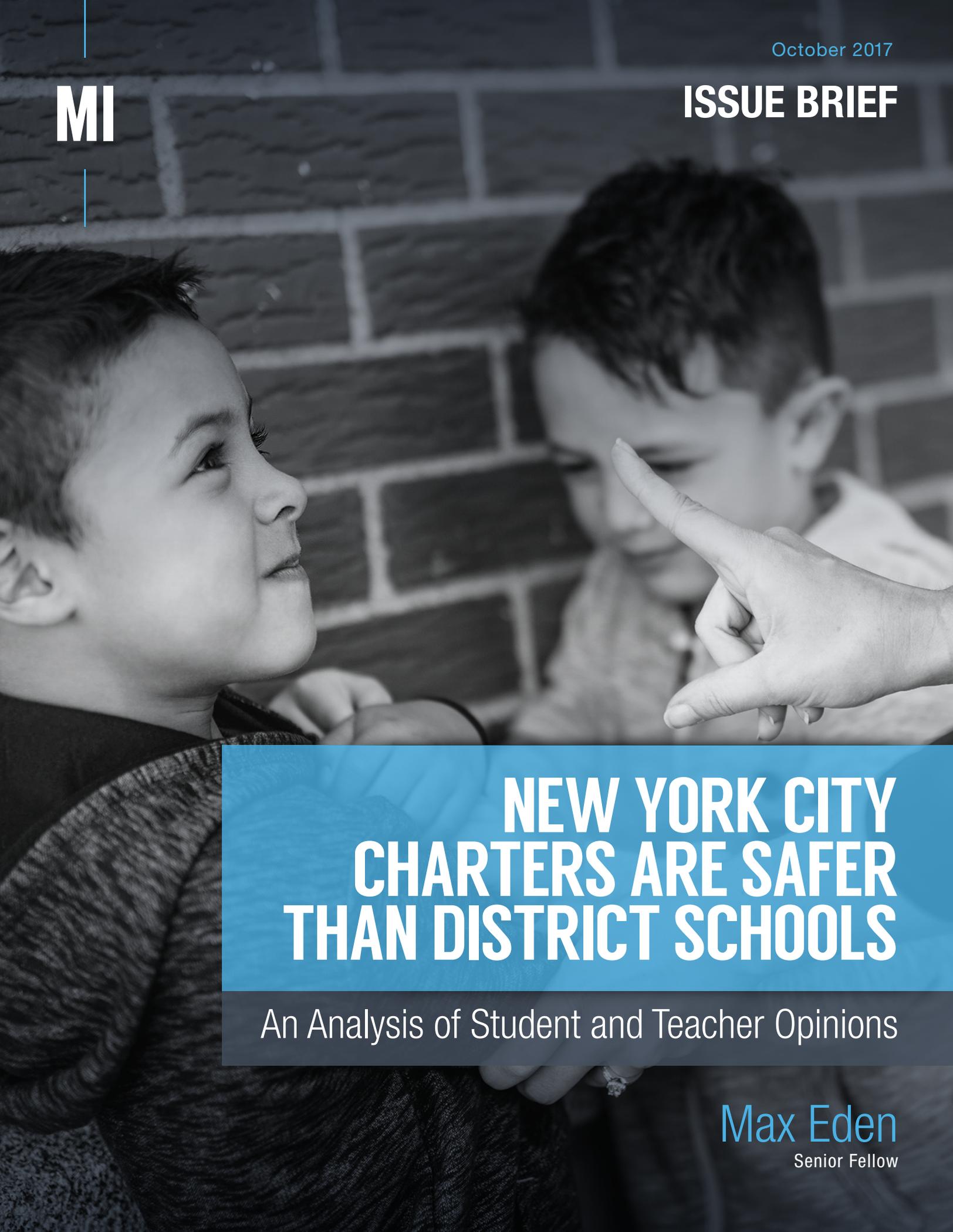


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NEW YORK CITY CHARTERS ARE SAFER THAN DISTRICT SCHOOLS

An Analysis of Student and Teacher Opinions

Max Eden
Senior Fellow

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Executive Summary

Most analysis of, and debate about, public charter schools focuses on student performance on standardized reading and math tests. These are important indicators of school quality; but school safety is also a crucial consideration. Unfortunately, whereas standardized test score data are universally available, reliable data on school safety are scarce.

