

Students in Ohio's online charter schools perform worse than peers in traditional schools

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Despite dramatic growth in enrollment in online charter schools in Ohio, students are not achieving the same academic success as those in brick-and-mortar charter and public schools, finds a study by NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development and RAND Corporation.

"Our research suggests that online schools - in their current form, a largely independent learning experience - are not effective for K-12 learners. Instead, learners still need the presence of teachers, mentors, or peers to help them through the learning process," said study author June Ahn, associate professor of learning sciences and educational technology at NYU Steinhardt.

The findings are published in *Educational Researcher*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association.

In Ohio, where online [charter schools](#) have been authorized since the early 2000s, a variety of providers can operate online charter schools, including school districts, non-profits, and private for-profit companies. These K-12 schools deliver most or all education online and lack a brick-and-mortar presence.

Advocates of online schools argue that new technologies used in online learning have the potential to expand the courses available to [students](#)

and provide flexibility in location and scheduling. However, questions have been raised about the effectiveness of learning outcomes in online charter schools, as well as how they compete for limited educational resources.

In addition, research shows that certain factors can influence how families choose schools. If information is challenging to acquire - whether it has a cost, is in a language not spoken by the family, or is too complex - low-income families often base decisions on easy-to-access information. In choosing schools, at-risk students place less weight on academic indicators, and low performing students are more likely to attend a school with low average achievement.

In the current study, the researchers analyzed data from 1.7 million K-12 students in Ohio who attended a traditional public school, charter school, or an online charter school between the 2009-10 and 2012-13 school years. They measured educational outcomes using standardized tests and looked at demographic data, including attendance and suspension; race and ethnicity; free and reduced price lunch status; and participation in gifted education, special education, or programs for English learners.

Online charter school enrollment grew around 60 percent during the period studied, from approximately 22,000 students in 2010 to over 35,000 students in 2013, with high schools making up the majority of online charter enrollment. While enrollment in traditional charters also increased during this period, traditional public school enrollment decreased.

"Online charter schools accounted for two percent of Ohio's student population in 2013, but the sector experienced the largest growth during this four-year period," said study author Andrew McEachin, policy researcher in the economics, statistics, and sociology department at the RAND Corporation.

In studying the characteristics of students in each school sector, the researchers observed that students in charter schools - both online and traditional - have lower baseline achievement than traditional public school students, are more likely to qualify for free and reduced price lunch, and are less likely to participate in gifted education.

However, students and families within the charter sector appear to self-segregate in stark ways. Low-income, lower achieving White students are more likely to choose online charter schools while low-income, lower achieving students of color are more likely to opt into a brick-and-mortar charter school. Around 50 to 60 percent of traditional charter school students are Black, compared to approximately 10 percent in online charters and 12 percent in traditional public schools.

"Our findings reveal that, across all grades and subjects, students in online charter schools perform worse on standardized assessments and are significantly less likely to pass Ohio's test for high school graduation than their peers in traditional charter and traditional public schools," said McEachin.

The researchers point to the importance of understanding how learning happens in online schools, much of which is self-directed and independent, but may not be suitable for many learners. They note that online curricula may be designed to efficiently deliver content, but should be combined with certain teaching and mentoring practices to serve students more effectively.

"In educational technology research, it is well established that technology as a delivery mechanism has no direct impact on student learning outcomes. What really matters is understanding how the introduction of technology impacts who chooses to participate in particular learning environments, and what they experience that result in learning outcomes," said Ahn. "In educational technology research, it is well

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Provided by New York University

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