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Review of *Measuring Diversity in Charter School Offerings*

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Summary of Review

Program variation has long been touted as a charter school advantage, so a recent AEI report rates the diversity of charter school programs in 17 major cities. Examining charter school websites, the report finds the schools evenly split between "Specialized" schools (e.g., no excuses, STEM, or Arts) and "General" schools. It finds small to moderate correlations between city demographics and certain types of charter schools but also finds that specialized schools tend to morph into homogenized general schools. The report has several weaknesses. It claims superior diversity for charter schools but doesn't empirically compare charter offerings with those of traditional public schools, which typically include many diverse options. Similarly, the introduction claims charter schools are hamstrung by red tape, but this is not addressed in the report. Also, as acknowledged in the report, coding schools based on website descriptions is an error-prone enterprise, yet no check of the accuracy of the data is provided. As the correlations between charter schools and city demographics are based on only 17 cases (cities are the unit of analysis), this is too weak a base to support the report's conclusions. Fundamentally, the report does not make the case for its major claims, and thus has only minimal utility.

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Review of *Measuring Diversity in Charter School Offerings*

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I. Introduction

In their 30-page report, *Measuring Diversity in Charter School Offerings*,[1] published by the American Enterprise Institute, authors Michael McShane and Jenn Hatfield seek to establish a taxonomy of charter schools with information gleaned from the websites of 1,151 charter schools in 17 cities. They begin by suggesting two main reasons for supporting charter schools: "(1) that charter schools will improve academic achievement by taking advantage of flexibility not afforded to traditional public schools; and (2) that deregulation will allow for more diverse schools than would otherwise be created" (p. i).

The report quotes a Fordham survey which found that parents want greater diversity. The report claims, without citing evidence, that "by removing regulations and red tape and decentralizing the operation of schools, students' education will be more closely tailored to their particular needs."[2]

The paper concludes with the statement, "In the horse-race narrative of charter school competition with public schools, it can often get lost that charter schools have a broader purpose." (p.27). Apparently not recognizing that public schools also have broader purposes, the report advocates for the expansion and deregulation of charter schools on the basis that they provide greater variety and are more responsive to parental desires. Unfortunately, the report addresses neither the issue of greater school variety nor academic achievement.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report is basically descriptive rather than inferential and it classifies charter schools based on their self-description of the school, including their stated mission, vision, philosophy, academic model, and curriculum. Schools are categorized as either "*General*" or *"Specialized"* based on specific words or phrases such as 'no-excuses,' 'project based,' 'classical,' etc., that are included in the website descriptions. The Specialized category is divided into 13 types, including STEM, arts, international/ foreign language, military,

vocational, progressive, etc.[3] If there is no website language connecting the school to one of the 13 identified variations, the school is classified as general.

The investigators find the number of schools in each category to be almost evenly divided (578 General charter schools and 573 Specialized charter schools). The enrollment is also fairly evenly divided across categories (55.5% General; 44.5% Specialized).

The next seventeen pages (more than half of the Report) are given over to one-page profiles of each of the cities selected for study. City-level demographics include ethnicity,, percentage of persons age 5+ with a language spoken at home other than English, median household income, total number of charter schools, and total charter school enrollments. Pie charts, tables and bar graphs illustrate the number of charter schools in each city and enrollments in Specialized and General charter schools. Demographic data are taken from U.S. Census reports from 2010 and 2013.

A second group of findings provide simple pair-wise Pearson r correlations such as the type of school (e.g., STEM, hybrid, no excuses, etc.) with race, income and foreign language. These correlations are generally quite low (although the report describes them more generously) and statistical-significance information is not provided. It is unlikely that any of the correlations are statistically significant due to the small n and their small magnitude. The authors note, "These are small sample correlational analyses of complex environments" (p. 25) and caution, "Such is the issue of having a sample size of 17 (p. 25)."

The report provides three broad explanations for the lack of greater diversity among charter schools:

A. "Maslow's hierarchy of charter schools." - In the authors' interpretation, low-income communities and minority parents seek safer choices including 'no-excuses' schools, while more affluent parents want more progressive choices including international and foreign language schools. This is a strange application of Maslow's hierarchy, which typically applies to individual behaviors, and one which carries overtones of justifying segregation by school type. It also contradicts the claim that parents want more diversity.

B. "Lagging Indicator." Ironically, the authors report that charter schools tend to shift over time from a specialized focus to a general focus (which would be inconsistent with their major hypothesis). The authors believe this decreasing diversity is caused by over-regulation by charter school authorizers and by inertia favoring current models of charter schools. They provide no evidence supporting their interpretations.

C. "Institutional isomorphism," described as the tendency for organizations to look alike. Long-established patterns perpetuate themselves, which dries up innovation and inhibits new charter school approaches. (This also contravenes the report's diversity assumption).

The major conclusion of the report is that diversity is important yet not as important as school quality.

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

The report's rationale is not explicit.

The report describes diversity of school offerings as a key positive feature of charter schools. By creating categories for diversity and classifying schools into them, the efficacy of charter schools in providing this positive feature is *prima facie*, established.

