

Michael Oher was in possession of what had to be among the more conspicuous athletic gifts...and yet, without outside intervention even his talent would likely have been thrown away...If Michael Oher's talent could be missed, whose couldn't? Those poor black kids [in the inner-city] were like left tackles: people whose values were hidden in plain sight...Pity the kid inside Hurt Village [in Memphis] who was born to play the piano, or manage people, or trade bonds.

-Michael Lewis, *The Blind Side*

No Excuses Charter Schools—The Good, the Bad and the Over-Prescribed?

Over a period of many years, researchers employing high-quality social science techniques established in a series of studies that over-subscribed No-Excuses style charter schools had significant and positive effects on student test scores. These positive findings lead to a large investment of philanthropic investment and human capital into the expansion of No-Excuses charter schools in urban areas. A recent survey of urban charter school sectors noted that No-excuses schools stand as a dominant model in most urban communities, and gave a straightforward explanation as to why: “They hold this central position for a simple reason: they work.”¹

Recent research however has thrown this confident assertion into doubt. A growing body of empirical investigations has found a consistent disconnect between K-12 test scores and long-term student outcomes for students attending No Excuses charter schools. This disconnect flows both ways- scholars have found No Excuses charter schools with strong K-12 test score results, but which lack strong post-secondary outcomes. Researchers have also found examples of schools without significant K-12 test score benefits, but positive long-term outcomes. Moreover, some of the strongest charter sectors least associated with No Excuses schooling show strong signs of flourishing, while some charter sectors most closely associated with No Excuses schools have experienced either disappointing long-term evaluation results or political setbacks, or both misfortunes.

The focus on test scores among policy makers, activists and philanthropists lies largely due to an implicit assumption that test scores serve as a strong proxy for later-life outcomes. Our aspiration for strong math and reading scores derives in large part because we believe that they will strongly correlate with later success in life. This assumption of a strong correlation however is not proving out. The implications of the disconnect between standardized test scores and long term outcomes like college persistence, income and other social measures merits careful consideration. Our collective interest in the long-term success of students ultimately outranks our interest in the elementary and secondary standardized test scores for those students. Currently the strongest empirical evidence on long-term sector-wide charter student success comes from a state lacking a heavy presence of national No Excuses schools. That same charter sector (Florida) has yet to show a statistically significant test score advantage vis a vis district students, but does show long-term benefits to enrolling in charter schools.

Policymakers and philanthropists have placed a great deal of emphasis on opening No Excuses charter schools in urban areas in the hope of closing achievement gaps, most prominently the gap between the average level of achievement between White and Black students. The more recent trend in research findings in addition to recent charter school political history however merit careful consideration. The earlier trend in No Excuses charter research- a series of random assignment studies showing higher test scores-naturally lead to the conclusion that No Excuses schools the most powerful weapon in the reformer arsenal in combating the woes of urban education. This conclusion however may have been premature.

Inner-city students may prosper more in the long run from having access to a more varied set of schooling options. Moreover, the charter movement, in an understandable enthusiasm for addressing the urban education crisis, may have neglected suburban and rural constituencies to

its own detriment. Strong social movements require broad and diverse communities of support. The emphasis on urban No Excuses schools may be precluding the opportunity to develop broader charter school constituencies in urban areas (among those who might prefer other school types) and especially in suburban and rural areas. In other words, both students and the charter school movement might benefit from a renewed emphasis on diversity of approaches. Philanthropists and policymakers should view No Excuses charters as a work in progress, rather than “the solution” to the deep problems of urban education.

“No Excuses” Charter Schools and Test Scores-The Origin of Enthusiasm

A group of University of Arkansas Department of Education Reform scholars offered the following description for No Excuses schools:

Enrolling mainly poor and minority students, these schools feature high academic standards, strict disciplinary codes, extended instructional time, and targeted supports for low-performing students. The strenuous and regimented style is controversial amongst some scholars, but others contend that the No Excuses approach is needed to rapidly close the achievement gap.²

Researchers have conducted several random assignment studies on charter school achievement. These studies take advantage of state laws requiring random admission policies (lottery assignment) when applications exceed available seats to compare the test scores of lottery winners to those of lottery losers. Lottery assignment enables the strongest research design—a random assignment study.

