the evidence is mixed at best that no-excuses disciplinary practices promote academic achievement; and 2) practices like data-driven instruction, extended instructional time, high-dosage tutoring, intensive professional development, and high expectations can explain much of the success of these schools. In fact, controlling for the above five practices, Will Dobbie and Roland Fryer find that the no-excuses behavioral approach (e.g., schoolwide behavioral rules, tracking the teacher, etc.) had no association with students' academic achievement. The conclusion that they reach, unmentioned in the report, is that these results are "highly suggestive that there is nothing mystical about 'No Excuses' schools" (p. 19).[23]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is a standard literature review and the method is appropriate for its purposes. The organization of the review, however, follows what we consider a "what works" logic. That is, it identifies the most rigorous quantitative studies of charter school effects on standardized test scores; narrows in on urban, no-excuses charter schools because they show the largest gains; and argues that these schools and their practices can and should be expanded. Such an approach may appear like common sense in an era of evidence-based decision-making but we contend that this logic is flawed. Focusing on replicating "what works" for raising standardized test scores overlooks other measures of success, including social, civic, and developmental outcomes.

There is growing consensus that non-academic skills, such as self-regulation, conscientiousness and persistence, are as important as academic skills in preparing students for future success in school and work.[24] Many no-excuses schools themselves focus explicitly on teaching these skills.[25] A few studies, most of which are referenced in the report in relation to academic outcomes, also examine the impact of no-excuses charters on these non-academic skills, finding little impact, or in some cases, *negative* impacts on students.[26] For example, using data from oversubscribed Boston no-excuses charter schools, one set of researchers found a statistically significant negative impact of these schools on students' grit and

self-control, and a marginally significant negative impact on conscientiousness.[27]

The authors speculate that these puzzling results may be due to reference bias—students in no-excuses schools have higher standards when they are evaluating their own skills because these schools have higher standards.[28] A different explanation, based on ethnographic research inside these schools, is that students are not developing these important non-cognitive skills because of highly structured and punitive disciplinary practices.[29] Besides the non-cognitive skills measured in these surveys, other skills—like assertiveness, initiative, self-expression, and advocacy—are also important for students' ability to make use of resources and participate as active citizens. The main issue is, despite their importance for success in college and life, these more proactive skills can be in direct tension with disciplinary methods found in no-excuses schools.[30]

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

We see several important problems with the recommendation to replicate no-excuses schools and their practices based purely on the evidence reviewed. First, the report implicitly assumes that academic achievement should be the primary policy concern and that advanced quantitative methods are the gold standard for making decisions about policy and practice. Looking at reviews of a wider range of the literature on no-excuses schools,[31] we see that the emphasis on academic achievement above all else has the potential to harm as much as help the students of color that these schools serve. Some no-excuses practices such as "high standards for student behavior" can easily turn into harsh and exclusionary disciplinary methods that are in conflict with developing students' social and behavioral skills[32] and supporting equitable treatment of students of color.[33]

Second, with the possible exception of intensive tutoring, it is unclear which no-excuses practices are necessary for student achievement. The studies reviewed try to isolate the effects of individual school practices, but given that practices are implemented together, "it's difficult to separate the correlations for individual characteristics" (p. 8).[34] In our own review of these same studies, we find that no-excuses schools can be academically successful without using stringent disciplinary methods, such as silent hallways or school-wide behavioral systems where teachers dole out rewards and punitive consequences.[35] This points to a larger issue, which is that the report's recommendations to replicate require much greater specificity to be valid and useful. We need studies explaining the specific mechanisms and conditions that will actually "work," while attending to both academic and nonacademic outcomes.

Third, though the report recommends that no-excuses schools engage in turnarounds, charters may be reluctant to enter turnaround models because these efforts bring unique challenges. One prominent example of high-profile CMOs attempting to turn around low-performing public schools is Tennessee's Achievement School District (ASD). The ASD charters have yet to show significant performance gains,[36] a result school leaders attribute to hav-

ing to enroll students from the neighborhood who did not necessarily choose to attend the school. These charters confronted a high level of community resistance, low parent buy-in to school disciplinary practices, and difficulties that arose from serving a higher proportion of special education students and students with high mobility rates.[37] This suggests that the positive impacts of no-excuses charters may not generalize to a broader range of students because these students (and their families) likely differ in many ways from students (and families) who do not actively seek out these schools, a point acknowledged by the report but not extended to its conclusions.

The report also overlooks known issues of educator supply and turnover that affect the likelihood of success and sustainable growth. For example, researchers attributed the lack of positive gains in ASD schools to high teacher attrition. ASD teacher turnover averaged 63 percent over a three-year period. These schools lost more effective teachers than they retained. By contrast, Innovation Zone (iZone) schools—turnaround schools managed by the local school district rather than an external operator—made moderate to large test score gains in every subject.[38] These schools had about half the rate of teacher turnover compared to ASD schools, a difference attributed in part to a 12 to 18 percent pay increase for teachers who stayed in or transferred to iZone schools. Even though money seems to matter, the article appears to suggest otherwise: a New York City study reviewed in the report finds that resource inputs like per-pupil-funding and student-teacher ratios were not positively correlated with charter school effectiveness while practice inputs were, suggesting that money is less important than school practices.[39] However, philanthropic dollars have increasingly flowed towards no-excuses CMOs, which surely plays a role in their ability to provide support to educators and students.

This brings us to our final point: can we even find enough teachers and leaders to do this work? The report's conclusion that practices can be successfully "injected" into traditional schools is based on one experiment that required replacing 19 of 20 principals and 38 percent of all teachers. Fryer noted that schools in this study were still unable to get all the staff they needed,[40] and that "the financial resources needed for our experiment are another potential limiting factor to scalability" (p. 1404).[41] Indeed, others have pointed out that no-excuses schools have a limited supply of teachers who are willing and able to do the intensive work required.[42] Teachers leave no-excuses schools at higher than average rates, citing various concerns about workload and the no-excuses model itself.[43] Samuel Abrams examines average teacher attrition rates across KIPP and Achievement First regions and estimates that only between 21-32 percent of teachers will be working at the same school in four years.[44] In light of all this, it is difficult to imagine the viability of "injecting" no-excuses practices when these reforms struggle to find, replace, and retain educators.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report is useful in helping general audiences understand the nuances of advanced statistical designs and the studies used to measure the impact of charter schools on academic

achievement. It is a jump, however, from understanding the state of the research to recommending policies and programs. The report leaves the reader without a sufficient understanding of the no-excuses model it advocates replicating, particularly the no-excuses disciplinary approach. Policymakers, practitioners, and researchers need to do much more to understand and address the potential costs of the no-excuses model before giving thought to expanding these practices in either the charter or traditional school sector. Additional research is also needed to identify exactly which practices are driving academic impacts in these schools and how they work. Finally, we recommend that policymakers embrace a broader framework for equity—one that considers academic achievement but does not prioritize it above important social, civic, and developmental outcomes that, many argue, come into conflict with the no-excuses model.

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