The report uses small- and moderate-sized pairwise Pearson r correlations (only two exceeded 0.40) to make claims about the relationships among population demographics and charter school types and to support speculations about causation.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report has only 10 citations. Despite the existence of a vast charter school research literature, only one citation contains references that would generally be considered as acceptable scientific literature. The rest of the citations are to general news articles and reports, primarily from charter school advocacy organizations. Interestingly, the report says, "Twenty-five years in, we have a robust body of evidence examining this argument [whether charter schools improve achievement]" (p.1). Beyond the three references contained in one endnote, none of this "robust body of evidence" is presented or even referenced. A fair reading of the literature would say that charter schools perform about the same as traditional public schools.[4]

The authors cite their own recent AEI Report on factors contributing to "paperwork pile-up" and increasing burden on charter school applications.[5] This appears to be the foundation for their paperwork burden assertion.

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The report is basically an advocacy piece. Its research methods are essentially limited to classifying, counting, and correlating the counts with federal data summaries. The categories into which the schools are coded are not explained in much detail. Classifying schools as "general" because other descriptors are not in the web description is not evidence that they are general or some other category. The reader is left to envision the authors bent over the websites of the 1,151 charter schools, divining the primary characteristic of each school despite the lack of a common web format, content organization or definition of terms. To the authors' credit, they admit, "Classifying charter

schools is an inherently subjective business (p.2)." Unfortunately, there is no description of, if, or how the accuracy of the ratings was checked. Typically, a second set of judges would rate a sampling but if such a procedure was used, it was not apparent.

In classifying schools based solely on their website self-definitions, consider the following example:

> At Phoenix Collegiate Academy we are wholly committed to ensuring that our students gain the tools to be admitted to, and excel at top colleges and universities. We will achieve this goal by:
> - Implementing procedures, schedules, and promotion requirements that push students to higher expectations and achievement.
> - Increasing our learning time with a longer school day and a longer school year.
> - Frequently assessing students and using data to drive instructional decisions and supports.
> - Providing a seamless transition from middle school to high school to further guarantee success in college

Based on this information, it is not possible to definitively classify this school into any of the report's categories. Compounding the problem, websites are designed to put forth an organization's best face and may not be correct, current or truthful.

The report presents no evidence that charter schools do any better or worse than the current mix of public school alternatives.

While the authors find a 50-50 split between general and specialized charter schools, they do not offer any sort of comparison to traditional public school (TPS) offerings. This is a particularly glaring omission since superior program diversity over TPS's is the primary claim of the first sentence of the executive summary (p. i). TPS high schools, for example, may offer 20 or more different paths to graduation in such areas as school-to-work, early college entrance, technical education, special education, and alternative education. Unfortunately, the report simply asserts greater diversity in charter schools without offering any evidence to support the claim.

The city profiles take up more than half the report but the utility of this information is questionable. For instance, knowing that STEM is the predominant enrollment group in Denver and that *progressive* charter schools edge out *no-excuses* schools in Boston may be of some peripheral value. New York's emphasis on *no-excuses* while Minneapolis concentrates on *international issues* likely represents local circumstances, but the policy implications of this information are unclear. Attempting to find meaning through small n correlations lends itself to too much speculation.

Rather than reporting cities along with their metropolitan areas, the report considers only cities in its analysis. The result is a bias in the numbers and types of charter schools reported in the selected areas. For example, the city of Phoenix is included in the analysis

but no consideration is given to the charter schools in the Phoenix metro area (e.g., Anthem, Chandler, Gilbert, Glendale, Goodyear, Mesa, Paradise Valley, Peoria, Scottsdale, etc.). This calls into question the generalizability of the data to all charter schools.

Further, the ethnic identification correlations in the report are based on the cities in which the schools are located rather than the composition of the charter student body. The population demographics in the inner cities are, in general, different than those of the charter schools. Charter schools are more segregated than their communities.[6] In the instant case, the result is likely misleading.

The analysis is based on computing 26 pairwise correlations. Since the city is the unit of analysis, this reduces the n to 17 which is generally considered too small for correlational work. Collapsing the variance in such a major way renders the analysis suspect. It is puzzling that the authors acknowledge the problems of doing correlations with an n of 17 but then proceed to draw inferences from these doubtful numbers.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The methodological problems noted above render the report of little validity or utility.

The report's foundational assumptions are "(1) that charter schools will improve academic achievement by taking advantage of flexibility not afforded to traditional public schools; and (2) that deregulation will allow for more diverse schools than would otherwise be created." However, the report does not demonstrate that charter schools are any more flexible than TPSs, or that they show improved academic progress. Neither do they demonstrate that over-regulation hampers school diversity.

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

Assuming we accept diversity of offerings as a primary policy goal, the report presents no evidence that charter schools do any better or worse than the current mix of public school alternatives. Further, the data analysis and interpretation is prone to classification subjectivity and arbitrary coding and as a result has limited practical value. The descriptive correlations are based on too small an n to support any claimed relationships, let alone any causal inferences. Finally, the report's discussion of findings could simply be read, at best, as failing to support their own hypotheses.

Notes and References

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