New York City, however, administers a school-climate survey to students and teachers every year that includes several questions about safety. Using responses to these questions for the 2016–17 school year, this paper provides a comparative descriptive analysis of New York City student and teacher perceptions of safety at 150 charter schools and their neighboring traditional (“district”) public schools.¹

Key findings

- ✓ Overall: 64 of 150 charter schools provide a safer climate than their neighboring traditional public schools, 24 charters are less safe, and 62 charters are roughly as safe.
- ✓ Elementary schools: 24 charters are safer than their neighboring traditional public schools, 12 are less safe, and 20 are roughly as safe.
- ✓ Middle schools: 26 are safer than their neighboring traditional public schools, 3 are less safe, and 25 are roughly as safe.
- ✓ High schools: 14 are safer than their neighboring traditional public schools, 9 are less safe, and 17 are roughly as safe.
- ✓ After demographic differences between students are accounted for, the charter school safety advantage remains statistically significant.



Parents Prioritize School Safety

Researchers have intensively studied what motivates parents when they choose a school for their child. The strong consensus: parents typically value academic quality most, but safety is often a close second and, sometimes, even the first priority.

In 2017, researchers at the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty conducted an econometric analysis of parents' choices in Milwaukee, which has traditional public and charter schools (as well as one of America's most robust school voucher programs). They found that the single most important factor motivating parents to transfer their students was safety: "[A]n increase of one 911 phone call per student is expected to lead to a decline in enrollment of nearly 65 students."² The researchers also found: "Academic quality does not appear to be a significant driver of enrollment changes. Instead, we see that safety [as measured by student 911 calls] is a significant, positive predictor of school growth."

In 2013, researchers at EdChoice, an organization that promotes school choice, surveyed participants in Georgia's tax-credit scholarship program. They found that parents ranked "better student discipline" and "improved student safety" above "better education" and "better learning environment" as their top reasons for choosing a school.³

In 2012, researchers at the University of Arkansas conducted a survey of parents in Detroit, dividing them into three categories based on their experience choosing a school: "veteran" choosers, who had previously exercised choice over the school that their child attended (above and beyond their choice of neighborhood in which to live);

“emerging” choosers, who planned on choosing a new school for their child in the near future; and “potential” choosers, who considered making a choice sometime in the future.⁴ The researchers found that whereas “veteran” choosers were more likely to rank academic performance as a top priority, “emerging” and “potential” choosers were more likely to prioritize safety and discipline.

This recent research is consistent with some of the earliest analysis of parental motivation in school choice, conducted by researchers at the State University of New York and the University of Illinois at Chicago, in 2000. They found that “lower socioeconomic status and minority parents are more likely to value schools that perform the bedrock function of providing a safe environment.”⁵

Measuring School Safety

Parents prioritize school safety, but there are few reliable ways to assess it. In New York City, for example, school safety statistics have become, in the words of a Politico New York reporter, a front in a “proxy war.”⁶ Charter advocates have raised alarm bells over state data suggesting that violent incidents have risen precipitously under Mayor Bill de Blasio. According to state data, crime in New York City school rose by 23% from 2013–14 to 2014–15; assaults that caused a physical injury increased by 39%.⁷

