

**Abstract Title Page**

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**Title: Much Ado About Nothing? Innovation in Charter Schools**

**Author(s): Courtney Preston, Ellen Goldring, Mark Berends, Marisa Cannata**

## **Abstract Body**

*Limit 5 pages single spaced.*

### **Background / Context:**

*Description of prior research and its intellectual context.*

A key argument for charter schools pertains to the notion that school choice will spur innovation and differentiation among schools. School personnel are free to innovate because they are able to use professional autonomy to make decisions. In fact in many cases the language of innovation and professional autonomy is rooted in charter school legislation. Malloy and Wohlstetter (2003) report that most charter school laws include the desire to “facilitate innovative teaching” (p.220). Lubienski (2003) notes, “choice, competition, and innovation are cast as the necessary vehicles for advancing academic outcomes” (p. 397). However, we have limited evidence about whether or to what extent competition and choice spur innovation in schools. Research supporting or refuting the idea that school choice leads to more innovative instructional practices is either nonexistent or mixed (Gill et al., 2007; Lubienski, 2003).

This paper compares innovation across two school types: traditional public schools and charter schools. We develop a notion of innovativeness in terms of local structures, dynamics, and context (Lubienski, 2003; Mowery and Rosenberg, 2000; Traill and Grunert, 1997). We submit that practices cannot be deemed innovative in an absolute sense, but innovations must be considered in terms of their relative prevalence in a local and state context.

Defining innovation is complicated as innovation in one context may not be innovation in another. Mowery and Rosenberg (2000) further define that innovation must include local structures and dynamics, considering the context of the innovation. Lubienski (2003) describes the education analogue to these concepts in his dimensions of the nature of innovative practice: “the distinctive nature of the practice” and “appearance of innovation in a local context” (p 408). The deviations between charter schools and traditional public schools in the same district are used in this paper to measure the contextual level of innovation. The outcomes we measure are therefore not innovative in the “brand new” sense of the term, but they may not be prevalent or standard practice in traditional public schools, either. Therefore, we measure innovation in terms of how innovative a practice is relative to its local and state context.

### **Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:**

*Description of the focus of the research.*

The purpose of this paper is to develop a framework for measuring innovation in charter schools. We ask two questions,

1. What practices constitute innovation in various local and state contexts?
2. Do levels and types of innovation differ between charter schools and traditional public schools?

**Setting:**

*Description of the research location.*

Our sample frame includes traditional public schools from the Schools and Staffing Survey and charter schools from our Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) database in 103 school districts in 11 states.

**Population / Participants / Subjects:**

*Description of the participants in the study: who, how many, key features or characteristics.*

As part of a larger study of school choice, the schools for our study were selected from the set of schools with which NWEA had partnered to monitor student achievement through the administration of computerized adaptive tests in math, reading and language arts every spring and fall of the school year. As of the spring of 2006, approximately 270 were identified as charter schools. About 51.79% of the charter schools agreed to participate in the study.

**Intervention / Program / Practice:**

*Description of the intervention, program or practice, including details of administration and duration.*

Principals of the charter schools that agreed to participate were asked to fill out online, confidential questionnaires. The research project survey, called NWEA What Makes Schools Work (WMSW) survey of principals is a comprehensive survey geared toward understanding a wide set of areas in comparing traditional public schools and charter schools, including such topics as hiring practices, job focus, school organization, professional development, teacher pay structures, parental involvement, and curriculum foci, and instructional practices.

**Research Design:**

*Description of research design (e.g., qualitative case study, quasi-experimental design, secondary analysis, analytic essay, randomized field trial).*

To provide local context for the charter schools to determine the extent to which the charter schools are innovative in relation to other schools in their locales, we linked schools in our sample to traditional public schools in the same district from the 2007-08 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) (NCES) using NCES district identifiers. Because we define practices as innovative relative to their local context, we chose the SASS to provide this context. It is a nationally representative survey, providing a stratified systemic sample of schools and giving a picture of what practices are in use at both the school and district levels.

### **Data Collection and Analysis:**

*Description of the methods for collecting and analyzing data.*

Measures of innovation are taken from NWEA principal surveys. To obtain additional local and state contexts for comparison, we developed a database from principal questionnaire of the nationally representative 2007-08 SASS (NCES). We matched items from the principal surveys from our sample of charter schools to similar items from the SASS in order to observe differences in the implementation of innovative practices. Following arguments for innovation in charter schools, measures of innovation from both the WMSW survey and 2007-08 include the extent to which practices and policies are implemented that are innovative in regard to instructional strategies, curriculum materials, student assessment, and parental contact and involvement. Examples of items include, such looping and flexible hiring policies.

We calculate the difference in frequency of innovations within the local context for each charter and its matched district traditional public schools in our sample. We measure differential innovativeness in two contexts: between the charter schools and their contexts and charter schools and traditional public schools in the aggregate. For example, if the local district does not have policies or programs about extended school days, and the matched charter schools do, this would be considered "innovative." Therefore, having an extended day policy may be innovative in one local context but not in another context where this practice is more widespread.

### **Findings / Results:**

*Description of the main findings with specific details.*

The innovations we examine relate primarily to the instructional experiences of students in classrooms and schools since we hypothesize that those innovations closest to the instructional core are likely to be related to student achievement gains. Preliminary results suggest limited innovation differences between charter and traditional public schools on average, with more variation when locale and state context are taken into account. Practices where we find the most evidence of innovation in

charter schools include awarding tenure and providing academic support services to students such as voluntary tutoring. Overall, as predicted by institutional theory, schools in a given choice set appear to have similar programs and practices.

**Conclusions:**

*Description of conclusions, recommendations, and limitations based on findings.*

Based on our findings, we conclude that while charter schools on the whole may engage in innovative practices more often than traditional public schools, within their local context, they do not fulfill their promise of innovation. We do not have data that provides information on which school employed a practice first, therefore we cannot fully examine the impact charter schools may have had on the diffusion of innovative practice within their local context, but the results support a diffusion of innovation notion supported by institutional theory.

## Appendices

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### Appendix A. References

*References are to be in APA version 6 format.*

Gill, B. P., Timpane, P. M., Ross, K. E., Brewer, D. J., & Booker, K. (2007). *Rhetoric versus reality: What we know and what we need to know about vouchers and charter schools*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND.

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