



## The Data on Detroit

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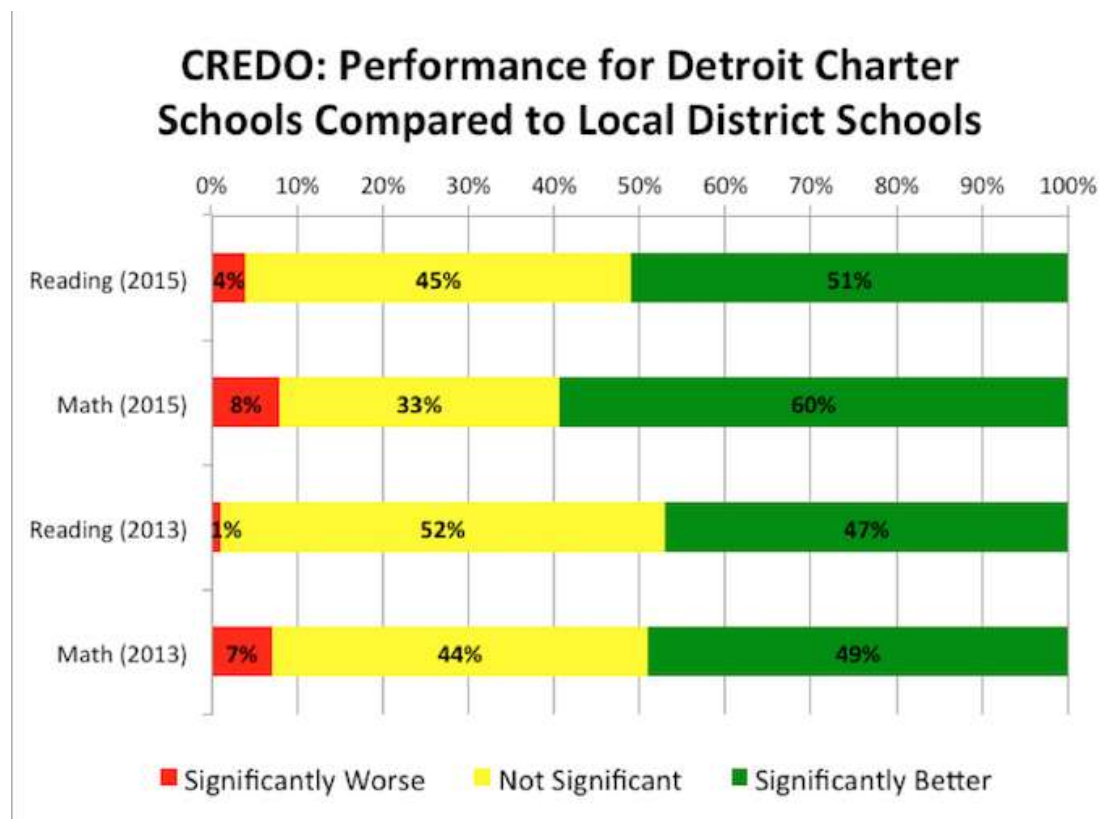
Today, Secretary of Education nominee Betsy DeVos will appear in front of the Senate education committee for her first confirmation hearing. She will face questions on a range of issues, perhaps most importantly on her record as a school-choice friendly philanthropist in her home state of Michigan. Unfortunately, descriptions of that record in the mainstream press—most notably in the *New York Times*—run counter to all available data.

In a recent [editorial](#), the *New York Times* asserted that DeVos “faces a big challenge in explaining the damage she’s done to public education in her home state, Michigan.” The *Times* editors fault DeVos for supposedly supporting “legislative changes that have [reduced oversight and accountability](#)” for charter schools—a charge that [treads a thin line](#) between [exaggeration and falsehood](#)—and laments that DeVos wants to expand school choice in Detroit, where supposedly “charter schools often perform [no better](#) than traditional schools, and sometimes worse” [links in the original]. The *Times* editorial relies on an [op-ed](#) they ran by Tulane Professor Doug Harris, who asserted in November that Detroit’s charter school system is “the biggest school reform disaster in the country.” As evidence, Harris cites what he calls a “[well-regarded study](#),” which “found that Detroit’s charter schools performed at about the same dismal level as its traditional public schools.” Likewise, in an [article](#) last June, *Times* national education correspondent Kate Zernike claimed that in Motor City, “half the charters perform only as well, or worse than, Detroit’s traditional public schools.”

