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Charter Schools in Chicago: No Model for Education Reform

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Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity responses to the Illinois Network of Charter Schools critiques of “Charter Schools in Chicago: No Model for Education Reform”

The Illinois Network of Charter Schools (INCS) response to the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity (IMO) report on Chicago charter schools misrepresents the report findings. In addition, it presents alternative comparisons of charter performance that are inadequate because they do not control for student and school characteristics that directly impact student performance. One of the central messages of the IMO report is that controlling for these factors can dramatically affect how charters compare to traditional schools.

The table below responds to the INCS critiques point by point.

INCS Claim	Truth
<p>“Charters have had higher graduation rates than other open-enrollment (non-selective) schools for the past 6 years.” (from “Setting the Record Straight on Charter Performance.”)</p>	<p>INCS only uses comparisons of raw graduation rates – numbers that have little meaning without controlling for student and school characteristics.</p> <p>The characteristics included in IMO’s analysis were: percentage of students in the school with limited English, percentage of students in independent educational programs, percentage of students low-income, percentage of students homeless, school mobility rate, school chronic truancy rate, school attendance rate, school size, racial mix of students, and whether schools are classified as “selective” or as a “magnet.”</p> <p><i>After controlling for these student and school characteristics, 2012-13 graduation rates in charters were significantly lower than in traditional (non-selective) schools.</i> (See Tables 4 and A.4 in the IMO report.)</p>
<p>“In 2013, 84% of Chicago charter school campuses outperformed their neighborhood comparison schools in ISAT (elementary) or PSAE (high school) composite [pass rates]...” (from “Setting the Record Straight on Charter Performance.”)</p>	<p>Simple comparisons of one school to another cannot control for all of the differences between schools that directly affect student performance. The IMO analysis of student performance on standardized tests showed that, <i>after controlling for all of the student and school characteristics listed above, charters did in fact consistently underperform traditionals in reading and math pass rates, growth rates and graduation rates.</i> (See Table 4 and Tables A.1 - A.4 in the IMO report.)</p>

INCS Claim	Truth
<p>“The author is unclear on how growth rates were calculated...” (from “Setting the Record Straight on Charter Performance.”)</p>	<p>The growth rate variable shows the average reading and math growth values by school from the Illinois State Board of Education growth model available from the Illinois Board of Education data site (http://www.isbe.net/assessment/report_card.htm). The IMO analysis showed that, <i>after controlling for all of the student and school characteristics listed above, growth rates in charters lagged behind traditionals by 3-4 percentage points in 2012-13.</i> (See Table 4 and Table A.3 in the IMO report.)</p>
<p>“Charter schools are open to all students, unlike selective, gifted and magnet schools which screen admissions based on academic achievement. Therefore, other non-selective, open enrollment schools are a better comparison group.” (from “Setting the Record Straight on Charter Performance.”)</p>	<p>Comparisons to selective, gifted and magnet schools were included in the IMO report only for the sake of completeness. Those comparisons received very little attention. <i>All of the comparisons highlighted in Table 4 of the report – the comparisons that control for student and school characteristics – show only differences between charters and non-selective traditional schools.</i> The differences between charters and non-selective traditional schools in income and racial mixes are controlled for in the IMO analysis.</p>
<p>“Charters led CPS open-enrollment schools in college enrollment by 20 percentage points in 2012-13” (from “Setting the Record Straight on Charter Performance.”)</p>	<p><i>The social science principle of “selection bias” tells us that this is exactly the kind of difference one would expect to see in a simple comparison between charters and traditional schools, especially since many charters explicitly characterize themselves as college prep schools.</i> The IMO report discusses this phenomenon: “The way that parents and students select charters virtually guarantees that, as a group, charter students have greater parental concern for and participation in their education than do students in traditional, assigned schools. By definition, charter parents cared enough to go to the trouble of enrolling their kids in a school other than one assigned to them by the school district. While many parents of kids in traditional schools care and participate just as much, you can't say that they have <i>all</i> demonstrated the same level of concern. This matters because active participation by parents in their child’s education is an important contributing factor to student achievement.” (IMO report, page 13)</p>

INCS Claim	Truth
<p>INCS representatives have argued in various places (in articles in the Chicago Sun Times, the Chicago Tribune and on WTTW’s web site) that the graduation data cited in Table 3 of IMO’s report is inaccurate and that the use of a single year of data compromises the findings.</p>	<p>The graduation rates in Table 3 represent simple averages calculated across schools. They may differ from rates calculated for entire student populations in the different types of schools. Simple averages were all that could be calculated with the data set used in the analysis. In any case, <i>the Table 3 comparisons were included only for completeness. It is the comparisons in Table 4 that control for student and school characteristics that matter</i> and those comparisons do not suffer from any biases associated with school size (as simple averages may).</p> <p>The basic models were initially tested using 2011-12 data with nearly identical results. When the 2012-13 became available, that year was used in the report instead.</p> <p>The student growth measure used in the analysis also measures achievement growth over time (the school year).</p>
<p>The IMO report “is a policy document masquerading as research.” (articles in the Chicago Sun Times, the Chicago Tribune and on WTTW’s web site)</p>	<p>The report applies universally accepted social science statistical procedures to hard data from public sources in order to evaluate an important public policy issue. That makes it a classic example of public policy research.</p>