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June 19, 2008

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## **Do Charter Schools Perform Better Than Traditional Public Schools? EdSource Study Says...It Depends**

**Report Shows That, After Adjusting For Student Background and School Size, Charter Middle and High Schools Achieve Higher API Scores; Elementary Charters Score Lower**

Mountain View, CA— A study released today by EdSource, an independent, not-for-profit research organization, found that California charter schools statewide outperformed traditional public schools at the middle and high school levels on the 2007 Growth API, after adjusting for school size and student demographics. At the elementary level, traditional public schools scored higher.

In a key difference from recently released studies by other groups reporting on charter school performance, EdSource's "California's Charter Schools: 2008 Performance Update" controlled for school size and student background. This ensured that achievement differences took into account charters' much smaller average size and differences in student demographics such as parental education levels or English learner status. Controlling for these factors enabled the EdSource research team to compare schools on more of an "apples to apples" basis.

EdSource evaluated data for every public school in California that had 2006-07 data on performance, including California's Academic Performance Index (API), Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), California Standards Tests (CST), the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE, for high schools only), and that had a School Characteristics Index (SCI) score — a total of 383 charter schools and 7,079 traditional public schools.

After applying these controls on a statewide basis, the researchers found several statistically significant results:

- **Charter elementary schools had lower API scores than traditional public elementary schools primarily because of lower math scores.** After adjusting for school size and student background, charter elementary schools scored an average of nine points lower on California's 2007 Growth API than traditional public elementary schools. This was primarily due to lower scores on the CST in mathematics. However, when nonclassroom-based charters, such as home-schooling networks and independent study programs, were excluded from the analysis, EdSource found no statistically meaningful difference between charter elementary schools' and their traditional counterparts' API scores.

- **Charter middle schools showed substantially higher performance than traditional public middle schools on all measures.** After adjusting for school size and student background, charter middle schools scored 45 points higher on the 2007 Growth API than traditional public middle schools. AYP and CST scores were also substantially higher for these charter schools than for traditional schools.
- **Charter high schools demonstrated higher overall performance than traditional public high schools, but math scores were lower in charter high schools.** Charter high schools scored an average of 14 points higher on the 2007 Growth API than traditional public high schools, after adjusting for school size and student background. Charter high schools had lower mathematics scores than traditional public high schools; however, when nonclassroom-based charters, such as independent study programs, were removed from the analysis, charters scored higher than traditional schools on all measures.

In 2007, EdSource released a California charter school performance report and found similar results in charter elementary, middle, and high schools across the state. The 2007 report did not contain district-level data.

“We’re seeing a trend,” said Brian Edwards, a Senior Policy Analyst at EdSource. “Charter middle and high schools continue to do well as a group, and we believe their continued success isn’t a coincidence. These schools are doing something right, and California would be well served to find out exactly what it is.”

The researchers also found that, in general, schools run by charter management organizations (CMOs), such as Green Dot Public Schools, Aspire Public Schools, and the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP), fared better than non-CMO charters. Performance differentials were especially large at the middle school level. After adjusting for school size and student characteristics, CMO middle schools scored an average of 73 points higher on the 2007 Growth API than non-CMO charters.

CMO-run schools also performed better than traditional public schools at all grade levels. After adjusting for schools’ size and student characteristics, CMO middle schools scored an average of 98 points higher on the 2007 Growth API than their traditional public school counterparts.

“CMO-run schools continue to do well and achieve strong results with students facing substantial challenges,” said Eric Crane, senior research associate at WestEd and co-author of the report. “Unlike other charters, CMO-run schools fare better than traditional public schools at every level.”

The study also found that most charters satisfied specific state-mandated performance requirements as a condition for charter school renewal; however, some charters were renewed under more ambiguous criteria. Since 2005, Assembly Bill 1137 has required that charter schools applying for renewal meet specific API targets or the charter-granting agency must determine that the school’s performance is at least equal to the performance of the schools the charter students would have otherwise attended. EdSource found that of 164 charter schools



renewed since the performance requirements took effect: 134 met the specific API requirements, 11 were exempt from state requirements because they were held accountable by alternative measures, and 19 appear to have been renewed under the “comparable performance” criterion. It seems no schools were closed permanently because of failure to meet state benchmarks.

“With the increased presence of charter school options for California students, it’s important charters are held accountable for meeting state standards,” said Trish Williams, Executive Director of EdSource. “We need to continue to examine closely which charter schools are doing well, with what types of students, under what conditions or structures, and using what strategies or practices. Remember that charter schools are exempt from most school regulations under the theory that increased school flexibility will generate better academic outcomes for students. Charters that are meeting this promise to improve student achievement should be viewed as exemplars, but those that aren’t doing well need to be held accountable for their performance, including revocation of their charter when appropriate.”

The full text of “California’s Charter Schools: 2008 Performance Update” is available online at [www.EdSource.org](http://www.EdSource.org).

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### **About EdSource**

*EdSource is an independent, impartial, not-for-profit organization whose sole mission is to clarify complex education issues and to promote thoughtful decisions about public school improvement. EdSource does not advocate or lobby and has developed a solid reputation since 1977 as a credible and respected source of information on California’s K-14 education policy and school reform issues.*