

November 10, 2011

California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) responds to Arizona State University professor David Dr. Garcia's review for the National Education Policy Center's (NEPC) Think Twice think tank review project of CCSA's report: *Chartering and Choice as an Achievement Gap-Closing Reform: The success of California charter schools in promoting African American Achievement*.

In Dr. Garcia's critique of the report he takes aim at elements of the report that fail to account for the type of data analyzed and the way the methodology was constructed, and takes aim at the report for critiques unfounded in the type of data analyzed and attacked claims we have not made, without the benefit of his own analysis or source data. It is indeed difficult to believe that this is something inadvertent, and suggests his aim has less to do with providing a balanced critique about the limitations of the study than to discredit the work on its face

The CCSA report was not presented as an academic analysis for an academic audience. Rather, our aim was to assess general trends, using publicly available, aggregate, school-level data to present to parents and community members the merits of the charter option.

We reject Dr. Garcia's analysis and critique, and stand behind our report's results on both the findings and our methodology. Below is a summary of the key points made by Dr. Garcia and the facts that refute his assertions.

Summary of Erroneous Points made by Dr. Garcia and the CCSA Response

- Dr. Garcia critiques CCSA for claiming that California (CA) charters are effectively closing the achievement gap.
 - At the very front of our report, we said: "We cannot yet declare victory — sizeable gaps still exist for African American students (CCSA, page 5)." We agree that the gap between African American students is an intractable, alarming problem that no one subset of schools can truly claim to have solved. However, what CCSA is taking a stand against is the pernicious claim that the students themselves are somehow to blame. We believe that charter schools are showing promise and are proof points that change is possible. Though in general the performance for all schools – charter and traditional – is unacceptably low for African American students, charter schools ARE outperforming; those "small" differences matter to parents because those averages actually represent real performance for an individual child.
- Dr. Garcia argues that charters cannot say they are truly closing the achievement gap. The underlying critique is that because the report was not a quasi-experimental design but rather a descriptive report based on summary school-level data, it did not take selection bias into account and therefore the report findings are invalid.
 - It is true that we did not control for parent motivation (which was not possible because we utilized publically available data which was available to us, not student-level data which is not). However, we did assess the demographic characteristics of African American families and found them to be similar in charters and traditionals on several socioeconomic/demographic variables. African American families in charters and traditionals had the same level of parent education, similar income levels (as measured by Free and Reduced Price Lunch) and similar levels of student retention (negating the argument that charters are disenrolling low performers). There

may be some intangible effect of parent motivation but these are similar families - and their students are achieving at higher levels in charters. No matter how you slice it, the Black-White gap is smaller in charter schools as measured by the difference between African American and White students' scores.

- Dr. Garcia appears to rest his critique on referring to the growth of students.
 - CCSA states clearly throughout and in the study limitations that this is an analysis of aggregate, school-level data as that is all we have access to. Therefore, there can be no assessment of students starting performance level. We do not have student-level data.
- Dr. Garcia also argues that CCSA cherry picked exemplar charters on which to focus the report.
 - This criticism is simply not rooted in fact. The quantitative analyses in the report examined all charter schools and non-charter schools with data and several analyses enumerated the number of charters and traditionals that met various high bars of performance for African American achievement. We looked for any school (charter or traditional) that met our criteria for being designated as a school that had demonstrated “high impact.” Charters were three times as likely as traditional schools to meet this criteria (finding 6 of the report, page 23). Moreover, while charters make up only 9% of all California public schools, they represented 39% of highly effective schools for African American students as compared to traditional schools (finding 12 of the report, page 33).
- Dr. Garcia incorrectly critiques that CCSA dismisses the role of socioeconomic status (SES) and does not use SES variables in any analyses other than an initial comparison of charter/traditional SES levels on page 9 of the report.
 - Socioeconomic status variables of parent education and income level (as measured by Free and Reduced Price Lunch) were controlled for in CCSA’s regression model, (used throughout CCSA’s quantitative analyses).
- Dr. Garcia critiques the regression model and specifically the finding that charter schools are reversing the trend of underperformance among African American students.
 - The report clearly states that the predictive relation is negative for both charters and non-charters. This and all other analyses have been represented accurately. We however see these as promising trends versus anomalies to be ignored.
- Dr. Garcia says: CCSA claims charters are centers of innovation, but then concludes no practices observed in CA charters that are not also present in traditional. He goes on to say: “[A]s the authors eventually conclude themselves, there were no instructional practices observed in California charter schools that are not also present in traditional public schools.” (Dr. Garcia, page 1).
 - That’s not what we said. We said: “In the operational context of the full autonomy that chartering provides, these [charter] schools have created successful cultures of achievement, and made conscious choices about how to accelerate success – yet none of their practices are inherently inaccessible to traditional public schools,” (page 5). Dr. Garcia in fact reiterates our own point that these are not charter-specific practices. We said that. Our point was that these practices can and do exist in traditional schools as well. We are simply saying it is easier for charters to operate in these ways.
- We have to question to what extent Dr. Garcia set about his analysis with a goal of attempting to deride and minimize the import of the research work.