However, de Blasio’s allies have questioned the accuracy of New York’s data system, which relies on teacher and administrator self-reporting. According to John King, former U.S. secretary of education, the state’s data system “rarely reflects the realities of school health and safety.”⁸ Indeed, de Blasio has claimed that New York City’s 2016–17 school year was the safest on record, noting that arrests and summonses fell by about 10%, compared with the previous year.⁹ Yet Derek Jackson, the union representative for New York City’s school-safety officers, disputed de Blasio’s claim, arguing that reported safety incidents declined because of a policy shift that encouraged more infractions to go unreported: “[W]hat [de Blasio] did was take crimes and not call them crimes any longer.”¹⁰

Perhaps the most reliable data on school safety—and certainly the data most insulated from policy or political manipulation—are anonymous student and teacher

responses to school-climate surveys. However, only seven of America’s 50 largest school districts administer annual school-climate surveys to both traditional public schools and most of their charter schools *and* make school-level results (i.e., results for specific schools) public.¹¹ Of these seven school districts, only New York City and Baltimore make the data available in a format amenable to analysis.¹² This paper will thus focus on the results of the NYC School Survey for the 2016–17 school year.

NYC School Survey, 2016–17

The NYC School Survey has been administered annually since 2007. It asks students and teachers what they think about school climate, on matters ranging from academic expectations to school safety. Earlier this year, I published an analysis of answers to safety-related questions on the NYC School Survey, from 2011–12 to 2015–16: according to students, school safety declined significantly under the de Blasio administration.¹³ Unfortunately, changes to the 2016–17 NYC School Survey make it impossible to extend that analysis to the current year.¹⁴

However, it is still possible to make comparisons between schools in a given year. Below, I explore differences in student and teacher perceptions of school safety between charter and traditional public schools in 2016–17.

Methodology

For each school, I first created a safety index score by averaging student responses to six prompts:

1. At my school, I feel safe in my classrooms
2. At my school, I feel safe in the hallways
3. At my school, students get into physical fights
4. At my school, bullying is a problem
5. At my school, students use drugs and alcohol
6. At my school, there is gang activity

For prompts 1 and 2, students could select: strongly dis-

agree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree. For prompts 3–6, students could select: none of the time, rarely, some of the time, or most of the time. The percentages of positive responses to each prompt (i.e., agreeing that school is safe or reporting that dangerous behavior occurs rarely) were averaged to arrive at each school’s score. Because the NYC School Survey is not administered to students at the elementary level, I relied on teachers’ responses (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree) at elementary schools to the prompt: “At my school, order and discipline are maintained.” Charter and traditional public schools that did not have answers to all prompts, or that had a response rate below 40%, were dropped from the analysis.

I present my analysis in two parts. The first part compares charter schools with traditional public schools in the same neighborhood. I compared every charter school with its three geographically nearest traditional public schools (including “co-located” schools, i.e., schools that share a same building) that serve the same or overlapping grades. Using New York City’s grade-band designations, I paired “high schools” with “secondary schools” (henceforth “secondary” schools) and K–8 schools with “middle schools / junior high” (henceforth “primary” schools). Charter schools designated as K–12 were dropped from the analysis (there are only four K–12 traditional public schools, and K–12 schools don’t match neatly with middle or high schools). Because New York City gives preference in charter school lotteries to students who live in the same school district in which the desired charter school is located, charter schools were matched first with traditional public schools in the same district. (If there were not three matches in the district, additional matches were made based on distance from the charter school.)

Next, I created a safety index based on the prompts above. If a charter school’s safety index was 5 or more percentage points higher than its traditional public school neighbor (10 percentage points for elementary schools because of the limited questions available for analysis and the smaller sample size), it was deemed to have a safety advantage over its neighbor, and it received 1 point for that comparison. If the charter school’s safety index was within 5 percentage points of its traditional public school neighbor, it was deemed to have no advantage, and it received 0 points for that comparison. If the charter school’s safety index was 5 percentage points or more *lower* than its traditional public school neighbor, it was deemed to have a safety disadvantage, and it received -1 points for that com-

parison. (The 5-percentage-point threshold is a discretionary cutoff. The **Appendix** provides the same analysis for nonelementary schools, with a cutoff of 10 percentage points.)

