FOREWORD

By Michael J. Petrilli and Amber M. Northern

Those of us at Fordham have strived over the course of our organization's two-decade existence to stay open to new evidence and to be willing to change our minds. For example, we shifted from the "let a thousand flowers bloom" camp within the charter movement to the "some weeding is necessary" team after multiple studies showed just how poor the achievement of some charters was turning out to be, and just how hard it was to actually shut such failing charter schools down. And there have been other smaller shifts over the years too, on funding, teacher diversity, and more.

Of course, we are fortunate to be an independent think tank, with our own endowment and a mission to follow the evidence wherever it leads. It's not so easy to keep an open mind when you're an interest group, like a teachers union, which is charged with protecting its members' concerns. The unions are never going to say, "You know, we've changed our minds based on the evidence, and we've decided we *really* like these non-unionized charter schools." So for them the game is about finding evidence that supports their position and ignoring, if not discrediting, the rest.

We see that on our side of the reform fence too, as when some of our friends decided that test scores weren't valid measures of student success after multiple rigorous studies showed negative test score impacts of private school choice programs. Thus the energetic effort to discredit test scores as predictors of long term outcomes.

But back to reform opponents. There used to be a fierce debate about whether kids in charter schools were learning more than kids in traditional public schools. The American Federation of Teachers, for example, famously leaked a study to the *New York Times* that relied on NAEP scores to make this tendentious point. But now that dozens of studies have found that kids of color in urban charter schools learn significantly more on average than their district peers, the unions and other opponents have had to find other arguments to make their case, while working to discredit the impact evaluations.

So they now have a two-part argument.

First, they argue that the charter school advantage is due entirely to "creaming." For example, in a recent *Wall Street Journal article*, the co-chairman of United Teachers Los Angeles attributed the success of charter schools to "having classes filled with motivated, high-performing students." It's apparently not enough to claim that *some* of the advantage comes from selection—the likelihood that families who choose charters are different in important ways from those who don't. But all of it?

Second, they argue that, regardless of how good or bad charters might be for the kids they serve, their growth is hurting traditional public schools and the kids who are left behind there. This argument has the benefit of polling extremely well, and has been used to great—or terrible—effect in the current California charter school wars.

With that long context in mind, we are pleased to present the following *highly significant* analysis by Fordham's senior research and policy associate, David Griffith, which examines the relationship between charter school market share and student achievement—not just for the kids in charters or the kids in district schools but for everybody.

It sounds straightforward, but to our knowledge this is the first time anyone has conducted such a study.

We have the CREDO evaluations and other studies looking at the performance of students in charter versus district schools. And there have been many studies of "competitive" or "spillover" effects of charter schools on district schools, most of which find that competition from charter schools does not harm achievement in nearby district schools, and sometimes boosts it.

This study doesn't look at the differences between charter and district kids. In fact, we can't distinguish between them because our data source, the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), includes the academic progress that *all* students in a given geographic community made compared to students in other geographic communities nationwide. In other words, the academic performance of charter schools is included in what SEDA refers to as the "geographic school district," regardless of whether the charter schools operate independently of the district in which they are located (although we do know what percentage of students attended charters).

Griffith spent an entire year getting acquainted with the dataset and searching for the best way to model "charter market share." For example, because we're really interested in the achievement of specific racial subgroups, it makes more sense to consider the effects of "charter market share" within those subgroups than across them. So his findings focus on the relationship between the percentage of black, white, or Hispanic students who enrolled in charters and the average achievement of all black, white, or Hispanic students in a geographic school district, including those in traditional public schools.

In the end, what we learned was quite simple: For large urban districts, the more black and Hispanic students are enrolled in charter schools, the greater achievement is for black and Hispanic students.

This has huge implications for the two arguments that charter opponents are making.

First, it provides new evidence that creaming can't explain the entirety of the charter school advantage in urban districts. Because if charter schools' success was truly an "illusion," as the *Wall Street Journal* author charges, we'd see no gains for communities with greater charter market share. Higher test scores in charters would be canceled out by lower test scores in district schools, driven by the transfer of higher-achieving students from district to charter schools. It would be a zero-sum game.

Instead, we find achievement gains in districts with more charters. What that implies is that the additional learning that's happening in charter schools is not coming at the expense of less learning in district schools. It's additive. And that implies that kids in charters really are learning more—not because of who the kids are, but because of what the schools are doing.