University of Arkansas scholars Cheng, Hitt, Kisida, and Mills conducted a meta-analysis of random assignment studies addressing the impact of no excuses charter schools on test scores. The meta-analysis focused on random assignment studies using random assignment methodology and specific estimates for No Excuses charter schools in addition to the universe of all charter

schools. Random assignment studies take advantage of lottery admission requirements, but limit the universe of schools studied to those oversubscribed schools where applications for admission. In other words, charters that do not conduct a lottery cannot be included in a random assignment study.

Random assignment studies provide strong internal validity. In other words, we can conclude that the test score advantage exists due to the charter schools, rather than because of preexisting differences between the student groups. Many random assignment studies however raise questions about how far we can generalize the results. For example, you would want to employ extreme caution in generalizing the results from a single charter school onto the whole population of oversubscribed No Excuses charters. By combining the results of the entire universe of studies employing rigorous statistical methods, the meta-analysis improves ~~our~~ confidence in drawing broad conclusions regarding the impact of over-subscribed No Excuses charter schools on student test scores.

No Excuses charter schools significantly improve math scores and reading scores. The scholars estimate gains of 0.25 and 0.16 standard deviations on math and literacy achievement, respectively, as the annual impact of attending a No Excuses charter school. The authors note “We interpret the effects of No Excuses charter schools to be large and meaningful...A straightforward extrapolation of these results suggests that attending a No Excuses charter school for four to five years could eliminate the achievement gap.”³

The studies summarized in the meta-analysis collected over a period of many years. Each positive result encouraged well-meaning philanthropists looking to reduce achievement gaps to deepen investments. Serving the long-term interests of inner-city children, however, has proven to be more complex than the long and positive series of test score studies seemed to indicate.

Specifically, the evidence on the long-term impacts of No Excuses schools has not often matched the spectacular success seen in K-12 test scores.

Troubling Findings: Disconnect Between Test Scores and Long-Term Outcomes

Research of course should not be the ultimate arbiter of desirability, and in fact many No Excuses charter schools have long waitlists of students. Factors other than test scores or even scholarly evaluations driving parental enrollment decisions- safety, culture and innumerable other factors play into such decisions. Nevertheless, the existing research leads to the broad conclusion that we should view No Excuses charter schools as a model to perfect and improve rather than to place it on a pedestal as a fully optimized solution.

Our concern with test scores mostly rest upon an assumption of a strong correlation between test scores and long term life outcomes. It is not ultimately, for example, 8th grade math scores per se that concern us, but rather the hope that high scores denote the acquisition of the knowledge, skills and habits necessary to flourish in life. Recent years have seen scholars devising ways to directly measure longer term direct measures of student thriving. Unfortunately, the results have shown a distinct divergence between test score and long term student outcome trends. Scholars have found choice programs with modest impacts on test scores, but large effects on long-term outcomes. Other scholars have found large impacts on test scores but weak impacts on long-term outcomes. In combination, these studies have profound implications.

Kevin Booker, Tim Sass, Brian Gill, and Ron Zimmer published an analysis of long term outcomes related to charter school attendance in Chicago and Florida in 2014. Members of this research team had previously published academic research finding a lack of charter school impact on test scores, but a positive a statistically significant impact on high-school graduation

rates. In the 2014 study, the team analyzed high school graduation, college attendance, college persistence, and (in the case of Florida) earning trends associated with charter school attendance.

Booker et al found consistently positive long term graduation and persistence results associated with charter school attendance in both jurisdictions. Florida charter students displayed high school graduation rates 11 percent higher than the comparison group, college attendance 10% higher and persistence in college 13% higher than the comparison group. These results were statistically significant. Chicago charter students had high school graduation rates 7.4% higher than the comparison group, college attendance rates 11% higher than the comparison group, with both results meeting standard measures of statistical significance. Chicago charter students had a rate of persisting in college two or more years 6.6% higher than the comparison group, with this difference failing to meet the standard test of statistical significance.