These three comparisons tell us whether a higher (henceforth “safer”), lower (“less safe”), or similar (“as safe”) percentage of students reported feeling safe at charter schools compared with students at neighboring traditional public schools. Charter schools thus received a total score of -3 to 3. A charter school that received a score of 2 or 3 is safer than most, or all, of its neighboring traditional public schools, and it is not less safe than any traditional public school neighbor. A charter school that scored 1, 0, or -1 is roughly as safe as most of its neighboring traditional public schools. A charter school that scored -2 or -3 is *less* safe than most, or all, of its traditional public school neighbors, and it is *not* safer than any traditional public school neighbors.

This geographic comparative analysis answers a question that is often at the forefront of parents’ minds: Would a nearby charter school be a safer option for my child?

Still, schools’ student compositions can vary substantially. A charter school’s safety advantage over its traditional public school neighbor might be unremarkable if the charter school served a wealthier student population (where problems such as gang violence would, presumably, be less common). Therefore, the second part of my analysis aims to establish, descriptively, whether safety differences are attributable to basic demographic differences.

I do a straightforward multilinear regression that takes into account the percentage of students who qualified for free and reduced-price lunch; the percentage of students who required special education; the percentage of African-American students; and the percentage of Hispanic students. (This is *not* intended to establish a causal relationship between school governance and school safety. Such an effort would need to take into account many additional variables, such as local crime levels, local unemployment rates, teacher experience and characteristics, and more robust student-level characteristics.)

Charters Are Safer—According to Students and Teachers

Elementary School

Figure 1 shows safety scores for 150 (charter) elementary, middle, and high schools. Twenty-four of 56 charter elementary schools are safer than their neighboring traditional public schools; 12 charter elementary schools are less safe than their neighboring traditional public schools; and 20 charter schools are roughly as safe as their neighboring traditional public schools.

Middle School

Half of charter middle schools (26 of 54) are safer than their traditional public school neighbors; only 3 are less safe; and 25 are roughly as safe.

High School

A plurality of charter high schools (17 of 40) are roughly as safe; 14 are safer; and 9 are less safe.

Charter schools frequently serve student bodies that are notably different from those served by their traditional public school neighbors. Sometimes, for instance, they serve a higher (or lower) share of students in poverty. Other times, they serve a higher (or lower) share of students with disabilities. Yet the strictly geo-

FIGURE 1.