- For example, he chooses to highlight some small details among CCSA’s identified list of best practices, such as “school is clean” and “teacher is patient in explaining concepts” (Dr. Garcia, page 2). Yet he fails to list the 12 key findings that CCSA identified based on a lengthy review of scholarly literature in the field. To ignore the very important detailed descriptions of what was actually observed in the case study schools and to highlight a select number of minute details raises concerns that Dr. Garcia approached his research review with a specific goal of discrediting the work, rather than attempting to provide a fair and balanced research critique.
- Ultimately, Dr. Garcia’s critique rests on the fact that the research was not produced to a standard that would meet the research guidelines established by the national charter school achievement consensus panel and would speak primary to a research audience.
 - That is not the intended audience or purpose of our report. We are not conducting an academic analysis for an academic audience. Rather, our aim is to assess general trends, using publicly available, aggregate, school-level data to present to parents and community members the merits of the charter option.

Detailed Description of CCSA Response

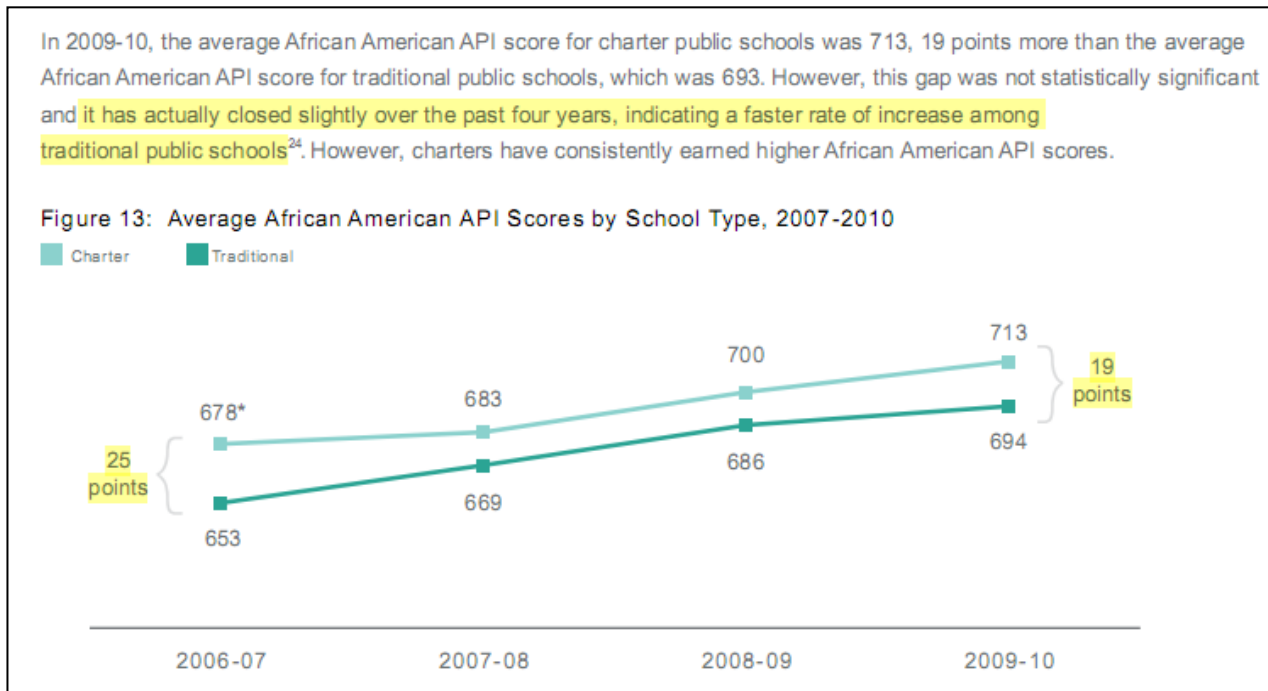
Dr. Garcia critiques CCSA for claiming that CA charters are effectively closing the achievement gap.