Florida data allowed the scholars to an evaluation of earnings associated with charter school attendance after students moved into young adulthood. The analysis again revealed a statistically significant earning advantage for charter students between the ages 23 and 25 years old of 12.7%. The authors puzzled over the discovery of long-term benefits to charter school attendance despite the lack of a short-term test score advantage:

The substantial positive impacts of charter high schools on attainment and earnings are especially striking, given that charter schools in the same jurisdictions have not been shown to have large positive impacts on students' test scores (Sass, 2006; Zimmer et al., 2012). Exactly what charter high schools are doing to produce substantial positive effects on educational attainment and earnings is an open question. Charter high schools might be able to produce positive effects on initial college entry merely by providing better counseling and encouragement to apply and enroll. But that could not explain higher rates of persistence in college or higher earnings, suggesting that charter high schools are endowing their students with skills that are useful for success in college and career but that test scores do not capture. The fact that charter high school students have higher earnings even if they do not attend college further supports this interpretation.⁴

The Booker findings on Florida charter schools also spur additional interest as Florida charter schools represent a much greater diversity in approaches than many city sectors studied. No Excuses schools dominate the charter sectors of cities such as Boston and Houston-subjects of additional studies including test score and long-term outcomes. The statewide Florida charter sector, while certainly including schools that follow the No Excuses model, also include many different approaches. Illustrative of this, in 2017, Florida House Speaker Richard Corcoran publicly lamented the very limited presence of national No Excuses charters in Florida near the outset of that year's legislative session.⁵ Ironically, Florida's current charter school sector currently holds the strongest evidence of long-term advantages for charter students and minority students make up 65% of the Florida charter school student body.⁶

While the disconnect between test scores and long-term trends struck Booker and company as odd in 2014, additional research would soon find similar results. A research team lead by Massachusetts Institute for Technology economist Joshua D. Angrist published an analysis of Boston charter school trends in the same year and month as the Booker team's analysis of Chicago and Florida charters. Boston charter results are especially relevant, as Angrist and company identify the No Excuses model as especially prevalent:

A defining feature of Massachusetts' successful urban charter schools appears to be adherence to No Excuses pedagogy, an approach to urban education described in a book of the same name (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2003). No Excuses schools emphasize discipline and comportment, traditional reading and math skills, extended instruction time, and selective teacher hiring.⁷

The Angrist analysis has a great deal of positive news regarding the impact of Boston charter schools and importantly beyond state accountability exam test scores. Students attending oversubscribed Boston charter schools had statistically higher SAT scores, qualified for state sponsored college scholarships at higher rates, and were significantly higher Advanced

Placement test taking and passing rates. However, a disconnect between positive test score trends appeared again as Boston charter students did not see a higher rate of college attendance. The Angrist team documented an increase in four-year college attendance that came at the expense of two-year college attendance.⁸ Whether an increase in four-year college attendance at the expense of two-year college attendance ultimately proves to be a positive development remains to be seen in further research. Without knowing completion rates, it is too early to judge.

Dobie and Fryer (2014) examined random assignment evidence from a Harlem Children's Zone Academy on short and medium term outcomes including test scores, health, risky behaviors and college attainment. The authors administered Woodcock-Johnson math and reading tests as alternatives to state test measures, examined pass rates on Regents Exams, surveyed students on health and risky behaviors, and assessed attainment measures such as high-school graduation, immediate college enrollment and college attainment.

Ultimately a similar disconnect between test scores and college attainment appears in the Harlem Children's Zone Academy results. The K-12 academic results- in both Woodcock-Johnson mathematics and Regents results proved quite impressive. Lottery admission winners however failed to show higher rates of college attainment than losers.⁹ Health and risky behavior measures also proved mixed between statistically significant and statistically insignificant results.

Dobbie and Fryer (2016) also found a disconnect between positive test score trends and earnings data when examining No Excuses charter schools in Houston, Texas. The Houston study did not allow for use of random assignment data due to a legal requirement for Texas charter schools to keep admission lottery data for only two years. Dobbie and Fryer therefore proceeded with a matching and regression design in which they linked K-12 data with later

college and earnings data. No Excuses Charter schools showed positive K-12 test score gains, but displayed no advantage for earnings for former No Excuses charter students at age 24 to 26.