It matters a great deal whether these claims are true not simply because the truth matters, but because DeVos was nominated due to her record as an education reformer. If her work expanding choice in Detroit and Michigan really has yielded “disastrous” results and done great “damage,” then the American people should be very concerned. But if her efforts in Michigan have improved a dire situation, then Americans should take heart—and put less faith in what they read in the *Times*.

In order to get a clearer picture of what’s really happening in Detroit, we thought it would be useful to assemble *all* the available data on the performance of Detroit’s charter and district schools into one place.

## 1. Stanford's Center for Research on Educational Outcomes



Source: *CREDO (2013)*, Table 7, page 44; and *CREDO (2015)*, Table 12, page 44, and Table 13, page 31.

Harris' *Times* op-ed cited the 2013 CREDO study on charter school performance nationwide. That study, and a follow-up report published two years later, found that in Detroit, about half to three-fifths of charter schools outperformed demographically similar district schools on reading and math assessments. Between a third and half of the charters performed about the same, and only a small number—between one and eight percent—performed worse. The 2013 CREDO report concluded:

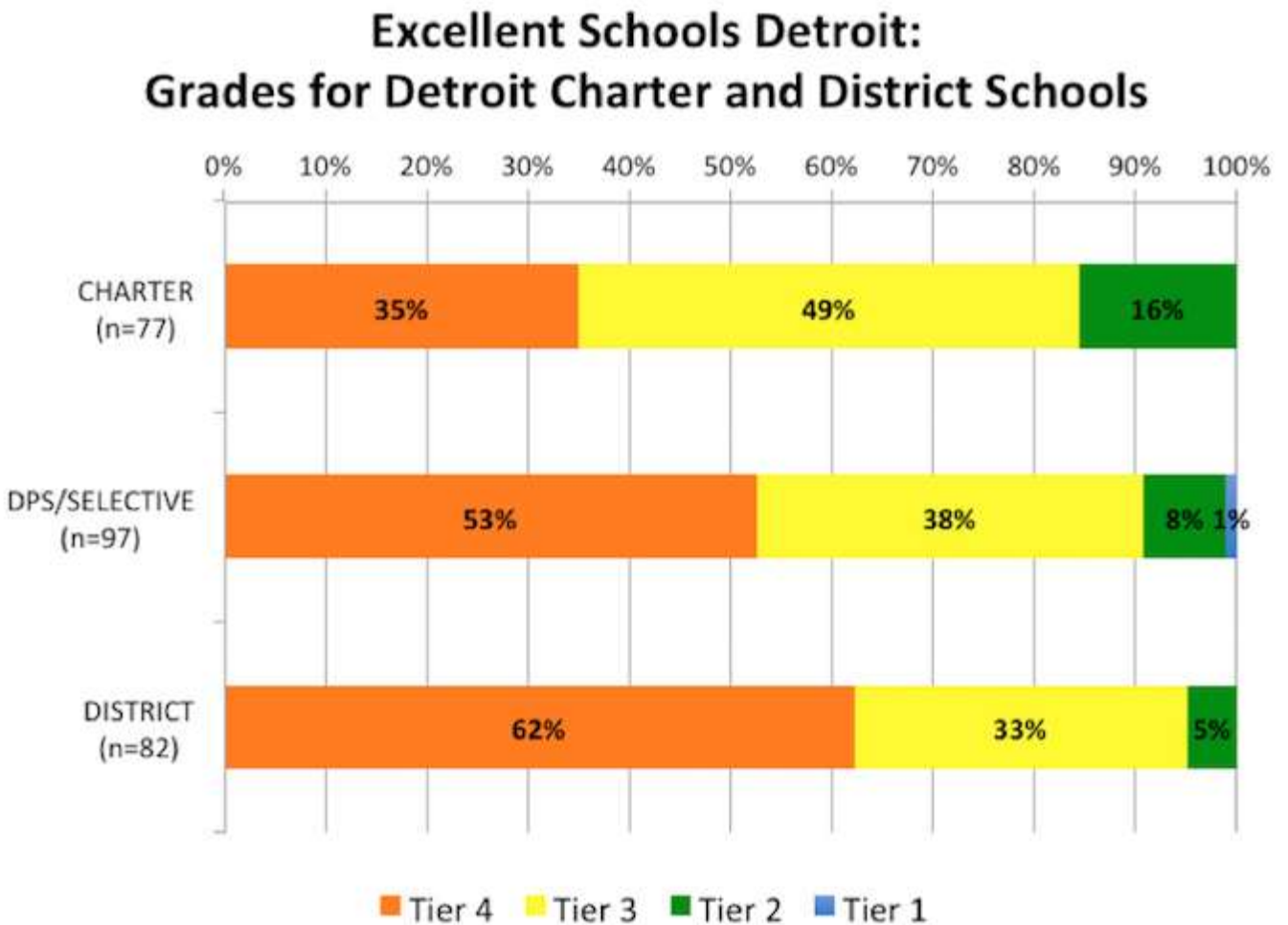
Based on the findings presented here, the typical student in Michigan charter schools gains more learning in a year than his [traditional public school (TPS)] counterparts, amounting to about two months of additional gains in reading and math. These positive patterns are even more pronounced in Detroit, where historically student academic performance has been poor. These outcomes are consistent with the result that charter schools have significantly better results than TPS for minority students who are in poverty.

