

What Does the Research Say About Charter Schools, Strategies and Student Achievement

This National Charter School Resource Center webinar focuses on an American Institutes of Research (AIR) study of autonomy at charter, traditional and pilot public schools in Boston and the potential impact on student achievement. Pilot schools are traditional public schools that have been granted extensive autonomy.

The April 20, 2011, webinar, attended by about 60 people, also included a description of major studies comparing the achievement of students in charter and traditional schools and the limitations and advantages of the research methods used.

Susan Bowles Therriault, Ed.D., and Allison Gruner Gandhi, Ed.D., senior research analysts at AIR and co-authors of the Boston study [*Out of the Debate and Into the Schools*](#), presented the webinar. They reported on the study's extensive survey of principals at the three types of schools.

For example, the survey found that charter principals at high achieving schools were far less likely than traditional and pilot public school principals to agree that the level of salary and benefits for teachers helps attract qualified candidates for the jobs. The researchers examined the issue further and found that the average annual salary for charter teachers was \$28,000 less than that of their counterparts. The charter principals were much more likely than their counterparts to agree that their school's reputation helps draw qualified candidates.

The survey also covered views of principals at high achieving schools about the characteristics of their staffs. For example, the survey indicated that principals at charter schools and autonomous traditional schools were more likely than principals at traditional schools to agree that their staff's values were similar to their own, that they possessed the necessary knowledge and skills, and that they continually strive to improve instruction.

The researchers also discussed their findings regarding principals' views about scheduling and use of time. The survey looked at professional development preferences among the school types, time spent on various categories of instruction and types of supports provided to students. For example, charter school principals were much more likely than their counterparts to report weekend academic support being required.

Regarding the length of the school day, the researchers reported charter students spending an average of 8.15 hours per day at school, pilot students 6.42 hours and traditional students 6.1 hours. For teachers, the researchers reported average contracted time per day at charter schools of nearly 9 hours, pilot schools about 7 hours and traditional schools 6.5 hours.

The additional time for charter students amounted to the equivalent of 62 more traditional school days, according to the researchers.

School autonomy plays a critical role in allowing school leaders to develop programs that help students achieve, but how that autonomy is used is vital to performance, the researchers said. They cautioned that school achievement involves the interplay of many factors and that it is difficult to make definitive statements about causes and effects.

But they said the most effective school leaders use autonomy to orchestrate strengths and weaknesses of staff, students and the school community to support high performance.