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STUDY FINDS TEST-SCORE GROWTH AT NYC CHARTER SCHOOLS OUTPACES DISTRICT SCHOOLS

Analysis from a Stanford center says that on average, charter students show growth equal to 23 extra days of learning in reading

By Leslie Brody
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A new study says that on average, New York City charter school students show growth equal to 23 extra days of learning in reading and 63 more days in math each year, compared with similar students in traditional public schools.

Released Wednesday by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University, the study found black and Hispanic students in poverty posted especially strong test-score growth at charters. At the middle school level, students at charter networks showed more robust gains overall than those at independent charters.

Skeptics say standardized tests are flawed measures. The study relied on such scores for grades three to eight for the five years ending in June 2016.

Margaret Raymond, director of CREDO, said charters' successes came largely from their flexibility to allocate resources to meet their students' needs. She said the power of charter oversight bodies to shut failing schools also helped.

The study was funded by two foundations that support charter schools, the Walton Family Foundation and Achelis and Bodman Foundation. Ms. Raymond said her center isn't pro- or anti-charter, but aims to identify policies to boost outcomes.

Looking at 144 charters, the study said that 16 percent performed significantly worse in reading than their peer traditional public schools, 43 percent fared significantly better, and 41 percent were about the same.

For each charter student, researchers created a "virtual twin"—a composite of several district peers who had the same previous test scores, race, gender, poverty level and special needs. The study then tracked whether the charter student learned more than a virtual twin attending a peer district school.

Although that method isn't the gold standard of a randomized trial, some education experts say CREDO studies reflect a worthy effort to use available data.

"A lot of people have legitimate concerns about what's really going on behind the magic curtain of the virtual twin matching," said Jeffrey Henig, an education professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. "But it's a serious study."

A spokesman for the city Department of Education said that "We celebrate the success of all our schools, district and charter, and under this administration, public schools are the strongest they've ever been."

The study included about 75,000 students at charters, which are taxpayer-funded and independently operated. Opponents say charters drain resources from regular district schools.

Kevin Welner, an education professor at the University of Colorado Boulder, said CREDO ignores the possibility that parents who apply to charters are more actively involved, "so the students are benefiting from having more engaged families."

Ms. Raymond disputed that concern, saying New York City parents know their options and act deliberately. "If they're choosing to have their students go to district schools, that's a choice," she said.