Do charter schools work?

Time for a test

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America's independent-schools movement under scrutiny

AMERICA'S universities are the best in the world, but the kindest verdict on its schools is "could do better". It spends enough on them—around the rich-world average of 3.8% of GDP—but its pupils do poorly in tests of reading, writing and mathematics, and too many drop out before completing school. Teaching attracts few ambitious and able graduates; school leaders have little autonomy. The solution, to free-marketeers, seems obvious. Give taxpayers' money not to a state-run monopoly, but to independent schools.

Since Minnesota started the experiment in 1991, most states have introduced independent, or charter, schools in some form. Evaluations have been broadly positive, but their enemies, including the politically powerful teachers' unions, can fairly claim that more research is needed. Do charter schools' pupils do better at tests because they have been coached intensively at the expense of a broad education? Do charters mean the most motivated students cluster in a few schools, to the detriment of the majority? Do they kick out—or coax out—the toughest to teach?

The answers to such questions should soon become clearer. Newark, one of America's grimmer cities, also has one of the country's highest concentrations of charter schools and is on course to have more. Seventeen schools run by 12 charter-management groups teach almost a tenth of the 48,000 children in its public-school system; by 2015 that share is likely to double. That is turning Newark into a magnet for education-policy wonks. The Newark Charter School Fund, established last year with money from, among others, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will help new schools navigate the bureaucracy, find buildings and recruit the best teachers. But it will also gather a mountain of data on the performance of every charter school, and pupil, in Newark.

All Newark's charter schools admit pupils by lottery, so tracking those who applied but didn't get in, as well as those that did, should allow comparisons between equally-motivated children of organised parents, but at different schools. If charter schools are teaching a narrow curriculum and focusing on test preparation, that should become clear when data are gathered on high-school completion rates and college destinations. If they are excluding lots of pupils, that will be obvious too. And if the state education department co-operates by giving researchers access to data on its own pupils, it will be possible to tell whether charter schools are leaching talent from state schools—or whether the challenge they pose to incumbents improves performance across the board.

Newark's charters are convinced they have a compelling story to tell. "We have never expelled a single child from one of our schools in Newark," says Ryan Hill, the director of the three schools run in the city by KIPP (the Knowledge is Power Programme), America's largest charter chain. "Great teachers prevent problems from developing in the first place." Drew Martin, a KIPP principal, is proud of his school's record in getting lagging children back on course. "More than four-fifths of our pupils are reading below grade level when they arrive aged ten," he says. "Three years later, fewer than a quarter of them still are."

Even if they are right, the debate will not be over. The final charge against schools such as those run by KIPP is that their longer hours and the demands those place on teachers (see Lexington) make them impossible to sustain, let alone replicate. Mr Hill thinks part of the solution lies in better management and training. The KIPP schools with the best teacher retention are also the oldest, he notes, suggesting that, over time, school leaders work out how to make the job manageable.

And the schools on his patch have started to train their own teachers—ensuring a ready supply of recruits. But the biggest step, he says, will be to stop children falling behind in the first place. "Our first elementary school, taking children from kindergarten up, opens in the fall, and once those children arrive in our other schools, our—and their—lives will be transformed."