The findings also have implications for opponents' argument that charter schools are hurting traditional public schools. We suspected that wasn't the case, based on existing evidence, at least for the district schools located closest to new charter schools, at least when it comes to test scores. But maybe the performance of other students in the district was being harmed in some way. We don't see any evidence of that in this study.

Of course, this one analysis won't end the charter school wars, or even change them in a significant way. Perhaps some scholars or bystanders who mildly opposed charter schools will change their minds, now that there's even more evidence that they really are doing something to help black and Hispanic kids learn more, and that they aren't hurting the outcomes of students in district schools. Yet we suspect that most critics will continue to oppose charter schools because their opposition has always been based on bread and butter interests, like the bargaining power of teachers unions, rather than evidence or reason.

But, charter supporters, stand proud. These schools really are getting better results for children of color, and not just because they are attracting the most motivated families.

That's good news with which to kick off the new school year.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although numerous studies have examined the relative performance of charter and traditional public schools, as well as the competitive effects that charters may have on their district neighbors, to our knowledge, no prior study has addressed whether overall achievement increases as the "market share" of charter schools rises.

Accordingly, this report uses data from a new source, which allows researchers to compare English language arts (ELA) and math scores from thousands of school districts and dozens of different tests, to address two questions:

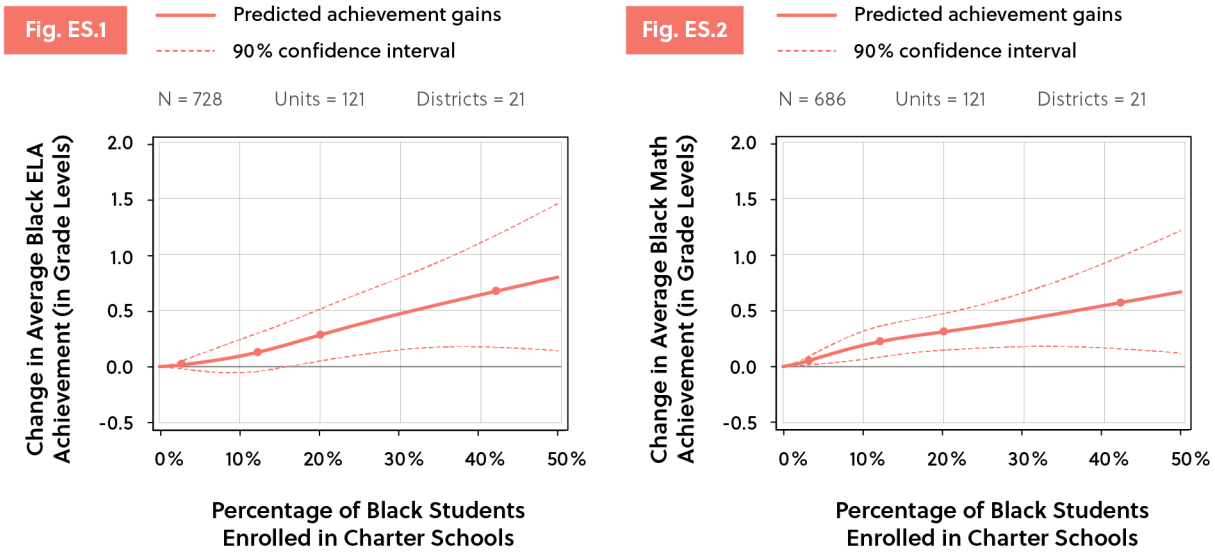
1. *Is higher charter market share associated with achievement gains for all students—including those enrolled in traditional (i.e., district-operated) public schools?*
2. *How does the relationship between charter market share and achievement differ by district and student characteristics?*

Unlike previous studies, this one neither compares nor distinguishes between the achievement of students in charter and traditional public schools. Rather, it focuses on the overall performance of "geographic school districts," which include both traditional public schools and local charters (even if they are legally and functionally independent). Furthermore, the effects of higher "charter market share" are examined *within* racial subgroups rather than *across* them. In other words, the findings focus on the relationship between the percentage of black, white, or Hispanic students who enrolled in charters and the average achievement of *all* black, white, or Hispanic students in a geographic school district, including those in traditional public schools.

FINDING 1: In urban areas, higher charter market share is associated with significant achievement gains for black and Hispanic students.

