



Enrollment Flexibility and Charter School Impacts:

The Effect of Backfill on Students in Massachusetts Charter Middle Schools

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POLICY ISSUE

Incorporating new pupils into existing student cohorts is a persistent challenge for public school districts, which are required to admit eligible students whenever they arrive and enroll, even if it is mid-year. As a result, public school teachers must often take time away from full-cohort instruction to familiarize these new students with classroom procedures or bring them up to speed on material their peers have already learned.

By contrast, most charter schools have the option not to “backfill” vacated seats with new students. Though there is no reliable estimate for the number of vacant seats in charter schools nationally, it is likely that decisions not to backfill substantially limits access to charter schools in many localities. Only four of the 45 states with charter school laws have policies regulating backfill in these schools.

The most common explanation for why some charter schools choose not to backfill despite their reliance on per-pupil funding is their concern that introducing new students would be especially disruptive because these schools tend to invest heavily in developing a consistent culture and norms with their existing students over time. However, some critics argue that charter schools refuse to add new students in order to boost their average aggregate test scores. The choice not to backfill is also controversial among charter school supporters, with some arguing that it conflicts with the schools’ mission of maximizing access to high-performing educational institutions.

Though prior research suggests that incorporating new students, especially mid-year, harms the achievement of incumbent students within traditional public schools, the extent to which limiting backfill explains charter school effectiveness is unknown. We leverage Massachusetts’s adoption of a statewide requirement for charter schools to backfill vacancies within some grades to provide the first causal estimates for the effect of incorporating new students on the performance of incumbent charter school pupils.

KEY FINDINGS

- The change in Massachusetts law requiring that charter schools “backfill” enrollment vacancies substantially increased the entry of new students within impacted grades in Boston charter middle schools.
- Exposure to the backfill requirement had no significant effect on the test scores of incumbent students within Boston charter middle schools.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

The study uses data from the universe of Massachusetts public school students enrolled in Grades 5 through 8 at schools that begin with Grade 5 or 6, from the academic years 2007–2008 to 2013–2014. We employed a difference-in-difference (DDD) design that exploits variation in exposure to the backfill requirement occurring over time (first difference), across school sectors (second difference), and between impacted and not-impacted grades within each school (third difference). Our analysis compares changes in student achievement in impacted vs. not-impacted grades within Boston charter schools, which backfilled at very low rates prior to the state adopting the requirement, to the patterns of student achievement within traditional public schools and charter schools outside of Boston, which were backfilling at high rates prior to the change in the law. Notably, Boston is home to a high-performing charter sector with schools that uniformly apply the so-

called “No Excuses” approach that prioritizes the development of strong school cultures. This made Boston an especially interesting setting to investigate the effects of backfill on student performance.

- The backfill requirement meaningfully altered enrollment patterns within charter middle schools in Boston but not within traditional public schools or charter middle schools operating outside of Boston. For example, the requirement increased the proportion of students within a school-grade cohort in an impacted grade within a Boston charter middle school by about 6.7 percentage points relative to non-Boston charter schools.
- Exposure to the backfill requirement under the new law had no significant impact on the test scores of incumbent Boston charter school students.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

These findings could be used to support a requirement that charter schools backfill enrollments, but that depends largely on an individual’s

view of the importance of charter school autonomy. Nonetheless, the results from Boston should allay concerns that backfilling would harm current student academic performance. These findings also appear to refute claims that comparisons of charter and traditional public school effectiveness are inherently unfair because the option to not backfill contributes substantially to charter schools’ impacts.

Why increased backfill had no significant negative impact on the performance of incumbent charter school students is a question worthy of future research. One potential explanation is that rather than exacerbating the disruptive aspects of incorporating new students, Boston charter schools’ consistent culture and intense focus on student behavior and activities make them especially adept at addressing the challenges created by mid-year admissions..

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