At the very front of our report, we said: “We cannot yet declare victory — sizeable gaps still exist for African American students (CCSA, page 5).” We agree that the gap between African American students is an intractable, alarming problem that no one subset of schools can truly claim to have solved. However, what CCSA is taking a stand against is the pernicious claim that the students themselves are somehow to blame. We believe that charter schools are showing promise and are proof points that change is possible. Though in general the performance for all schools – charter and traditional – is unacceptably low for African American students, charter schools ARE outperforming: those “small” differences matter to parents because those averages actually represent real performance for an individual child. We were careful to nuance our language in the report to highlight the promise that charters show while identifying the troubling gaps that remain:

- We were clear that closing the achievement gap among African American students and their White and Asian peers remains a significant challenge in public education. Indeed, few schools have demonstrated that they are highly effective educators of African Americans; however, charters are much more likely to be in this group.
- Dr. Garcia notes: “Most important, the report fails to support the claim in the report’s title that charter schools are closing the achievement gap. The data presented suggest, in fact, that the gap overall is largely unaffected by charter enrollment,” (page 10). The report was not an analysis of how chartering closes the achievement gap. We understand what the title of the report implies, but that implication is born out in the case studies conducted. The schools profiled have closed the achievement gap for their students. Furthermore, a title is precisely that – an attention grabber. A title should never take precedence over the actual text written in a report. However, in the analysis, we present performance differences, not declining gaps. We ourselves state that the gaps for charter remain large and that the traditional rate of change was higher over the past 4 years. But the achievement gap closing Dr. Garcia is ignoring is that of the case study schools. These schools are the achievement gap closing evidence, not the numbers.
- Moreover, Dr. Garcia references Figure 21 of our report but fails to include the heading, which also clearly calls out the fact that the achievement gap is far from closed: “Charter public schools are

having more success than traditional public schools at closing the achievement gap between African Americans and Whites and Asians, although big gaps persist across all school types,” (page 31).

- We did not hide the fact that the margin between charters and non-charters narrowed by 6 points. In fact, we called out the 25 point difference vs. the 19 point difference ourselves in Figure 13 on page 24 of the report (yellow highlight added):



The bulk of Dr. Garcia’s critique rests on referring to the growth of students.

CCSA states clearly throughout and in the study limitations that this is an analysis of aggregate, school-level data as that is all we have access to. Therefore, there can be no assessment of students starting performance level. We do not have student-level data.

- The critique also misinterprets the analysis as analysis of growth. There are no claims of "outgaining", but rather higher performance. Each year is a snapshot in time of average API performance for that year.
- Dr. Garcia states: "According to the graph, African Americans in charter schools started out higher and actually lost ground relative to traditional public schools over time," (page 5). This statement cannot be made when dealing with aggregate school-level data because there is no way of teasing out the possible overlap in this groups. The students in the traditional bucket one year could be in the charter bucket the next. That is why these are discussed as average performance trends as snapshots of performance over time. They cannot be linked in that way as we cannot assess the actual students that underlie these school level trends.
- Our statement is simply that charter performance is higher and therefore gaps are slightly smaller. We do not make claims about growth.

Dr. Garcia’s main argument is that charters cannot say they are truly closing the achievement gap. The underlying critique is that because the report was not a quasi-experimental design but rather a

descriptive report based on summary school-level data, it did not take selection bias into account and therefore the report findings are invalid.