Likewise, the 2015 CREDO report concluded that Detroit's charter sector was one of only four urban charter communities that "provide essential examples of school-level and system-level commitments to quality that can serve as models to other communities."

Like all empirical studies, the CREDO reports certainly have limitations, including some Harris [outlined](#) here at *EdNext*. Nevertheless, the CREDO findings do not support the notion that charters in Detroit have been a “disaster,” certainly not compared to district schools.

## 2. Excellent Schools Detroit

Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD) is a local nonprofit dedicated to improving education. Their [scorecard](#) does not control for race or socio-economic status. It grades K-8 schools based on a combination of static test scores, value-added test scores, and the results of a school climate survey, and their high school grades also factor in rates of high school completion and college matriculation. Using these metrics, ESD assigns schools letter grades and one of four “performance tiers.” According to [ESD](#), “Tier 1 and Tier 2 schools are considered excellent-to-good performers. Tier 3 schools are considered average-to-weak performers. Tier 4 schools are weak-to-failing performers.”



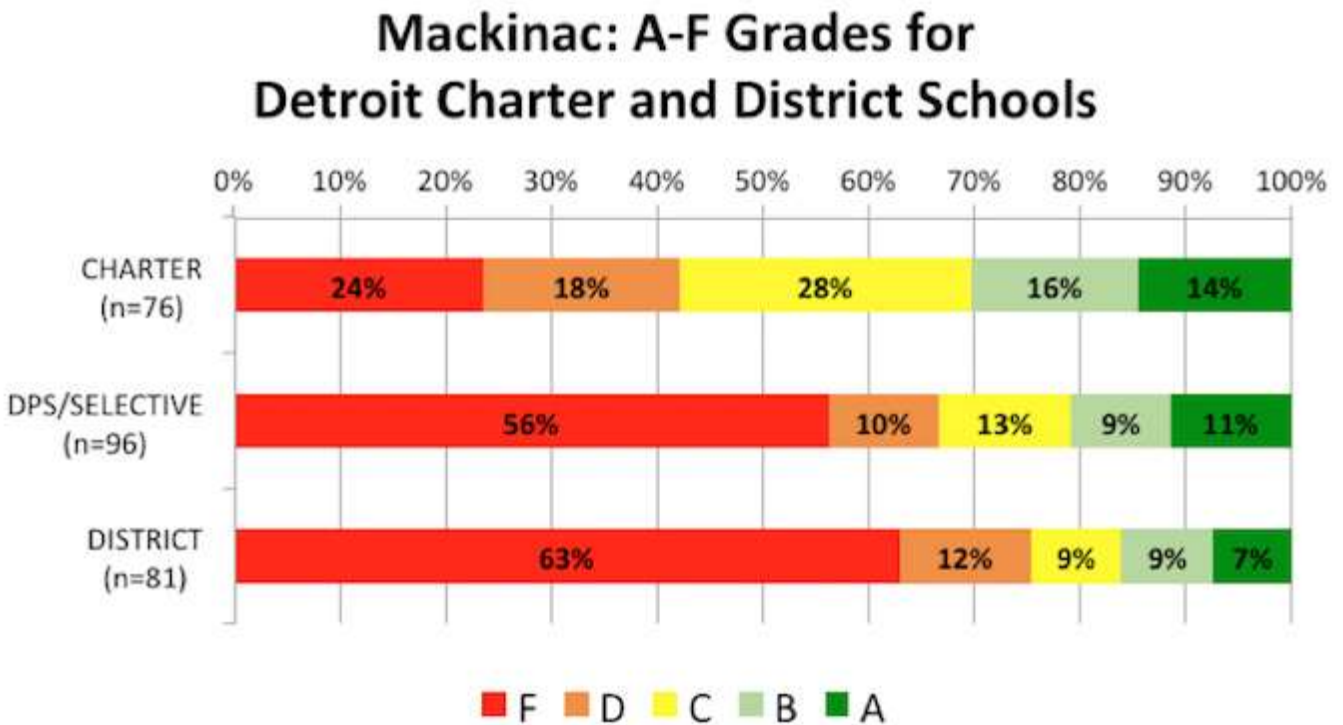
*Source: Excellent Schools Detroit. (Note: We include as “DPS schools” the public schools currently under state management, as they were and soon will be under DPS’s jurisdiction.)*