In major urban areas, higher charter market share among black and Hispanic students is associated with significant achievement gains in both ELA and math. For example, in the twenty-one urban districts with the most black students, moving from 0 to 50 percent "black charter market share" is associated with a 0.8 grade level increase in average ELA achievement and a 0.7 grade level increase in average math achievement for all black students—including those in traditional public schools (Figures ES.1–ES.2).

Figures ES.1–ES.2. In the largest urban districts, higher "black charter market share" is associated with significant achievement gains for black students.



Note: Figures show the predicted changes in the average ELA and math achievement of grade 3–8 black students in charter and traditional public schools as district-by-grade-level charter market share increases among black students. Estimates were generated using a cubic spline with knots at the 5th, 35th, 65th, and 95th percentiles (see red dots) and controlling for student demographics, district-by-grade-level unit and year fixed-effects, and district-specific quadratic time-trends. Sample includes all urban units with 0 to 50 percent black charter market share and average black enrollment >2500 between 2009 and 2015.

Similarly, in the twenty-seven urban districts that enroll the most Hispanic students, moving from 0 to 35 percent "Hispanic charter market share" is associated with a 0.7 grade level increase in average ELA and math achievement among Hispanic students—though because Hispanic charter market share didn't exceed 35 percent in any of these districts, we can't estimate the achievement gains beyond this point (Figures ES.3–ES.4).

Figures ES.3–ES.4. In the largest urban districts, higher "Hispanic charter market share" is associated with significant achievement gains for Hispanic students.

Fig. ES.3

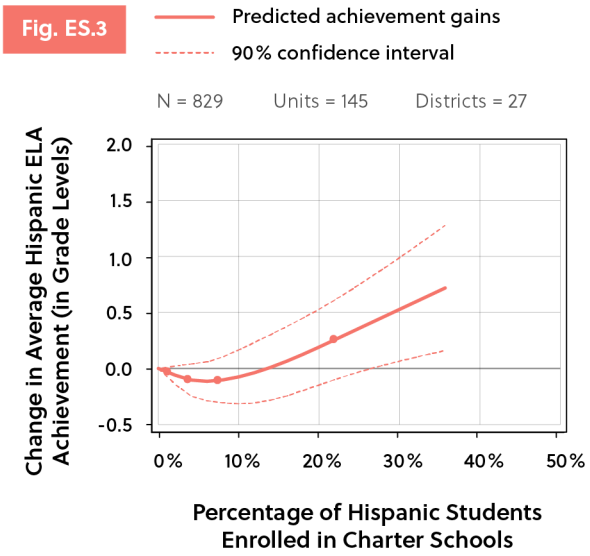
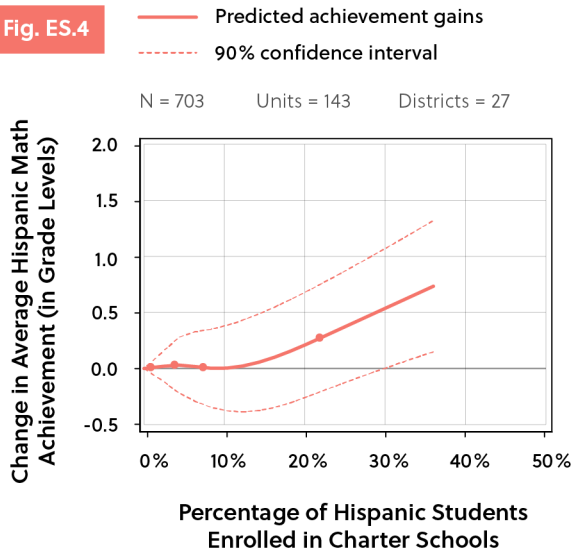


Fig. ES.4



Note: Figures show the predicted changes in the average ELA and math achievement of grade 3–8 Hispanic students in charter and traditional public schools as district-by-grade-level charter market share increases among Hispanic students. Estimates were generated using a cubic spline with knots at the 5th, 35th, 65th, and 95th percentiles (see red dots) and controlling for student demographics, district-by-grade-level unit and year fixed-effects, and district-specific quadratic time-trends. Sample includes all urban units with 0 to 35 percent Hispanic charter market share and average Hispanic enrollment >2500 between 2009 and 2015.

