

*Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?* by Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. 376 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

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Of the various urban school reforms on the agenda, the approach probably most evaluated by social scientists has been choice-based reform—including school vouchers, tax credits, open enrollment, and charter schooling. The most politically successful of these to date by far has been charter schooling, which has expanded dramatically since the first charter law was adopted in Minnesota in 1991. Today, more than 4,000 charter schools operate in more than 40 states.

This landscape is well-suited for serious and searching analysis of how charter schooling plays out in practice. In *Charter Schools: Hope or Hype?* Jack Buckley and Mark Schneider provide a sophisticated and innovative look at how charter schooling has unfolded in Washington, D.C. While the issue has been suffused with more than its share of polemics and sloppy scholarship, the authors here have produced a rigorous, determinedly empirical, exceedingly nuanced look at the realities on the ground.

That the evidence is entirely drawn from Washington, D.C., which boasts less than 2% of the nation's charter schools, suggests appropriate caution when generalizing from the findings. However, D.C. offers one of the nation's most generously funded charter programs, boasts a relatively "strong" charter law, and is one of the few cities where a robust charter system coexists with the traditional district. For that reason, the volume proffers a glimpse at the realities, challenges, and opportunities presented by a maturing charter sector.

Buckley and Schneider explore how families choose schools, whether charter students are tougher to educate than their district school peers, how families search for and utilize school information, parental satisfaction with charter schools and how it changes over time, and whether charter schools cultivate social capital and good citizenship. The authors forthrightly acknowledge that their data does not allow examination of how charter schools affect student achievement—a limitation that will disappoint some readers. The empirical analysis is built around the evidence gathered from two ambitious data collection efforts: one, a four-wave panel survey that they conducted which featured interviews with parents and students in the charter sector and the D.C. Public Schools (DCPS); and the second, observational

data they collected between 1999 and 2003 as parents and students used the Web site “DCSchoolSearch.com” to research schooling options.

The authors find that, in terms of key demographics, charter students and parents are not significantly different from students and parents in DCPS; there is a population of “marginal consumers” that is deliberate about choosing schools; charter parents are much more satisfied with their schools than DCPS parents, but this edge fades with time; and charter schools do better than district schools at cultivating citizenship skills. They conclude that, “*on average*, charter schools do no harm and in fact have the potential for doing good in many critical areas such as building social capital, increasing customer satisfaction, and enhancing the civic skills of students” (p. 279).

Ultimately, they suggest, markets “don’t work without lots of information, without a developed infrastructure, and without an adjudicating and enforcement authority” (p. 285). In place of the overheated rhetoric employed by many choice advocates and critics, they suggest that the charter debate needs smart, informed discussion of what it takes to create healthy markets and institutions. Buckley and Schneider have contributed importantly to that project by providing new insights into the relationship between charter schools and their customers. In doing so, they provide several intriguing findings that may surprise partisans on both sides of the charter debate.

They find that, although charter critics and proponents tend to agree that charters lack the facilities of district schools, charter parents grade their facilities more highly than DCPS parents.

No evidence of “cream skimming” is found; charter parents have lower average incomes and are more likely to be African American than are DCPS parents, and there are no significant differences between the two populations in average education or the number of years they have lived in their current neighborhood.

Contrary to arguments made on both sides of the debate, they “do not find consistent evidence that charter-school parents in D.C. are more involved with their schools than are D.C. public-school parents” (p. 58). For instance, both populations volunteer and join the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) at similar rates—a different finding than the authors reported in previous research on New York City.

They find that both charter school parents and those parents who still enroll their children in DCPS rate charter schools more highly than the DCPS schools.

They report that while parents claim that the key factors influencing their choice of school are teacher quality, academic environment and curriculum, parental involvement, and discipline/safety, search behavior when

parents used the “DCSchoolSearch” site revealed that the top concerns were test scores, location, basic program, and student demographics.

They find that higher levels of satisfaction with charter schools exist even after statistically controlling for self-selection and the “rose-colored glasses” effect, but there is far less evidence that charter students are more satisfied than are DCPS students. They also report that, for reasons that are not clear, the “charter-school advantage [in parental satisfaction] tends to narrow as experience with the school increases” (p. 218).

While skeptics worry that charter schooling might undermine the “public” character of public education, Buckley and Schneider report that “compared to the traditional public schools, charter schools do a superior job of educating their students in civic skills and getting them to volunteer and to participate in the community” (p. 266).

Readers should be clear about what Buckley and Schneider have delivered. Their focus on the dynamics of charter schooling makes for an important and nuanced contribution to a body of research that has tended to focus narrowly on test scores. This text—dotted with technical discussions of methodology, Bayesian analysis, and decision heuristics—is not a book for undergraduates or those with a casual interest in charter schooling. It is a serious book for scholars and the savviest of policymakers.

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*Subprime Mortgages: America’s Latest Boom and Bust* by Edward M. Gramlich. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press, 2007. 120 pp. \$26.95 (paperback).

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There is arguably no more critical development over the last 10-20 years to the shape and fate of urban housing markets than the growth and eventual decline of the subprime mortgage market. The meteoric growth and then crisis in this market has left many neighborhoods pockmarked with vacant buildings, and with residents effectively economically disabled by damaged credit records.

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**Reviewer’s Note:** In September 2007, Ned Gramlich passed away after a battle with cancer. Dr. Gramlich was a highly accomplished educator, scholar, and public official. His presence in a variety of his capacities—at the Federal Reserve, at the University of Michigan, at the Urban Institute, and other places—will be missed.