However, the positive human capital benefits of No Excuses schools do not translate into measurable improvements in earnings or employment for blacks or Hispanics, though the effects are estimated with considerable error...Of course, the 95 percent confidence interval of these estimates contains modest effect sizes, but these results are surprisingly small compared to the rhetoric on the power of charter schools to increase intergenerational mobility among poor minority students.¹⁰

The authors explore possible explanations for their findings-including the possibility of age dependent findings, adverse selection of students, the impact of dropout rates, statistical issues and instructional differences such as crowding out of some subjects (art and history) in favor of others (math and reading). No clear explanation emerges from this exploration, and further research will be required. The Houston results stand as the precise inverse to the Booker team findings in Florida- which found no test score advantage but a significant earnings advantage for Florida charter students summarized above.

Almost as an exception that illustrates a rule, Davis and Heller (2017) provided an analysis of a No Excuses charter school Charter Management Organization (CMO) from Chicago that defied the disconnect trend. Nobel Network CMO students demonstrated both strong gains in K-12 test score gains, college admission exam scores, college admission, caliber of institution enrolled in, and college persistence.¹¹ The results consistently show hope for results in K-12 tests and college for the No Excuses model schools studied- a welcome exception to the overall trend found in the research.

In 2014, Martin West led an investigation into non-cognitive measures that included a quasi-experimental comparison between charter and district schools in Boston. West's team studied charter school admissions lotteries, and found positive impacts of charter school attendance on math scores but found negative and statistically significant impacts on non-

cognitive measures of self-control and grit. The West team of researchers reported “The estimated effect sizes are in the opposite direction of the achievement effects and of similar or even larger magnitude, ranging between -0.12 (grit) and -0.21 (self-control) standard deviations.”¹²

West and his coauthors speculated that the decline in grit and self-control may be due to reference bias- using a higher bar when assessing their own conscientiousness, self-control, and grit due to attending a No Excuses school. While this could be a factor, perhaps even a dominant one, an actual decline in grit and self-control would also fit comfortably with the results of the Angrist results on long-term outcomes in Boston charters. If future research establishes this as a prevalent pattern, the findings of the Chicago research in which No-Excuses charter schools demonstrated both positive test score and long-term outcome trends.

Caution must be employed in drawing strong conclusions based upon the currently available research. We both require and will receive additional research in the years ahead that may illuminate our understanding. Nevertheless, the current collection of studies employing highly sophisticated analytical techniques have thus far found consistent if not universally disappointing long-term results for No Excuses charter schools. The most impressive long-term evidence currently in the high-quality research literature- Florida charter schools- comes from a sector of diverse approaches and lacking a clear test score advantage in the experimental literature. The Boston and Houston results meanwhile both proved disappointing.

Research Evidence and Charter School Strategy

The current evidence from high-quality evaluations does not condemn No Excuses charter schools. It does however raise unsettling questions: has the emphasis on a particular

model of charter school (No Excuses) in a particular type of community (urban centers) served to inhibit the overall scale of benefits of charter schooling? Does the current focus of the charter school movement represent an operationally inclusive and thus politically sustainable model for the long term?

American Enterprise Institute scholar Rick Hess raised these sorts of questions years before the long-term charter school research became available. In a broad critique of the education reform movement published in *National Affairs* in 2011, Hess cautioned strongly against what he coined as “achievement gap mania.”¹³ The Hess critique included a call for the charter school movement to diversify the types of schools provided and to strengthen charter school constituencies outside of urban communities.

Some five years after publication, events unfolded that made the Hess critique seem prescient. In 2016 Boston charter supporters test of greater consequence than bubble sheet exams—a political test. They failed the test badly. Charter school supporters in Massachusetts, unable to lift their state’s cap on charter schools in the legislature, campaigned for a ballot initiative in 2016 allowing for 12 additional charter school openings per year. Question 2 enjoyed a well-funded Yes campaign that emphasized the social justice theme in a deep blue state. For instance, a column written in favor of the adoption of Question 2 concluded “As a blue state, Massachusetts supposedly cares about inequality. Question 2 will put that professed virtue to a test on Nov. 8. As of this writing, the waitlist for the state’s charter schools was 34,000 students long.”¹⁴

On November 8, 2016 Massachusetts voters rejected Question 2 by a margin of 62% to 38%.