FINDING 2: In suburban and rural areas, higher charter market share is associated with significant achievement gains for Hispanic students, and black students in rural districts also see gains.

For example, in suburban districts with at least 500 Hispanic students per grade level, moving from 0 to 50 percent Hispanic charter market share is associated with a gain of 0.5 grade levels in ELA for Hispanic students—although there is no evidence that Hispanic students in suburban areas see gains in math (Figures ES.5–ES.6).

Figures ES.5–ES.6. In large suburban districts, higher "Hispanic charter market share" is associated with significant ELA gains for Hispanic students.

Fig. ES.5

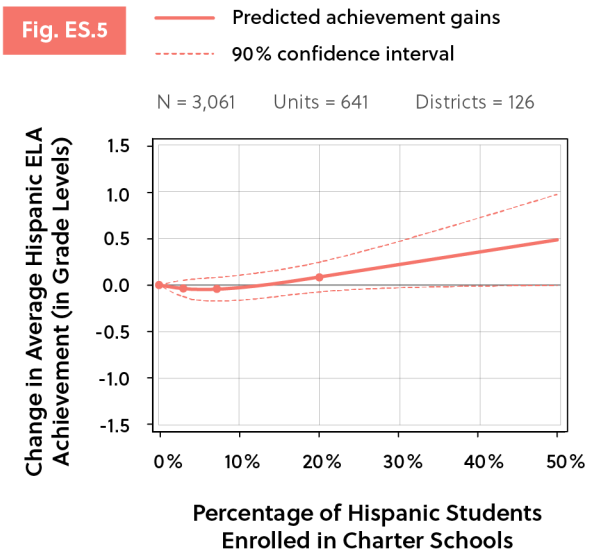
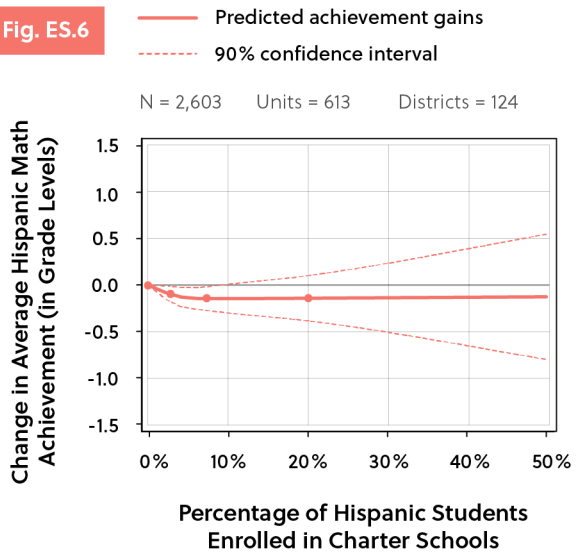


Fig. ES.6



Note: Figures show the predicted changes in the average ELA and math achievement of grade 3–8 Hispanic students in charter and traditional public schools as district-by-grade-level charter market share increases among Hispanic students. Estimates were generated using a cubic spline with knots at the 5th, 35th, 65th, and 95th percentiles (see red dots) and controlling for student demographics, district-by-grade-level unit and year fixed-effects, and district-specific quadratic time-trends. Sample includes all suburban units with 0 to 50 percent Hispanic charter market share and average Hispanic enrollment >500 between 2009 and 2015.

Similarly, higher black charter market share in rural districts is associated with significant ELA gains for black students in these communities (Figures ES.7–ES.8). However, there is no evidence that higher black charter market share in suburban districts benefits black students (not shown).

Figures ES.7–ES.8. In rural districts, higher "black charter market share" is associated with significant gains in ELA achievement for black students.

