Summary Report

Civic Education and Charter Schools: Current Knowledge and Future Research Issues

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Credits and Acknowledgments

This summary report was written by Nancy Kober, a CEP consultant, and is based on a longer report written and researched by Naomi and Victor Chudowsky, CEP consultants; Nanami Yoshioka, CEP’s graduate research assistant; and Jennifer McMurrer, CEP’s research associate. Maria Ferguson, CEP’s executive director, and Diane Stark Rentner, CEP’s deputy director, provided advice and assistance on the report.

Based in Washington, D.C., at The George Washington University’s Graduate School of Education and Human Development and founded in January 1995 by Jack Jennings, the Center on Education Policy is a national independent advocate for public education and for more effective public schools. The Center works to help Americans better understand the role of public education in a democracy and the need to improve the academic quality of public schools. We do not represent any special interests. Instead, we help citizens make sense of the conflicting opinions and perceptions about public education and create the conditions that will lead to better public schools.

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Preparing young people to be good citizens is an important mission of all public schools. But with the pressure to raise student achievement in reading and mathematics, many schools are devoting less attention to civic education.

At the same time, many people have questioned whether students are learning enough civics to become well-informed, engaged citizens. According to the 2010 Civics report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), overall student achievement in civics increased between 1998 and 2010 at grade 4, stayed about the same at grade 8, and rose then fell back to its 1998 level at grade 12. While a majority of students reached NAEP’s “basic” level of achievement in civics in 2010, only about one-quarter performed at or above NAEP’s definition of “proficient” performance (which tends to be more rigorous than many states’ definition of proficiency).1

Information about civic education is limited for all types of schools but is particularly lacking for the rapidly growing charter school sector. Charter schools comprise about 5% of all public schools; between 2000 and 2010, charter school enrollments more than quadrupled. Roughly 55% of charter schools are located in cities, compared with just 25% of all public schools. Charter schools also enroll a higher proportion of racial/ethnic minority students than public schools in general—62% compared with 46%.2 Some charter school advocates maintain that the freedom from regulation and flexibility in curriculum and teaching found in many charter schools can have a positive impact on students’ civic education and engagement, but few studies have examined this issue.

To learn more about the status of civic education in both charter and traditional public schools, the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at The George Washington University analyzed data from the most recent NAEP civics assessment conducted in 2010. This was the first NAEP civics assessment that produced sufficient data for the charter school sector to allow for comparisons with traditional public schools. CEP used NAEP’s online data explorer3 to analyze disaggregated data for charter and traditional public schools, including data on student achievement and on various “background variables” related to civics curriculum, civics instruction, and student characteristics. We also reviewed other research literature on civic education and charter schools. Except where noted, the data in this report are from our own analysis.

This report summarizes the main findings from our analysis and our recommendations for future research in this area. A longer report that includes detailed data tables and a fuller discussion of findings is available at www.cep-dc.org (see Civic Education and Charter Schools: Current Knowledge and Future Research Issues).

2 http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cse.asp
Limitations of the NAEP Civics Data

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the only nationally representative dataset on civics achievement and instruction, but it has serious limitations as regards charter schools. Results from the NAEP civics assessment are available only for the nation as a whole, unlike NAEP results in reading, mathematics, science, and writing, which are available in certain years for individual states and for many large urban districts. Thus, while comparisons of civics achievement can be made between a representative sample of all charter schools and all traditional public schools in the nation, it is not possible to compare urban charter schools with urban traditional schools.

In addition, the sample of charter school students who took the 2010 civics assessment was small. Consequently, the standard error of measurement—a statistic that indicates how accurately a particular sample of test-takers represents the entire test-taking population—can be very large for the charter school results. This means that differences between charter and traditional schools that appear to be large are often not statistically significant.

We addressed this last limitation by grouping observations from our NAEP analysis into two categories: “statistically significant” findings that meet NAEP’s criteria for significance, and “suggestive” differences between charter and traditional public schools that are not statistically significant but are large enough to suggest a need for further research using other methods.

Statistically Significant Findings from the NAEP Analysis

We found several statistically significant differences between charter and traditional public schools, as well as several noteworthy similarities.

Overall, civics achievement was similar for students in charter and traditional schools.

At most grades, and for most racial/ethnic student groups, the average scores of charter school students on the 2010 NAEP civics assessment did not differ significantly from those of traditional public school students. The table that follows shows the average civics scores for all students in charter and traditional public schools on the NAEP scoring scale of 0-300.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 8</th>
<th>Grade 12</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>158</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: NAEP scoring scales are set independently for grades 4, 8, and 12 and are therefore not comparable across grade levels.