Charter Schools' Safety Index Score



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the NYC School Survey



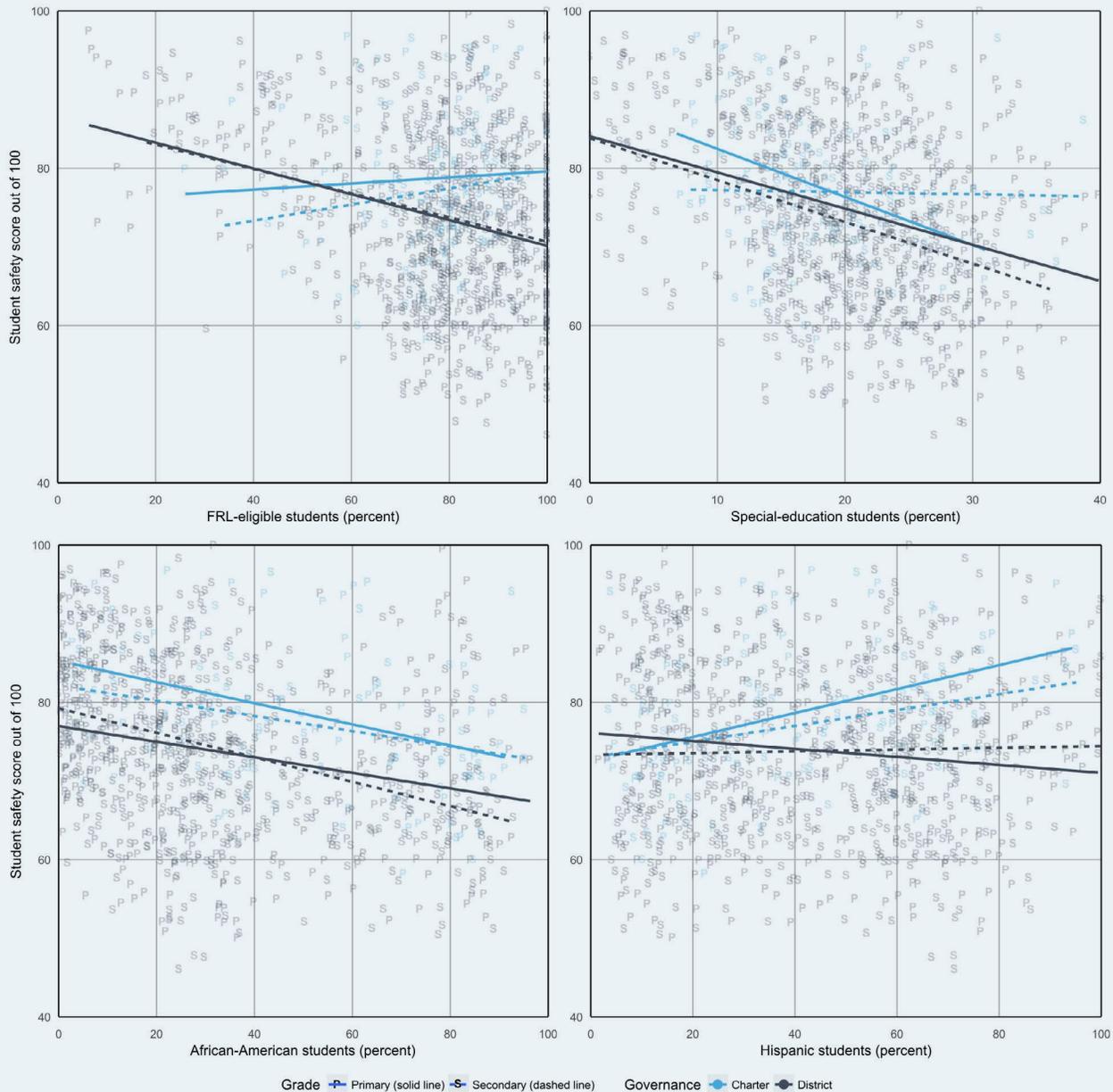
graphic comparison, above, will not capture such differences in student populations.

Figure 2 attempts to account for such differences. It shows the student safety scores (see the Appendix for

teacher safety scores) of primary schools, traditional (“P”) as well as charter (“P”), and it shows the student safety scores of secondary schools, traditional (“S”) as well as charter (“S”)—according to the percentage of their students who are eligible for free and reduced-price

FIGURE 2.

Student Safety Scores—and Demographics—of Charter and Traditional Public Schools



Source: Author’s calculations based on data from the NYC School Survey

lunch (FRL); the percentage of their students who receive special education (SPED); the percentage of their students who are African-American; and the percentage of their students who are Hispanic. The y-axis, the school's safety index, is based on the average of positive responses to the six prompts above. (A school that scored "100" saw all students give a positive answer to all prompts; a school that scored "0" saw all students give a negative answer to all prompts.) For traditional primary schools, the best-fit line is solid gray; for traditional secondary schools, the best-fit line is dashed gray. For charter primary schools, the best-fit line is solid blue; for charter secondary schools, it is dashed blue.

Figure 2 shows that traditional public schools with high rates of student poverty (i.e., FRL eligibility) tend to be less safe than schools with lower poverty rates (the Ps and Ss are concentrated in the middle part of the far right); and it shows that charter schools serving a higher percentage of poor students are safer than those serving a lower share (the Ps and Ss are abundant in the upper part of the far right).