Fig. ES.7

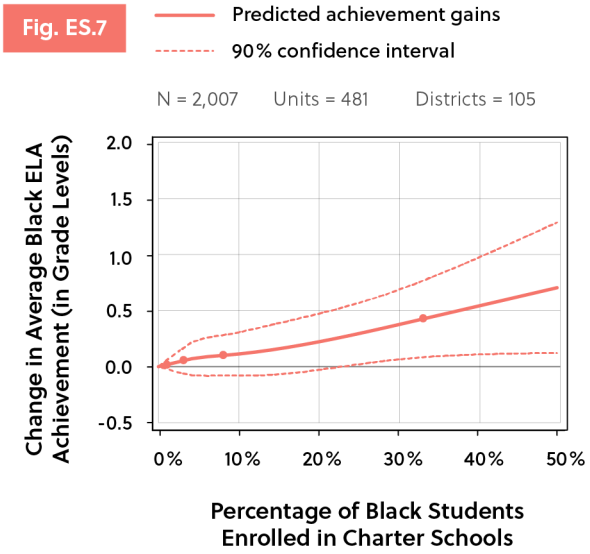
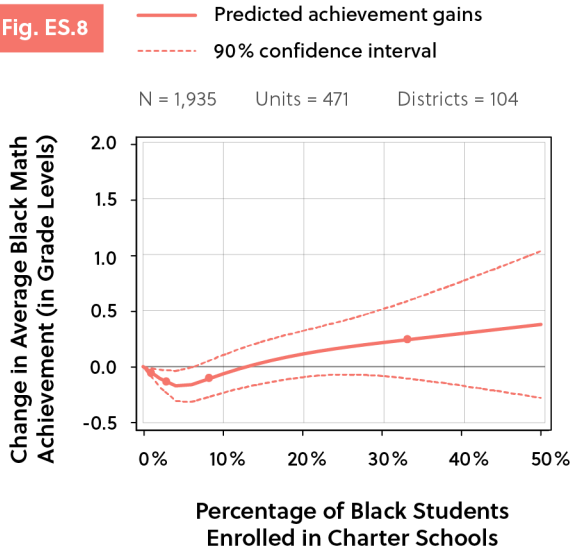


Fig. ES.8



Note: Figures show the predicted changes in the average ELA and math achievement of grade 3–8 black students in charter and traditional public schools as district-by-grade-level charter market share increases among black students. Estimates were generated using a cubic spline with knots at the 5th, 35th, 65th, and 95th percentiles (see red dots) and controlling for student demographics, district-by-grade-level unit and year fixed-effects, and district-specific quadratic time-trends. Sample includes all rural units with 0 to 50 percent black charter market share and average black enrollment >100 between 2009 and 2015.

FINDING 3: There is no evidence that higher charter market share is associated with achievement gains for white students.

For example, there is no evidence that higher "white charter market share" boosts the ELA or math achievement of white students in larger urban districts (Figures ES.9–ES.10).

Figures ES.9–ES.10. In large urban districts, there is no significant relationship between "white charter market share" and white students' ELA and math achievement.

Fig. ES.9

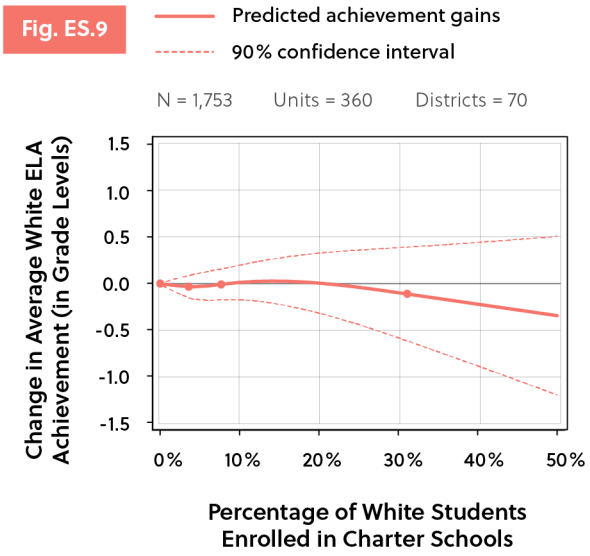
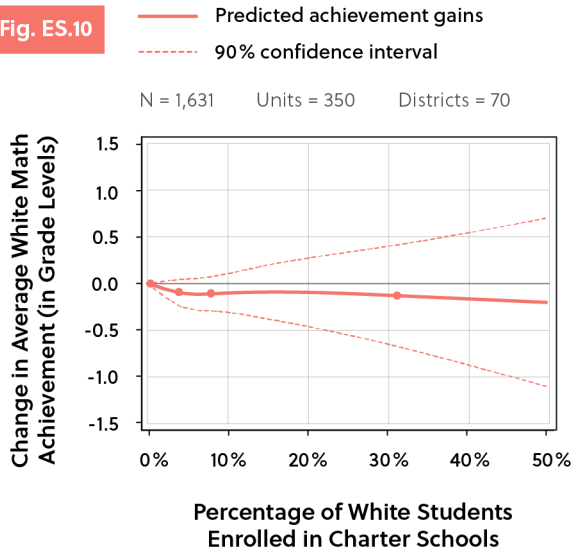