The apparently large difference at grade 12 between charter and traditional public schools is not statistically significant and is discussed later in the Suggestive Results section.
Significant differences in achievement between charter and traditional public schools were evident for a few student groups at particular grades.

Hispanic 8th graders in charter schools scored significantly higher on the NAEP civics assessment (an average score of 161) than did similar students in traditional schools (an average score of 134). Male 12th graders in traditional public schools scored significantly higher (an average score of 148) than did their peers in charter schools (an average score of 116).

There were no significant differences between charter and traditional public schools in how often students reported studying social studies.

Time spent on social studies is a critical factor in civics achievement. Students in all types of public schools who reported studying social studies almost every day scored significantly higher on the NAEP civics assessment than those who had social studies classes less often, according to our analysis.

At grade 8, a large majority of students in both charter schools (81%) and traditional public schools (69%) reported having social studies lessons almost every day. (The apparent difference between the two school sectors is not statistically significant). At grade 12, the proportions of both charter and traditional school students who reported taking social studies almost every day were similar to each other but lower than those in grade 8—most likely because high school students take more specific courses, such as U.S. history or government, that were not reported as “social studies” courses.

Fourth-grade teachers in both charter and traditional public schools appeared to place about the same amount of emphasis on basic civics topics.

For example, 40% or more of 4th grade teachers in both school sectors reported giving “moderate” or “large” emphasis to the following topics in their social studies classes: economic changes, environment and society, various cultures, politics and government, the role of citizens in U.S. democracy, space and place, and technological changes. In addition, more than one-third of 4th grade teachers in both charter and traditional schools gave moderate or large emphasis to the foundations of U.S. democracy and the U.S. constitution.

A majority of 8th and 12th graders in both charter and traditional public schools studied many of the same fundamental civics topics, but some of these topics were studied by a greater proportion of students in charters than in traditional schools.

Notable majorities of 8th and 12th graders in both school sectors reported studying the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. Congress, how laws are made, the Presidency and cabinet, elections and voting, the court system, and state and local government. At grade 8, however, significantly higher percentages of charter school students than of traditional school students reported studying the Constitution, the Congress, how laws are made, and the court system. At grade 12, the percentages of students who did not study international organizations and other countries’ governments were higher in traditional schools than in charter schools.

An equal percentage (16%) of 12th graders in charter and traditional public schools reported taking an Advanced Placement government and politics course.
Some significant differences emerged in how social studies was taught in charter and traditional public schools.

Similar proportions of charter and traditional school students reported undertaking certain activities in their social studies classes, such as writing reports, working on group projects, and writing opinion letters. But at grade 8, significantly higher percentages of students in charters (28%) than in traditional schools (15%) reported taking part in role play, mock trials, and dramas one to two times per month. At grade 8, a greater share of students in charters (40%) than in traditional schools (27%) also reported responding to short-answer questions in social studies almost every day. At grade 12, charter school students wrote long answers to questions more often than their peers in traditional schools.

The vast majority of 4th grade teachers in both charter and traditional public schools reported that their schools’ social studies programs were structured to a large extent around state curriculum standards. Other possible sources, such as state or district assessments and teacher discretion, were cited less often by teachers as a basis for their social studies programs.

The NAEP 2010 civics assessment asked teachers about the extent to which their schools’ social studies programs were structured according to various sources; response options included curricula and assessments at the national, state, district, or school levels, district recommendations, teacher discretion, and commercial programs. Sufficient comparative data for charter and traditional school teachers were available only for grade 4.

About 83% of 4th grade teachers in both charter and traditional schools reported that their schools’ social studies programs were structured to a large extent around state curriculum standards. Smaller percentages of teachers reported that their social studies programs were structured to a large extent around the other sources listed in the preceding paragraph.

Only a few significant differences emerged in the responses of traditional and charter school teachers. A significantly higher percentage of traditional school teachers (70%) than of charter teachers (38%) reported that their social studies programs were structured to a large extent around district curriculum standards. In addition, significantly higher proportions of traditional school teachers than of charter teachers reported basing their social studies programs to a large extent on district recommendations (26% versus less than 1%) or on national curriculum standards (20% versus 9%).

In general, students in charter and traditional public schools had similar responses about the availability of resources at home that could contribute to civics knowledge.

Roughly 90% or more of both charter and traditional public school students in grades 4, 8, and 12 reported having computers at home. About half or more of the students in both sectors reported having magazines at home, although 12th graders in traditional schools were more likely to have this resource than those in charter schools. A minority of students in both sectors reported having newspapers at home.

The responses of students in charter and traditional schools were similar regarding how often they discussed what they had studied in school with someone at home.
Suggestive Results from NAEP

Although not statistically significant, we noted several differences in NAEP results between charter and traditional public schools that were large enough to warrant further investigation, perhaps using other data sources or research methods.