Despite a well-funded yes campaign, Massachusetts voters decisively rejected the measure in the November 2016 ballot. The *New York Times* reported that “You could drive a full 30 miles through the leafy suburbs northwest of Boston before reaching a town where Mr. Trump hit 20 percent of the vote” but these same voters demonstrated a disinterest in allowing Boston’s No-Excuses schools to expand in a modest fashion.

An actual after-action report of the campaign lies outside of the scope of this work. Note however than in 2011 Hess had warned:

Because middle-class parents and suburbanites have no personal stake in the gap-closing enterprise, reforms are tolerated rather than embraced. The most recent annual Gallup poll on attitudes toward schooling reported that just 20% of respondents said, “improving the nation’s lowest-performing schools” was the most important of the nation’s education challenges. Indeed, while just 18% of the public gave American schools overall an A or a B, a sizable majority thought their own elementary and middle schools deserved those high grades. The implication is that most Americans, even those with school-age children, currently see education reform as time and money spent on other people’s children. This makes school reform a losing vote for suburban legislators — one that they can take because it’s the right thing to do, but that is calculated to burn rather than win political capital. The focus on achievement gaps makes for bad politics by making it hard to build broad, sustained support for reform.¹⁵

In the weeks following the Question 2 defeat, Derrell Bradford, Executive Director of the New York Campaign for Achievement Now drew a similar conclusion:

From a political perspective, charters in many of the country’s states are now butting up against the walls created by an urban movement focused on low-income families in densely concentrated areas. Though from a social-justice perspective this makes perfect sense — and the equity message inherent in this structure resonates deeply with many charter advocates, including myself — it has confined the movement’s ability to advocate for itself to smaller constituencies with limited ability to affect policy or politics at a statewide level.¹⁶

Other states serve as a counter-example to the Massachusetts experience-with charter sectors that include dense urban areas, but getting much closer to matching the state’s geographic and student diversity. Arizona stands as a stark contrast to the Massachusetts example in developing stronger suburban and rural charter communities, and in largely eschewing No Excuses schools.

Arizona Charter Students Thrive without No Excuses Schools

A major part of the appeal and utility of choice lies with the ability to match the individual needs and aspirations of children with the strengths of schools. The current emphasis on No Excuses models may reduce the diversity of offerings available to inner city students, possibly to their detriment.

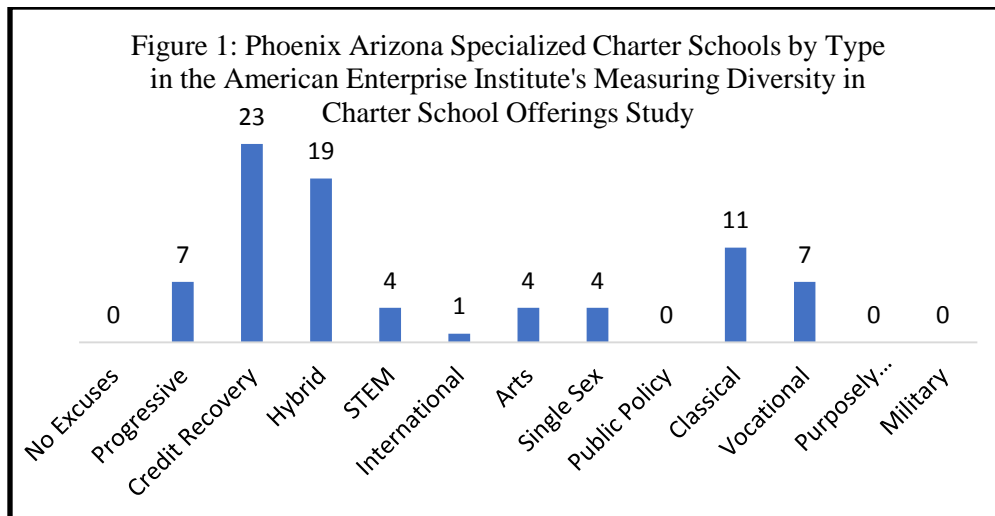
McShane and Hatfield found a strong correlation between the size of the African-American student population and the prevalence of No Excuses schools. It may be the case however that all types of students benefit from the ability to match their interests and aspirations against a variety of specialized schools. Diversity of focus and instructional approaches could potentially benefit every student creating more meaningful choices for parents to make. A deeply meaningful matching process can benefit all students and might benefit inner city students as much as anyone. Michael Lewis made a poignant observation in the *Blind Side* that the subject of his book, the incredibly athletically gifted Michael Oher, benefited from a series of fortuitous developments to realize his potential. Pity, Lewis said, the children born in the same neighborhood with less obvious talents and potential. Lewis gave the examples of musical talents, management potential or financial acumen as less obvious talents, but he could have greatly extended his list. The focus of No Excuses schools may not cover a large portion of the needs spectrum for urban students.

