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Libertarian research paper finds top-funded Calif. charter schools not worth the money

By [Mikhail Zinshteyn](#) | 06.07.11 | 2:21 pm

Billions of private dollars have forced journalists and lawmakers to take seriously the school choice movement, be it voucher programs and tax credits, charter schools and reforms to teachers contracts within traditional public schools. Their money is highly strategic as well, with funds being poured into non-profits and research facilities that pursue the educational conceptions these wealthy donors promote.

So what happens when a study determines the success of charter schools has no correlation with the money they receive from education philanthropists? On Monday, [Andrew Coulson](#) of CATO published a [report](#) (PDF) that found the above to be mostly true.

The takeaway shouldn't be that wealthy funders are throwing their money away; the implications are perhaps much more severe.

Despite big donor money trying to identify the top performing schools for the purpose of scaling these institutions up, that is, spread their top-rated standards across a wider plain of geography, the schools trumpeted as paragons of academic consistency are middling or worse.

Coulson and his team isolated California, the state with the most charter schools and charter school networks, defined as "groups of two or more schools following the same pedagogical model or founded, overseen, or operated by the same person or group." They obtained public filings of donations made through the state's Fair Political Practices grant database, and also looked into top players in charter school support. Next, the writers of the study looked at the only statewide exam that gauges the performances of traditional and charter school students, the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) 2010 research files. Then they broke down the results by student socioeconomic status (SES), subject and grade.

In total, 68 charter school networks were ranked by student performance and by total funds received.

While not a goal of the study, the researchers found that charter schools enrolling low- and moderate-income black and Hispanic students outperform the statewide average for middle- and upper-income white and Asian students attending traditional public schools. As an example, here is a summary on how the American Indian charter school network fared, a group that ranked 21 in total grants received but was revealed to have the best student performances:

For perspective, recall the effect size categorization presented earlier in this paper. An effect around 0.5 [Standard Deviation] is considered “moderate” and one near 0.8 SD is considered “large.” The American Indian charter school network is an astonishing 4 SD above the statewide public school mean.

Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school group, perhaps the most high-profile alternative school network in the country, ranks 7th in student performance and funding. The network with the most funding, Aspire, with over \$36 million in grants, ranks 23rd in educational output. That incongruity is not an outlier. From the study:

The first sign of a problem is that the three highest-performing charter networks are ranked 21st, 27th, and 39th in terms of the grant funding.

And for the wonky statistical explainers:

Outliers can be a product of measurement error, and, where there is reason to believe this is the case, they are generally dropped from the dataset so they do not skew the results. In the present study, however, we have no evidence that the top performing networks, or the best-funded networks, have greater measurement error than the others. And, even when they are dropped, the correlation between performance and grant funding remains negligible.

Analyzing his own data, Coulson finds that charter schools that aren't part of a network do no better than traditional schools, as [other studies have found](#). But, he argues, the best charter school networks outperform by a wide margin the average performance indicators of traditional public schools.

Coulson, in a brief interview with The American Independent, referred back to a question he raised in the concluding paragraphs of the report. He says education in the U.S. is over-regulated, which explains why a for-profit academic enhancement service like the Japanese Kumon, with “4 million students in 42 countries, while the nonprofit KIPP, one of the fastest growing charter school networks in America, serves fewer than 30,000.” As evidence, he pointed to a [paper he wrote in 2009](#) that argued the best international school systems are those that are the most market-oriented.

He also cautioned not to take too much from the research paper. “That study is a straightforward explanation of whether a popular current strategy for scaling up the best schools is working. It finds that it isn't,” he said.

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