Some possible differences in civics achievement deserve further study.

At grade 12, the average civics scores for students overall, as well as for some subgroups of students, were higher in traditional than in charter schools, although the differences were not statistically significant. At grade 8, while the average scores for students overall did not differ greatly between the two school sectors, there was a consistent pattern of apparently higher scores for charter school students in certain subgroups, especially among African American and low-income students.

Some possible differences between charter and traditional public schools regarding the sources of social studies curricula are worth exploring.

A noticeably higher percentage of 4th grade teachers in charter schools (65%) than in traditional schools (34%) reported structuring their social studies program “to a large extent” around school-based standards, although the difference was not statistically significant. In addition, higher shares of traditional public school teachers reported structuring their social studies programs to some extent on teacher discretion—a counterintuitive result that warrants further exploration.

Review of Other Research

In addition to analyzing NAEP data, we reviewed other research literature on civic education and charter schools, as well as more general studies of civic education in all public and private schools.

We found very little empirical research on civic education in charter schools—or in public schools in general.

Only a small number of published papers and dissertations have specifically examined civic education in charter schools. A limited number of studies have looked at best practices for teaching civics and promoting civic education in public schools, but these studies usually focused on particular districts, schools, or programs. In general, the research base is inadequate to assess the quality of civic education in any type of school or to inform decisions about this field.
Recommendations for Further Research

Many key questions about civics achievement, civic education, and civic engagement in charter schools cannot be answered because NAEP data have limitations and other research is scarce. In fact, this is true for public schools in general, not just charter schools.

CEP recommends several steps for strengthening the current body of research and practical knowledge about civic education in all types of public schools, whether charter or traditional. Recommendations 1 through 3 below are intended to improve NAEP data on civics and are directed to the administrators of NAEP. Recommendations 4 through 9 are aimed at improving knowledge and practice in all public schools, both charter and traditional, and are directed to the research, policy, and philanthropic communities.

1. “Oversample” charter schools for the next administration of the NAEP civics assessment to include a larger representative sample of these schools.

This type of oversampling would lead to lower standard error rates in the charter school data and would allow researchers to reach firmer conclusions about civics achievement and instruction in charter schools compared with traditional public schools.

2. Include data on civics achievement in NAEP’s Trial Urban District Assessment.

The Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) produces district-level NAEP data on student achievement and other variables for participating large urban districts. Currently, the TUDA program is limited to mathematics, reading, writing, and science.

3. Include data for charter schools in participating TUDA districts, since many charter schools are located in urban areas.

This recommendation would produce data that researchers could use to compare results for charter and traditional public schools in the same cities.

4. Hold a workshop of researchers and leaders with expert knowledge about civic education.

The purpose of this workshop would be to frame an agenda for additional research on civic education in charter and traditional public schools.
5. Encourage additional research to determine whether apparent differences in NAEP results between charter and traditional schools are real and what factors might explain these disparities.

Issues for further study could include both the statistically significant and “suggestive” differences found in NAEP, such as the apparent differences between the two school sectors in 12th grade civics achievement, the achievement of certain student subgroups, and instructional methods.

6. Encourage more detailed and extensive research on student achievement in civics in charter and traditional public schools.

This research should include studies in states with civics-related standards and assessments and should compare students in charter and traditional public schools in similar districts and locations (urban, suburban, and rural).

7. Once additional research on civics achievement is completed, conduct follow-up studies to determine why one group of students is outperforming the other.

Possible variables to be examined in studies of achievement differences include:

- Teacher credentials or experience
- Curriculum and instructional practices or other school-level inputs such as time spent on civics-related subjects
- School resources
- Demographic characteristics such as socioeconomic status, parents’ education, level of engagement, and civic participation in the home

8. Promote more in-depth studies at the state and district levels of how civics is taught in charter and traditional public schools and which instructional methods are most effective.

This could include case studies of civic education in selected school districts, particularly urban areas with concentrations of charter schools. These studies might investigate whether differences exist between charter and traditional public schools in such areas as the following:

- Using “active” methods of teaching civics (debates, mock trials, etc.)
- Encouraging students to express opinions in class about civics topics
- Encouraging civic engagement among students
9. Support more thorough empirical research on best practices for improving civic engagement for students in traditional public, charter, or private schools.

This might include in-depth studies of whether particular characteristics of private schools—especially Catholic schools, which have been the topic of some previous civics research—encourage civic engagement and are replicable in public schools.

In conclusion, there is a paucity of knowledge about civic education in both charter and traditional public schools. If the nation hopes to prepare all public school students to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy, we must understand more fully how well students are learning civics, how civics is taught, and how civic engagement is encouraged in all types of public schools.