The ESD data include charter schools, traditional public schools, and selective-admissions magnet schools run by the Detroit Public School (DPS) system. The chart above compares the performance of Detroit’s charter schools (the top bar) to all the DPS schools (middle bar), as well as to Detroit’s traditional public schools, excluding the schools that require passing a test or maintaining a certain GPA to gain admission (the bottom bar). Comparing the top and bottom bars yields the most apt comparison because Detroit’s charter schools must take all comers and hold lotteries for oversubscription.

Detroit’s charter schools significantly outperform Detroit’s district school sector even when selective-admissions magnet schools are included, and even more significantly when they are excluded. Although the only school to achieve a Tier 1 ranking was a selective-admissions school, the percentage of charters that earned a Tier 2 ranking is double the percentage districts and selective-admissions schools combined. Moreover, when those schools are excluded, charters are three times more likely to achieve a Tier 2 ranking. Likewise, only about one third of charters ranked in the bottom tier, compared to more than half of the combination of district and selective-admissions schools and more than six in ten traditional district schools.

### 3. The Mackinac Center

The Mackinac Center is a center-right public policy think tank based in Michigan. Mackinac uses a regression analysis accounting for the socioeconomic status of a school’s students to predict academic performance, and grades schools by comparing the school’s actual results to its predicted performance.



Source: *Mackinac Center for Public Policy*.

The chart above shows the Mackinac grades for the same school groupings as the ESD chart. Once again, charter schools show a clear advantage. The percentage of charters earning an “A” is double the percentage of non-selective district schools. Nearly six in ten charters earn a grade of “C” or higher compared to only a quarter of non-selective district schools. Likewise, less than a quarter of charters earned an “F” compared to more than six in ten non-selective district schools.

Three separate reports using three separate methodologies all reached the same conclusion: Detroit’s charter schools outperform the city’s district schools. Now, that’s not to say that Detroit’s charters are very good. They are just much better than Detroit’s district schools, which as Robin Lake has noted, is a very low bar. Most schools in Detroit leave much to be desired. But if the question is whether Detroit’s charter schools are a significant improvement over the status quo, the results are unequivocal.

Of course, any reporter or researcher worth their salt knows that a close examination of the data can reveal more nuanced results than a superficial reading, but doing so rarely yields the exact opposite results. Yet the exact opposite is what the *New York Times* would have its readers believe. The *Times* has consistently pushed a narrative about Detroit’s charter schools that flies in the face of all the available data, and it should correct the record. Their readers—and the American public—deserve better.

We are not saying that Betsy DeVos made Detroit schools great again. We are saying that a plain look at the data suggests that the charter sector she supported is *significantly* outperforming the traditional district system. As the Senate, and the American people, considers her nomination for Secretary of Education, this fact should matter.

— Jason Bedrick and Max Eden

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