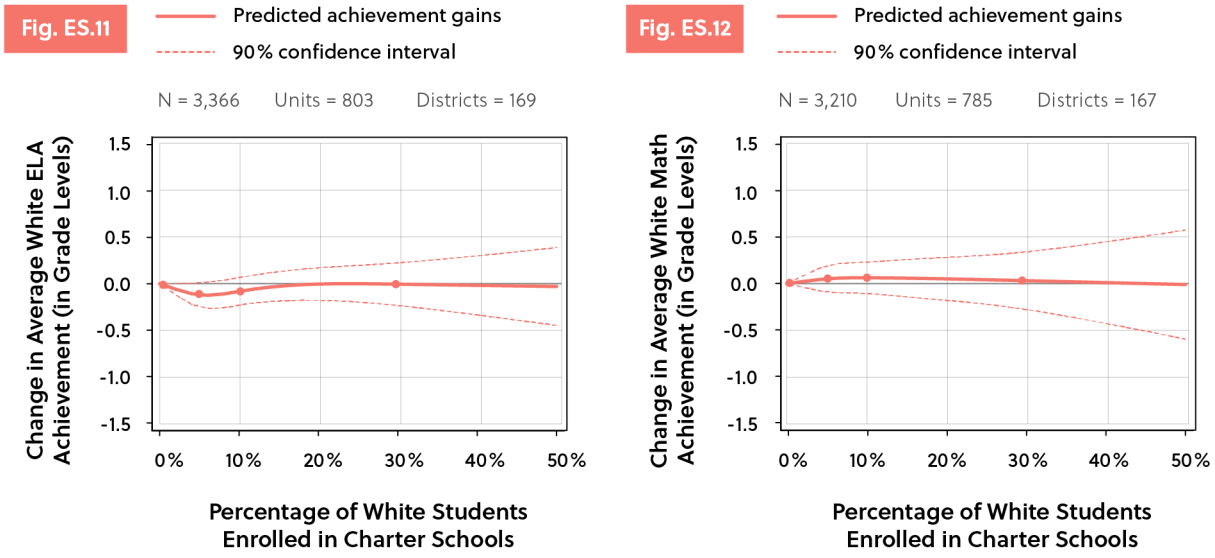
Fig. ES.10



Note: Figures show the predicted changes in the average ELA and math achievement of grade 3–8 white students in charter and traditional public schools as district-by-grade-level charter market share increases among white students. Estimates were generated using a cubic spline with knots at the 5th, 35th, 65th, and 95th percentiles (see red dots) and controlling for student demographics, district-by-grade-level unit and year fixed-effects, and district-specific quadratic time-trends. Sample includes all urban units with 0 to 50 percent white charter market share and average white enrollment >1000 between 2009 and 2015.

Similarly, there is no evidence that white higher charter market share boosts the academic achievement of white students in suburban districts (not shown) or in rural areas—although it doesn't seem to do much harm in these places either (Figures ES.11–ES.12).

Figures ES.11–ES.12. In rural districts, there is no significant relationship between "white charter market share" and white students' ELA and math achievement.



Note: Figures show the predicted changes in the average ELA and math achievement of grade 3–8 white students in charter and traditional public schools as district-by-grade-level charter market share increases among white students. Estimates were generated using a cubic spline with knots at the 5th, 35th, 65th, and 95th percentiles (see red dots) and controlling for student demographics, district-by-grade-level unit and year fixed-effects, and district-specific quadratic time-trends. Sample includes all rural units with 0 to 50 percent white charter market share and average white enrollment >250 between 2009 and 2015.

In short, when it comes to white charter market share, there simply isn't much to talk about.

In contrast, the academic gains associated with higher black and Hispanic charter market share are substantial and highly consistent with the large, overwhelmingly positive literature on the performance of charters that serve these groups, as well as the smaller, but still positive, literature on charters' competitive effects.

Obviously, the logical implication of these results is that increasing the percentage of black and Hispanic students who enroll in charters—especially in the largest urban districts, which educate millions of minority students per year—would significantly reduce the longstanding racial achievement gaps that are ostensibly of concern to policymakers.