The 2011 Hess critique again deserves consideration:

Furthermore, the intense focus on gap-closing has led to a notion of ‘innovation’ dedicated almost entirely to driving up math and reading scores and graduation rates for low-income and minority students. Promising innovations that promote science, foreign-language learning, or musical instruction have garnered little public investment or acclaim. Even in terms of math and reading, there is not much interest in interventions that do not show up on standardized state assessments.¹⁷

Suggestive evidence on the possible power of a diverse matching process for low-income children can already be found. The prominent national No Excuses CMOs have yet to open charter schools in Arizona, which has the nation's largest charter sector on a percentage basis. Arizona charter schools receive less overall per student funding than districts-about \$8,000 per pupil in charters compared to a statewide average of \$9,250 in Arizona districts. Many of the No Excuses national charter operations employ school models spending well above Arizona's modest per pupil spending, creating a considerable hurdle for national No Excuses organizations. Currently none of them operate schools in Arizona.

The American Enterprise Institute conducted a study on the diversity of charter school offerings, published in 2015. American Enterprise Institute scholars Mike McShane and Jenn Hatfield coded information from 1,151 charter schools educating more than 471,000 students in 17 different cities. The authors divided charters into specialized and non-specialized schools based on information available on school websites, and then further quantified specialized schools into more specific categories. Consistent with the decision of No Excuses CMOs not to open in the Arizona market, the Phoenix, AEI's Phoenix sample of schools had zero No Excuses charter schools. No Excuses had the highest enrollment of any type of specialized schools across the 17 cities surveyed, and Phoenix was the only city not to have a No Excuses school in the sample. Figure 1 presents the breakdown of the American Enterprise Institute's Phoenix sample of specialized charter schools.



If Arizona urban charter school students are suffering academically due to a lack of No Excuses charters, it is difficult to find any evidence of it the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Urban charter schools in Arizona outscored the national average for such schools on all six 2015 NAEP exams, often by wide margins. NAEP's ability to give subpopulation estimates has limits, but NAEP 8th grade NAEP data show that both free and reduced lunch eligible and Hispanic students in Arizona urban charters outscore their peers nationally in Math, Reading and Science. NAEP takes separate statewide samples for each exam, making score estimates for modestly sized groups less precise than for larger groups. In Arizona's case however the gaps between charter and district achievement were even larger on the state's accountability exam (AZ Merit) exam than those seen in NAEP. Unlike NAEP, AZ Merit does not involve sampling, and thus lends confidence to the NAEP results.*

* Arizona charter school students scored well on all six 2015 NAEP exams (the most recent available at the time of this writing). NAEP involves the statewide sampling of students, which means that student subgroups of various sorts have a greater standard error of estimate than larger statewide populations. In Arizona's case however the state's AZ Merit exam also shows large achievement advantages for charter students in comparison to district students, which lends supportive evidence to the high level of achievement for Arizona charter students. The AZ Merit exam is given to all students in grades 4 and 8, and thus provides external validation to the NAEP sample results.