Figure 2 also shows that students at traditional primary and secondary schools, as well as at charter primary schools, with high percentages of special-education students tend to feel less safe than in schools with lower percentages of those students. Yet in charter secondary schools, there is no correlation between SPED and safety, suggesting that charter high schools offer a better climate for high-needs students than do traditional public high schools.

Across all school types, the percentage of African-American students is negatively correlated with safety, although charter schools offer relatively greater safety than traditional public schools. Meanwhile, at traditional primary and secondary schools, the percentage of Hispanic students is slightly negatively correlated with safety; but in charter schools, it is slightly positively correlated with safety.

Finally, a multilinear regression suggests that the charter advantage on safety remains statistically significant—at about 5 percentage points on the safety index, above—after basic demographics are taken into account.

Conclusion

According to New York's teachers and students, the city's charter schools offer a safer learning environment than do its traditional public schools—even when differences in student populations are accounted for. Of the 150 charter schools analyzed in this paper, 64 provide a safer climate than their neighboring traditional public schools, 24 are less safe, and 62 are roughly as safe.

These findings do not *prove* that charters are responsible for creating the safer environment in their schools.¹⁵ Nor can we infer from these findings that charters in other cities are safer than their traditional public school counterparts.¹⁶ Yet these findings do offer important insights into the conditions—and failures—of New York City schools. (According to students, the 50 most dangerous schools in New York City are all traditional public schools.¹⁷ The most dangerous, Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation, saw one student recently stabbed to death and another critically injured.)¹⁸

In recent years, discussion across the U.S. about school safety has emphasized suspension rates rather than the opinions of students and teachers.¹⁹ But suspensions are an imperfect measure of school climate: they are handed out at the discretion of school administrators, and they can be reduced even when student behavior does not improve. If school-climate surveys were implemented in more school districts and the data were made readily available to parents and policymakers, schools could more easily be held accountable for safety, as well as for test scores.

Appendix

FIGURE 3.

