U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and the Workforce

Full Committee Hearing:
The Power of Charter Schools: Expanding Opportunity for America's Students

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Written Statement of:

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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I am an associate professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, deputy director of the Harvard Kennedy School's Program on Education Policy and Governance, and editor-in-chief of the journal *Education Next*. I serve on the Massachusetts State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, the sole charter school authorizer in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I am also a board member of Rhode Island Mayoral Academies, a non-profit that opens economically diverse charter schools in partnership with Rhode Island mayors, and of Building Excellent Schools, a non-profit that prepares charter school leaders. Finally, I am the principal investigator of the Boston Charter Research Collaborative, a partnership with six high-performing charter management organizations to understand how schools influence the development of skills not captured by test scores. This testimony draws on not only the available research on charter schools, but also my experiences in each of these roles. The views expressed are mine, however, not those of the organizations with which I am affiliated or their funders.

A hearing on the topic of charter schools is timely in light of April's release of the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress, often called the nation's report card. The latest results showed a slight uptick in 8th-grade reading scores but were otherwise flat—continuing a period of stagnation that has persisted for a decade. This lack of progress is especially disappointing after fifteen years of steadily rising achievement, during which students of color and low-achieving students made the greatest gains. It has led some to question the model of school reform our nation has pursued over the past decade.

These questions are appropriate, but they should not lead us to ignore evidence on one reform that has worked: the creation of charter schools to provide new public school options for families, particularly those living in low-performing urban school districts. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia now have laws permitting the authorization of public charter schools.

These schools are publicly funded, tuition-free, and open to all, but they are managed independently of the traditional district. Some 3.2 million students—roughly 6 percent of the total K-12 population—attend one of the more than 7,000 charter schools in operation nationwide.

The emergence of charter schools has been a state-led reform: States enact charter school laws, determine the entities that can authorize charters, and set the conditions under which charters operate. But the federal government has provided the charter sector with critical support through start-up funds, facilities financing, and, since 2010, grants to replicate or expand charter schools with a strong track record. Federal priorities for states seeking these funds have also encouraged states to improve their practices for authorizing charter schools and ensure that students are able to access them equitably. This is an attractive model for federal education policy: supporting promising state policies and encouraging, not mandating, other states to consider them. The accumulated research on charter schools speaks to the value of—and continued need for—these investments.

Charter school effectiveness

First, research confirms that charter schools are providing high-quality options for millions of American students, particularly those most in need of alternatives. Compared to public school students as a whole, the students who attend charters are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, black or Hispanic, and living in urban areas. The benefits of charter school attendance are greatest for these groups.

Compared to most education interventions, we have unusually good evidence on how charter schools affect the students who attend them. Researchers have been able to take advantage of the natural experiments that occur when students are admitted by lottery to oversubscribed charter schools. They have also used the results of lottery-based studies to validate other forms of charter school evaluation, enabling them to study the effectiveness of a broader set of schools, including those that are not oversubscribed.

It is often said that the evidence on charter schools is "mixed." Individual charter schools do vary widely in their effectiveness, and the most comprehensive studies of the charter sector suggest little difference, on average, in how much students learn in charter and nearby district schools. For example, a 2013 study of charter schools in 27 states conducted by Stanford University's Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) found that, on average, attending a charter school has no effect on students' math achievement and only a small positive effect in reading (CREDO, 2013).

Yet dismissing the charter sector's track record as mixed ignores clear evidence of benefits for students from low-income families, students of color, and students living in urban areas—all groups for whom educational opportunities are too often limited. The same 2013 CREDO study found strong test score gains from attending a charter school for each of these groups. And a more recent CREDO study that focused on charter schools in 41 urban areas with a large

charter presence found that charter schools in these cities have strong positive effects on achievement that are largest for low-income black and Hispanic students (CREDO, 2015).

Rigorous studies from my home state of Massachusetts illustrate the pattern of results often found in research on charter schools (Angrist, Pathak, and Walters, 2013). In our urban centers, each year of attendance at an oversubscribed charter middle school increases students' achievement by 15 percent of a standard deviation in reading and 32 percent of a standard deviation in math. These effects are among the largest on record for an educational intervention implemented at scale, and large enough in math to close the entire black-white achievement gap while students are enrolled in middle school. In contrast, attending a charter middle school in a suburban or rural area lowers students' achievement by a small amount in both reading and math—despite the fact that these schools are popular enough to hold admissions lotteries. Many of these nonurban charter schools have a distinctive curricular emphasis that may explain their sustained popularity despite a lack of success in improving test scores. Even so, this pattern of results suggests that the availability of charter schools has enhanced the equity of outcomes for American students.

The strong performance of charter schools in urban settings is particularly impressive given that, in many states, they continue to receive substantially less funding per student than their district peers. A 2014 study by the University of Arkansas found that charter schools receive an average of $3,814, or 28 percent, less per student from all sources (including private donations) than district schools in the same state (Batdorff, et al., 2014). This gap implies that charter schools provide a far greater return-on-investment for spending on public education.