Based upon the evidence currently available, it appears all Arizona charter students, including disadvantaged students, are doing quite well on average. Both Hispanic and Free and Reduced Lunch eligible subgroups attending Arizona charter schools display high levels of academic achievement on the NAEP compared to their peers nationally. Arizona charters however also have proven quite popular in suburban communities however, creating a broad and diverse constituency.

Counterintuitively, Arizona's urban students have directly and indirectly benefitted from the operation of suburban charters. Arizona's various choice policies interact with each other in a dynamic fashion, creating additional opportunities for students. A demographic report prepared for the Scottsdale Unified School District for instance detailed that 9,000 school age students living within the boundaries of the district did not attend Scottsdale schools. Scottsdale Unified enrolls approximately 25,000 students, but 4,000 of these are students who transferred into the district through open-enrollment policies. Despite these open enrollment transfers into the district, Scottsdale has an entirely vacant multi-building campus at the time of this writing, and 13 of 31 school campuses below 65% capacity in 2014.¹⁸ Scottsdale Unified thus has a substantial financial interest in attracting more open-enrollment transfers. The fact that Arizona choice policies have included suburban districts has created opportunities for urban students to transfer into suburban schools.

Arizona's "all of the above" choice environment-including inter and intra district open enrollment, an active charter school sector, and private school choice options in combination create a highly competitive environment for startup charter schools. Data provided by the National Alliance for Public Charter schools tracking charter school openings and closing by state found that Arizona opened 232 charter schools between 2008 and 2013, but 83 Arizona

charters closed during the same period.¹⁹ The average Arizona charter school closure between 2000 and 2013 operated for four years, and had only an average of 62 students enrolled in the final year of operation.²⁰ Thus Arizona's highly competitive K-12 environment- with districts, charters and private schools all seeking enrollment, has created an environment in which charter schools either thrive or fold primarily based upon parental demand. The result of a geographically inclusive set of choice policies has been the creation of a broad participant charter school constituency that displays very high levels of academic achievement for both urban and suburban students.

Such dynamics seem unlikely to have matured had philanthropists put the lion's share of their efforts behind opening a single type of school. A relatively free-wheeling process in Arizona for instance revealed a strong demand among both suburban and urban parents for charter schools with an emphasis on the classical education. Approximately 40% of the 17 city AEI survey sample of urban students attending classical charter schools were in Phoenix. One could view this as either positively or negatively based upon one's view of classical education, but it certainly reflects revealed parental preferences as the demand for such seats greatly exceeds the supply. Hopefully scholars will provide research on the long-term outcomes associated with Arizona charter schools in the future. For now, the Arizona charter movement operated in a fashion consistent with the Hess critique and has broadly flourished to the benefit of many- including disadvantaged students.

Conclusion: More Things in Heaven and Earth than Test Scores

The late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan once asked the Clinton Administration for two supportive studies justifying the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on a favored program in a

committee hearing. Administration officials sent two studies the following day, but Moynihan did the unexpected: he read the studies. The Clinton administration officials apparently had not read the studies, as they both concluded that similar programs had failed to produce positive results.

In response, Moynihan wrote the following in a letter:

In the last six months I have been repeatedly impressed by the number of members of the Clinton administration who have assured me with great vigor that something or other is known in an area of social policy which, to the best of my understanding, is not known at all. This seems to me perilous. It is quite possible to live with uncertainty, with the possibility, even the likelihood that one is wrong. But beware of certainty where none exists. Ideological certainty easily degenerates into an insistence upon ignorance.²¹

Echoing Moynihan, we should acknowledge that it is *not known* that No Excuses charters have the greatest efficacy in improving long-term education outcomes vis a vis other possible strategies. We do not know why short term test score trends have so consistently failed to materialize into long-term benefits. More research will be needed to explore the test-score/outcome disconnect, but it is obvious that there is far more to education than test scores.

While we do not know that the charter movement has not flourished to the extent possible due to a lack of geographic inclusiveness, but we have reasons to strongly suspect it. Philanthropic support for No Excuses charters may be crowding out other types of schools, possibly to the detriment of students.

