School choice embraces a variety of options, including magnet schools, charter public schools, neighborhood public schools, vouchers or tuition tax credits, homeschooling, inter- and intra-district choice, and supplemental educational services (Berends 2014, 2015). These options allow families to choose the school their children attend. Over the past two decades, charter schools—schools that are publicly funded but run under a charter by parents, educators, community groups, universities, or private organizations to encourage school autonomy and innovation—have grown significantly.

Charter school growth, location, composition, management

- **Growth.** The first charter school was founded in 1992 in Minnesota after that state passed the nation’s first charter school law (Junge 2012; Wohlstetter, Smith, & Farrell 2013). Since that time, the number of charter schools has steadily grown, more than tripling in the last decade alone. Today there are over 6,400 schools serving over 2.5 million students in 43 states and the District of Columbia (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).
• Location. California has the most charter schools (1,130), followed by Texas (689), Florida (625), Arizona (605), Ohio (400), and Michigan (297) (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). Nationwide, just over half of the charter schools are located in urban areas; about one-fifth is in suburban locales; the rest are in rural or small town areas (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

• Composition. When compared to traditional public schools, the racial-ethnic composition of charter schools in 2010-11 is disproportionately African-American (28% vs. 16%) and Latino (28% vs. 24%). White students are under-represented (36% vs. 51%) as are Asian students (3% vs. 5%) (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016). One primary reason for this is that urban centers—where charter schools are predominately located—have higher-than-average numbers of students of color attending public schools, whether traditional or charter.

• Management. The majority of charter schools are “freestanding,” or independently run. But non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs) and for-profit education management organizations (EMOs) have grown over the last five years (see Miron, Urschel, Aguilar & Dailey, 2012). Both operate like districts without borders, running multiple schools and starting new ones. Between 2007-08 and 2010-11, CMOs increased their share of the charter school sector from 11.5% to 20.2%. EMOs remained stable over this time period, ranging between 11%-12% of all charter schools, while the number of freestanding charter schools dropped from 78% to 67.5% (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2016).

Parents choosing schools

• Decision-making. Parents engage in a complex, dynamic, and multi-step process of choosing a school for their child (Goyette, 2014; Stein, Goldring, & Cravens, 2010). When making choices between traditional public schools and charters, they consider a number of factors, including academic quality, social networks, safety and discipline, distance between home and school, and the racial/ethnic composition of the school (for review see Altenjofen, in press; Lareau & Goyette, 2014).

• Academic quality. It is difficult to determine what parents mean by academic quality. For example, in an Indianapolis study that relied on parent surveys and longitudinal student administrative records, 63% of parents reported that academics were an important factor in their choice of charter schools. However, test score data revealed that many more parents switched their children from high- to low-performing schools than from low- to high-performing ones (Stein et al., 2010).

• Social networks. Parents rely on their social networks when deciding among school options (Neild, 2005; Schneider et al., 2000). Trusted members and the information exchanged within these networks are highly valued (Lareau, 2014; Stein, in press).

• Socioeconomic status. School decision making may differ by socioeconomic status. For instance, lower socioeconomic families have a more limited set of options for housing, available schools, and transportation options (Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014). And lower socioeconomic families tend to think that the available school options are similar when in fact they may differ in important ways (Lareau, 2014; Rhodes & DeLuca, 2014).

• Composition. The racial/ethnic composition of a school can be an important factor for parental choice (Lankford & Wyckoff, 2006; Renzulli & Evans, 2005; Schneider & Buckley, 2002), though studying its role is difficult because parents’ beliefs about integration do not always match their
actions. White parents may be especially sensitive to a school’s racial/ethnic composition. For instance, in response to mandated school desegregation plans between 1968 and 1990, white parent households were about half as likely as childless ones to move into desegregating districts (Rich, 2015).

Charter school effects on student outcomes

Student achievement

- Across the nation, charter schools show mixed effects on student achievement—some positive effects, some negative, and some neutral—in both lottery-based and quasi-experimental studies (Betts & Tang, 2014; Clark et al., 2015; Gleason et al., 2010; Furgeson et al., 2012). The significant variability needs further examination to understand the conditions under which school choice is effective or not (Berends, 2015).
  - In lottery-based studies in New York and Boston, charter schools had a significant impact on student achievement (Abdulkadiroglu et al., 2009; Angrist et al., 2011; Clark et al., 2015; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Hoxby & Murarka, 2008; Hoxby, Murarka, & Kang, 2009). For example, in a New York study of students who won and lost the charter school lotteries in the Harlem Children’s Zone, the positive charter school effects were large enough to close the racial achievement gap across subjects (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011).
  - In the largest national study of charter schools that rely on lotteries for admission, findings showed no significant effects on math or reading achievement and significant variability in achievement effects across charter schools (Gleason et al., 2010).
  - Studies relying on quasi-experimental methods also show mixed results for charter school effects on achievement (Bilfulco & Ladd, 2006; Booker et al., 2007; CREDO, 2013; Davis & Raymond, 2012; Hanushek et al., 2007; Sass, 2006; Zimmer & Buddin, 2006; Zimmer et al., 2009, 2012; for a review see Betts & Tang 2014; Teasley 2009).
  - A recent meta-analysis of the more rigorous studies—i.e., lottery-based and quasi-experimental value-added analyses—found overall that charter schools are producing higher achievement gains in mathematics compared with traditional public schools.1 In reading, although most of the effects point in the positive direction, there are no overall statistically significant differences between charter and traditional public schools (Betts & Tang, 2014).

Educational attainment

- When it comes to charter school effects on educational attainment (i.e., high school graduation, college attendance, and college persistence), little is yet known. The few studies performed to date have found positive significant effects (Angrist et al., 2013; Booker et al., 2011, 2014; Dobbie & Fryer, 2011; Furgeson et al., 2012). The samples, however, are confined to certain geographic areas (e.g., Boston, Chicago, New York City, and the state of Florida), so it is difficult to generalize to other locations.

Future research directions

Future research needs to focus on questions that go beyond the horse races between charter and non-charter students. Understanding the conditions under which choice options are effective or not will push policy debates. This line of research will expand our learning about charter schools and
yield cumulative, systematic knowledge that can inform educators, policymakers, and researchers in the revision of policies, programs, practices, and theory.

Endnote

1In the Betts and Tang (2014) review, they note that to date only eight papers have used a lottery-based approach and fifty-two papers used quasi-experimental value-added approaches.

References