Finally, there is evidence that the performance of the charter sector is improving over time, for multiple reasons (Epple, Romano, and Zimmer, 2015). First, many charter schools are relatively new, and schools tend to become more effective as they mature. Second, a growing share of the charter sector comprises schools that are part of charter management organizations, which tend to be more effective than standalone schools (CREDO, 2017). Most importantly, research from multiple states confirms that low-performing charter schools are more likely to close either due to a lack of parental demand or as a result of authorizer decisions (Baude, et al., 2014; Chingos and West, 2015; Ladd, Clotfelter, and Holbein, 2017). While relatively few schools closed due to academic performance in the early years of the charter movement, the annual closure rate for charter schools in the past decade has averaged 3-4 percent. This provides a mechanism for continuous improvement that is generally not present in traditional public sector.

Parental satisfaction and student discipline

My own research on parental satisfaction provides additional evidence of a charter school advantage (Barrows, Peterson, and West, 2017; see also Cheng and Peterson, 2017). Using two data from two nationally representative surveys, my colleagues and I find that parents of students attending charter schools are more satisfied with important aspects of their schools—such as teacher quality, school discipline, and character instruction—than are district-school

parents. These differences are especially pronounced when it comes to school discipline and safety. For example, 34 percent of charter parents report that they are "very satisfied" with discipline in their child's school, as compared to just 17 percent of district-school parents. The comparable figures for school safety are 38 percent and 28 percent, respectively. Charter parents are also less likely to report that property destruction, fighting, and drug use are serious problems in their children's schools than are district-school parents. These findings are descriptive and not causal. They nonetheless confirm that the additional choices charter schools are providing are valued by the families who use them.

Contrary to common perception, charter schools on average do not rely more heavily on suspensions as a tool for student discipline than other schools in the areas in which they operate. Data from the 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection reveal that 6.4 percent of students attending charter schools are suspended each year, slightly higher than the 5.3 percent of students attending district schools (Government Accountability Office, 2018). When examined separately, however, white, black, Hispanic, and Asian students are all less likely to be suspended if they attended a charter school. This counter-intuitive pattern implies that the modest difference between charter and district schools in overall suspension rates reflects differences in the populations they serve and prevailing practices in the areas in which they operate. Indeed, when each charter school nationwide is compared to its closest five district schools, 53 percent of charter schools suspend students at a rate similar to their local peers, and more charter schools suspend students less frequently than do so more frequently (Malkus, 2016).

Of course, there are some charter schools that do rely heavily on suspensions as a tool for managing student behavior, just as some district schools do so. Many of these charter schools, either on their own or under pressure from their authorizers, have identified this as a concern and are working to develop alternative approaches to student discipline while maintaining high expectations for behavior and results. For those concerned about an excessive reliance on exclusionary discipline in American schools, however, even current data suggest that charter schools are part of the solution, not the problem.

Effects of charter schools on non-charter students

Finally, the additional high-quality options created by the charter sector have not come at the expense of students who remain enrolled in traditional districts. Rather, the bulk of the evidence suggests that the presence of charter schools has a modest positive effect on nearby district schools, and there are a growing number of examples of districts adopting lessons from the charter sector and of charter schools partnering with districts to share best practices.

Researchers at Mathematica Policy Research recently surveyed the results of eleven rigorous studies that have examined how the presence of charter schools affects the achievement of students enrolled in nearby district schools (Gill and Booker, 2015). Six of these studies found evidence of positive effects, four found no effects, and just one found negative effects. A subsequent study of New York City found that the opening of a new charter school led to

improvements in nearby district schools, that the size of these gains increased with proximity, and that they were greatest when charter and district schools shared the same facility (Cordes, in press).

That's not to say that a substantial loss of enrollment to charters does not create challenges for traditional districts, which may be forced to reduce staffing levels or close under-used facilities. It is critical, however, to distinguish between the charter sector's effects on school districts as systems and its effects on the students enrolled in those systems. The available evidence indicates that these students, at a minimum, are not harmed by charter schools—and that they may even benefit.

Conclusion

In short, charter schools are succeeding in providing new high-quality options for millions of American students. This expansion of choice has had the greatest benefits for students in urban areas, where improvement is most needed. And the performance of the charter sector as a whole is improving over time, in stark contrast to the stagnation seen among U.S. public schools as a whole.

It is therefore disappointing that the growth of the charter sector has slowed. After a decade of climbing by 6-9 percent a year, growth in the number of charter schools has fallen to two percent annually over the past three years. This is not due to a lack of demand: Many charter schools have long wait lists of families seeking to enroll. Nor is it due to a lack of need: A recent report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute identified 454 "charter school deserts," defined as areas of three or more contiguous census tracts with at least moderate poverty and no charter elementary schools.

The reasons for the slowdown in charter growth are unclear, but one factor is surely the gap in the state and local funding charters receive and the difficulty many charter entrepreneurs face in securing adequate school facilities. This makes continued federal support for and investment in the charter sector all the more vital.

Thank you. I look forward to my fellow panelists' remarks and your questions.

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