The evidence on the long-term efficacy of No-Excuses charter schools demonstrates that we yet have a great deal to learn. It fails to support the notion that we “know the solution” to inner city education problems and should simply scale it with dispatch. No Excuses charters represent a work in progress rather than an ultimate solution to urban education problems. Further research should explore the impact of diverse school offerings, or lack thereof, in both urban and other settings. This research should be of particular interest to those operating No-

Excuses schools. Philanthropists should consider viewing a diversity of approaches in charter markets as a worthy goal in its own right. More support of a portfolio of specialized offerings—including investment in “one off” niche schools, may be of greater utility than an effort to bring a particular model to scale. The magic of parental choice may lie in having a meaningfully diverse set of options in enable parents to find a “good fit” then diversity should outrank “scale” as a concern.

Charter school supporters should also debate the wisdom of strategy considering the evolving evidence. No Excuses charter operators should be attempting to improve the long-term impact of their model. Philanthropists should participate in this process, and should consider supporting a diversity of approaches in their portfolios. The long-term evidence casts doubt on the notion that charter school authorizers should favor No-Excuses charters in authorization vis a vis other types of schools. Given our lack of certainty, we should be more focused on charter schooling as a discovery process rather than implementing a preordained solution.

¹ Michael McShane and Jenn Hatfield, “Measuring Diversity in Charter School Offerings,” *American Enterprise Institute*, July 2015, accessed May 8, 2017, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Measuring-Diversity-in-Charter-School-Offerings.pdf>.

² Albert Cheng, Collin Hitt, Brian Kisida and Jonathan N. Mills, “No Excuses Charter Schools: A Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence on Student Achievement,” working paper 2014-11, *Department of Education Reform, University of Arkansas*, July 2015: 1, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://www.uaedreform.org/downloads/2014/12/no-excuses-charter-schools-a-meta-analysis-of-the-experimental-evidence-on-student-achievement.pdf>.

³ Ibid, 23.

⁴ Kevin Booker, Brian Gill, Tim R. Sass, and Ronald W. Zimmer, “Charter High Schools’ Effects on Long Term Attainment and Earnings.” Working paper 14-5. *SSRN Electronic Journal* (March 2014): 27-28, accessed May 8, 2017, doi:10.2139/ssrn.2443566.

⁵ Travis Pillow, “House Speaker: Florida Needs More Top Charter Schools for Low-Income Students.” *RedefinED*. January 31, 2017. Accessed May 8, 2017. <https://www.redefinedonline.org/2017/01/fl-house-speaker-florida-needs-top-charters-low-income-students/>.

⁶ Data derived from the National Alliance for Public Charter School, Data Dashboard, Florida, 2013-14 school year, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://dashboard.publiccharters.org/Home/?p=Home>.

⁷ Joshua D. Angrist, Sarah R. Cohodes, Susan M. Dynarski, Parag A. Pathak, and Christopher R. Walters, "Stand and Deliver: Effects of Boston's Charter High Schools on College Preparation, Entry, And Choice," *Journal of Labor Economics* 34, no. 2 (2016): 275-318, accessed May 8, 2017, doi:10.1086/683665.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Will Dobbie and Roland G. Fryer, "The Medium-Term Impacts of High-Achieving Charter Schools," *Journal of Political Economy* 123, no. 5 (2015): 985-1037, accessed May 8, 2017, doi:10.1086/682718.

¹⁰ Dobbie and Fryer, "Charter Schools and Labor Market Outcomes," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, July 2016, accessed May 8, 2017, http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/fryer/files/charters_7.15.16.pdf.

¹¹ Blake Heller, and Matthew Davis, "Raising More than Test Scores: Does Attending A 'No Excuses' Charter High School Help Students Succeed in College?" *Education Next* 17, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 64-70, accessed May 8, 2017, http://educationnext.org/files/ednext_xvii_1_davis_heller.pdf.

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¹³ Frederick M. Hess, "Our Achievement Gap Mania," *National Affairs*, fall 2011, accessed May 8, 2017, <http://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/our-achievement-gap-mania>.

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