Commentary on "Alternative Strategies for Identifying High-Performing Charter Schools in Texas"

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In the last few years policymakers and practitioners nationally have shown much interest in identifying, recognizing, and replicating successful charter schools, many of which are proving that they can educate low-income and otherwise at-risk students remarkably well. However, past efforts to identify high-performing schools have been problematic. Too many schools proudly post blue ribbon banners based on a year's gain long after the same schools have gone into decline in subsequent years. Other schools were identified as high performers but upon scrutiny, their outstanding performance was traced to an advantaged student population or a massive influx of funding. There may be something useful going on at these schools, but not necessarily something replicable with at-risk populations.

It is for these reasons that the article *Alternative Strategies for Identifying High-Performing Charter Schools in Texas* is useful to policy and practice. The article takes a thoughtful approach to measuring charter success in a reliable, fair, and useful way. The authors take careful consideration of student demographics and other possible selection biases in order to home in on true measures of whether a school is adding value to the abilities and motivations of a given student. Utilizing the guidelines of the Center on Reinventing Public Education's (CRPE) Consensus Panel on Student Achievement,[1] the paper argues for focusing as much as possible (given available data) on rigorous value-added methods using student-level data (hierarchical linear modeling or HLM). The authors also attempt to reduce the volatility of high-performance identifiers (which might label a school a success one year, but a failure the next) by using measures that employ multiple years of outcomes data. Finally, the paper goes a step further than other attempts to identify successful charter schools by taking cost effectiveness into account. Using the Texas school finance database, the authors assessed level of spending alongside performance.

Using these systematic approaches, the authors identify 44 Open Enrollment charter schools that merit a "high-performer" rating. These schools fall into the top quintile of the performance measures and outperform 80% of the public school campuses in Texas. Nearly all of the campuses identified serve a student population that is more than 60% non-white and most (75%) serve a student body that is more than 80% economically disadvantaged. The article also finds that most of these high-performers are highly cost-effective, earning high ratings on the cost-efficiency measures.

The authors argue for more widespread use of value-added modeling in the state accountability system, making an important and well-

justified point that various measures of school performance are not equally informative for the purpose of disaggregating school contributions to student learning. In fact, the performance metrics currently used by many states misidentify schools in need of attention, either as successes that should be rewarded or as failures that warrant closure or turnaround. The authors suggest that states, in this case Texas, should instead use metrics based on student-specific growth trends. They argue that, with such metrics in place, Texas would have confidence that the 44 high-performing charter schools merit expansion. Growth-model accountability systems would also provide meaningful and politically defensible standards for taking action against low-performing but high-spending charter schools.

There is growing consensus that value-added measures based on student-level gain are far superior, methodologically and politically, to the common blunt measures used to identify school performance. Colorado has, over the past several years, shifted to a growth model-based school accountability system. Many argue that the model has been a critical policy lever in large part because it simply seems fair to a broad range of stakeholders. Thanks to significant investment in outreach and online tools to support policy decisions based on the model, Colorado appears to have garnered widespread support for the model and has had success with its use.[2]

Despite my enthusiasm for growth models, I offer a few cautions on the limits of any kind of formula that drives high-stakes decisions about schools. The first is that automatic approval for one high-performing school to expand may not be wise. The research conducted by CRPE in partnership with Mathematica Policy Research on charter management organizations has shown that faithful replication of high-performing schools can be difficult, especially as networks expand too quickly, serve new grade levels or student populations, or expand across large geographic areas.[3] Rather than giving high-performing schools a free pass to expand, states would do well to carefully review capacity of one organization to scale and consider ways to ensure more schools adopt the practices of high-performing schools.

The second is that charter authorizers also deserve research and policy attention. Reliable student identification methods and value-added metrics allow states to deliver on the promise of shutting low-performing schools, but these data could also be used to analyze how authorizers are performing, which and ones are able to pick strong applicants, close low performers, and replicate success.

Finally, any discussion of school grading schemes or rankings is incomplete without some recognition that test scores are only one (albeit

an important) measure of student outcomes, and even the most sophisticated models are imperfect in capturing all aspects of student performance. An increasing number of state and local accountability systems use test scores as a top-level trigger to identify apparent successes and failures, but then use other metrics and even school inspections to confirm that there is strong evidence on multiple fronts that test scores align with overall student welfare.

References

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