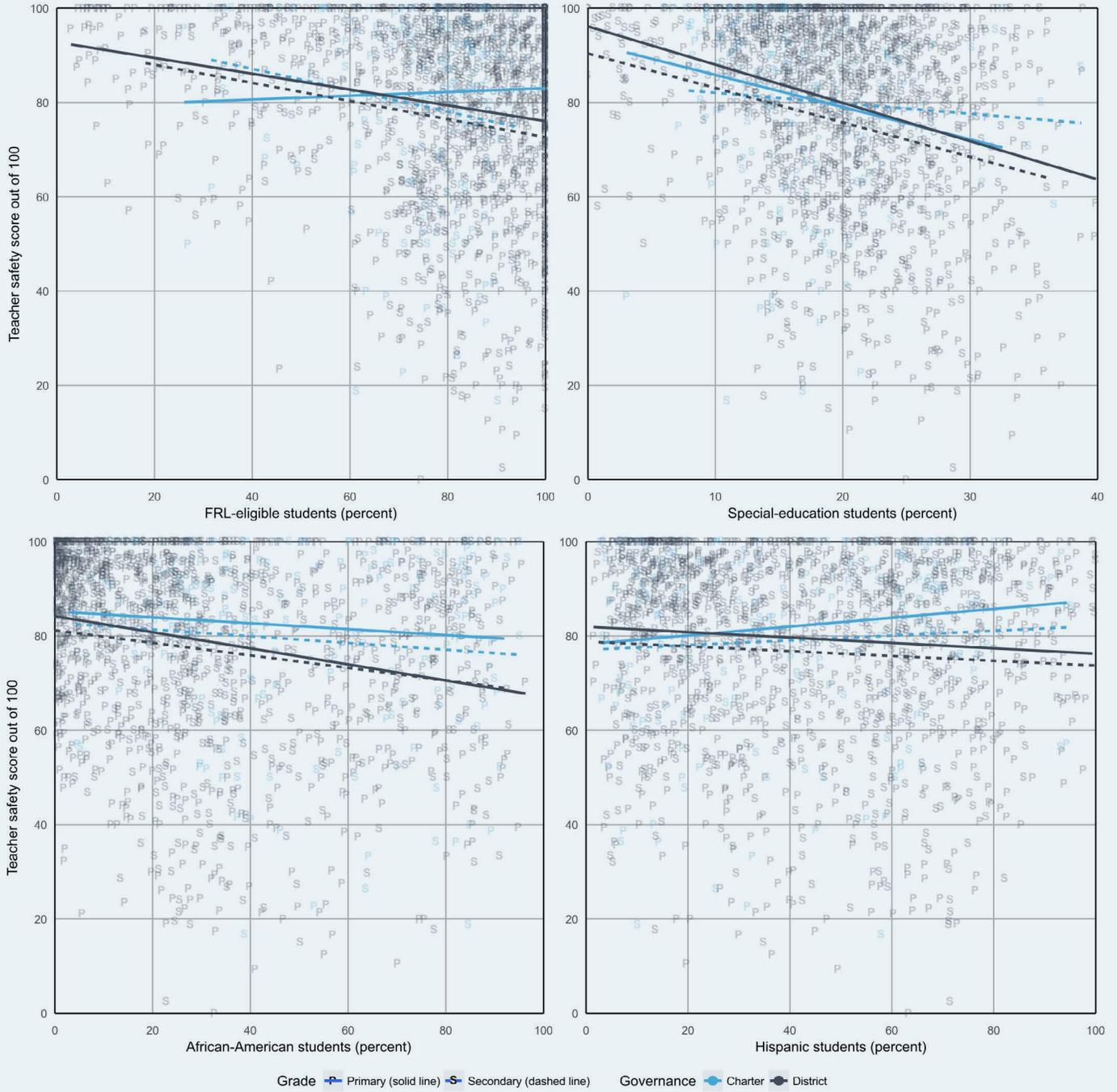
Charter Schools' Safety Index Score with Cutoff of 10 Percentage Points



Source: Author's calculations based on data from the NYC School Survey

FIGURE 4.

Teacher Safety Scores—and Demographics—of Charter and Traditional Public Schools*



*Elementary schools included
 Source: Author's calculations based on data from the NYC School Survey

Endnotes

The author thanks the Manhattan Institute's Connor Harris for his research assistance.

