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Authors	Velasquez, Déshané E
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Examining the Landscape of Charter Systems in Georgia

Deshane Velasquez

Introduction

Charter schools have autonomy from district and state regulations related to who they hire, how they structure the school day, and how they spend their resources. In exchange for this autonomy, charter schools must exceed the state average of traditional public schools on performance measures. Most charter schools operate alone from their districts or with a consortium of schools that have adopted the same curriculum. The State of Georgia, however, permits school districts to apply for charter status, such that every school in the district is a charter school and each school makes decisions about its people, time and money. These unique systems have yet to be evaluated to determine if districts are, indeed, relinquishing autonomy to their schools and what impact new governance practices may have on district performance.

Methods

This study uses descriptive statistics to illustrate the characteristics and performance of Georgia's 19 charter systems compared to its traditional public school districts. It also documents the governance policies of charter systems to evaluate how much autonomy schools have over their people, time and money. Demographic data, test scores and governance practices come from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement and the Georgia Department of Education. Maps and tables will distinguish the characteristics and performance of charter systems relative to traditional districts in Georgia for each year in operation as a charter system. Governance practices will be described and assessed to determine if each district's schools have low, average or high levels of autonomy.

Results

Preliminary results indicate that most charter systems have increased performance on state test scores over the period of their charters and in relation to the state average. These districts, however, serve fewer high-need students as measured by poverty, English language learners and disability compared to traditional public schools. Districts report permitting more governance authority to schools for hiring compared to time and use of money.

Discussion

Although charter districts are performing well, it is not clear if this success would have occurred without the autonomy, since districts had to demonstrate the capacity to manage themselves effectively in order to gain charter status.

References

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