- ¹ A total of 150 charter schools asked students to respond to all six question prompts in my safety index *and* saw a sufficiently high response rate (at least 40%) to inspire confidence in the responses.
- ² "Accountability in Action: The Impact of Fiscal Accountability and Parental Choice on the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program," School Choice Wisconsin and Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, Aug. 2017.
- ³ James P. Kelly III and Benjamin Scafidi, "More than Scores: An Analysis of Why and How Parents Choose Private Schools," Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, Nov. 2013.
- ⁴ Patrick J. Wolf and Thomas Stewart, "Understanding School Shoppers in Detroit," Michigan Future Inc., Feb. 2012.
- ⁵ Mark Schneider, Paul Teske, and Melissa Marschall, *Choosing Schools: Consumer Choice and the Quality of American Schools* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 107.
- ⁶ Eliza Shapiro, "Charter and Union Groups Declare New Proxy War over School Safety," Politico New York, Feb. 25, 2016.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Elizabeth A. Harris, "New York Education Dept. Is Sued over Violence in Schools," *New York Times*, Apr. 7, 2016.
- ⁹ Elizabeth A. Harris, "Crime in New York City Schools Is at a Record Low, City Says," *New York Times*, Aug. 1, 2017.
- ¹⁰ Max Eden, "Here's How de Blasio's School Safety Data Falls Short," *New York Post*, Aug. 1, 2017.
- ¹¹ The seven school districts are Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, New York, Miami, and Philadelphia.
- ¹² In most of these cities, the results are available exclusively as a series of PDFs, which is hardly conducive to data analysis. The major third-party platforms that parents use to evaluate school safety, such as GreatSchools.com or Niche.com, must rely solely on school-level suspension data.
- ¹³ Max Eden, "School Discipline Reform and Disorder: Evidence from New York City Public Schools, 2012–16," Manhattan Institute, Mar. 14, 2017.
- ¹⁴ Max Eden, "Making It Impossible to Measure School Safety," *New York Post*, Mar. 22, 2017.
- ¹⁵ Charter advocates would likely argue that the safety difference is mainly the result of the greater freedom and flexibility that charter schools enjoy in setting school ethos and disciplinary culture. Charter critics would likely argue that the same parents who are motivated to sign their children up for charter school lotteries also do a better job of instilling respectful, orderly behavior in their kids. Both explanations likely have merit.
- ¹⁶ For example, a study by the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University found that differences on standardized test scores between charter schools and traditional public schools vary substantially between cities. It seems reasonable to expect similar differences for school climate and safety, too. See Edward Cremata et al., "National Charter School Study," Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2013.
- ¹⁷ New York City's 50 most dangerous schools, according to students, are: Urban Assembly School for Wildlife Conservation, New Explorers High School, Bronx Leadership Academy High School, Humanities & Arts Magnet High School, J.H.S. 226 Virgil I. Grissom, Hunts Point School, High School for Law Enforcement and Public Safety, Bronx Academy of Health Careers, Clara Barton High School, High School for Service & Learning at Erasmus, J.H.S. 218 James P. Sinnott, Catherine & Count Basie Middle School 72, Schuylerville Preparatory High School, Rockaway Collegiate High School, I.S. 232, Herbert H. Lehman High School, I.S. 238 Susan B. Anthony Academy, Frederick Douglass Academy V. Middle School, Collaborative Arts Middle School, Bronx Aerospace High School, Bronx Design and Construction Academy, Felisa Rincon de Gautier Institute for Law and Public Policy, Teachers Preparatory High School, School of Performing Arts, P.S. 308 Clara Cardwell, Fordham Leadership Academy for Business and Technology, The College Academy, Brooklyn High School for Law and Technology, I.S. 49 Berta A. Dreyfus, P.S. 181 Brooklyn, I.S. 061 William A Morris, KAPPA IV, Queens United Middle School, I.S. 219 New Venture School, Bronx School of Law and Finance, J.H.S. 125 Henry Hudson, P.S. 129 John H. Finley, M.S. 390, J.H.S. 210 Elizabeth Blackwell, J.H.S. 098 Herman Ridder, Queens Preparatory Academy, I.S. 254, P.S. 041 Francis White, M.S. 061 Dr. Gladstone H. Atwell, I.S. 229 Roland Patterson, High School for Innovation in Advertising and Media, East Fordham Academy for the Arts, South Bronx Academy for Applied Media, Frederick Douglass Academy VI High School, and I.S. 068 Isaac Bildersee.
- ¹⁸ See, e.g., Kerry Burke and Denis Slattery, "Student Fatally Stabbed by Classmate at Bronx School Laid to Rest," *New York Daily News*, Oct. 14, 2017.
- ¹⁹ For example, UCLA's Civil Rights Project has helped to popularize the notion of a "school-to-prison pipeline," alleging that suspensions (rather than the behavioral problems signaled by them) cause long-term negative outcomes for suspended students. In a 2014 speech, former U.S. secretary of education Arne Duncan declared: "[The racial] disparity [in suspensions] is not caused by children." See Arne Duncan, "Rethinking School Discipline," U.S. Department of Education, Jan. 8, 2014. If data on suspensions were complemented by reliable data on school conditions, Duncan's vision would likely be hard to sustain.