It is true that we did not control for parent motivation (which was not possible because we utilized publically available data which was available to us, not student-level data which is not). However, we did assess the demographic characteristics of African American families and found them to be similar in charters and traditionals on several socioeconomic/demographic variables. African American families in charters and traditionals had the same level of parent education, similar income levels (as measured by Free and Reduced Price Lunch) and similar levels of student retention (negating the argument that charters are disenrolling low performers). There may be some intangible effect of parent motivation but these are similar families - and their students are achieving at higher levels in charters. No matter how you slice it, the Black-White gap is smaller in charter schools as measured by the difference between African American and White students' scores:

	2006-07	2009-10	
Charter Black-White Achievement Gap	143 points	141 points	gap closed by 2 points
Traditional Black-White Achievement Gap	168 points	160 points	gap closed by 8 points

- Dr. Garcia rightly points out a limitation of the work that we did not fully account for selection bias. But we did not pretend to – this was a review of publically available data for charter and traditionals and we did the best we could to account for that by reviewing the socioeconomic status (FRL and parent education) and retention rates of both groups to assess their similarities/differences. In our study limitation section we made sure to point out that the quantitative analysis relied solely on school level achievement data rather than individual student data, which provides a more nuanced, descriptive picture of achievement outcomes (CCSA page 58). But to dismiss the entire body of work because the design did not include a quasi experimental design is also problematic.
- Ultimately it is the African American parents themselves who are making the choice. They are enrolling their students in charters in record numbers at rates far exceeding the percentage in traditionals – and the numbers persist despite overall declines in the number of African Americans families living in the state.¹ More and more parents are choosing to stand up and enroll their students in effective charter schools of choice because they are getting a better education there. In Los Angeles and Sacramento City Unified School Districts, African American students are choosing charters at about twice the rate as traditional public schools.
- Several respected researchers have produced studies discounting the notion that charters are skimming the cream and selecting only the best students or that somehow charter school students differ in their very nature from traditional school students because of parents' selection.²
- Charters have to actively recruit their students. The notion of the highly popular charter that has so many students applying they have to hold a lottery only applies to a small percentage of charters. Most charters have to actively recruit students and are known to literally go door-to-door in the neighborhoods they serve, canvas the community by foot, attend church services to make announcements, or hand out fliers in front of stores. This notion that charter parents have actively sought out the charter opportunity is a myth for which there is no research-based evidence.

¹ In general, charter public school enrollment has been increasing while traditional public school enrollment has been decreasing (for all students). Over the past four years, traditional public school enrollment has been decreasing statewide and with African American students, however Latino student enrollment in traditional public schools has been slowly increasing. Among charter public schools, enrollment overall and African American enrollment has increased, although African American charter enrollment saw a drop in 2010. This is possibly due to the substantial increase among charter public schools in Latino enrollment in 2010 (up 16.68%).

² See <http://www.calcharters.org/2011/04/do-charter-schools-cream-or-skim-the-best-students.html>

- Dr. Garcia also notes that “By definition, student choosers (or their families, or both) are different than non-choosers,” (page 10). There is no empirical evidence this assumption is true.

Dr. Garcia’s argument that CCSA cherry picked exemplar charters on which to focus the report is also incorrect.

The quantitative analyses in the report examined all charter schools and non-charter schools with data and several analyses enumerated the number of charters and traditionals that met various high bars of performance for African American achievement:

- We looked for any school (charter or traditional) that met our criteria for being designated as a school that had demonstrated “high impact.” Charters were three times as likely as traditional schools to meet this criteria (finding 6 of the report, page 23).
 - A school is identified as a High Impact school if it fulfills each of the following: (1) API of at least 800 (the statewide goal); (2) Cumulative three-year API growth of above -30 points (no more than 30 point decline over three years), (3) Consistently outperforming predictions on CCSA’s Similar Students Measure regression model); (4) Proficiency of at least 50% in both English Languages Arts and Math.
- Moreover, while charters make up only 9% of all California public schools, they represented 39% of highly effective schools for African American students as compared to traditional schools (finding 12 of the report, page 33).
 - A school is identified as Highly Effective for African American students if it has (1) a 2009-10 African American API score of 800 or higher; (2) African American students’ ELA and math proficiency of 65% or higher; (3) predominantly African American enrollment (60% or higher); and (4) located in an urban area, mimicking the school environment most African American students in the nation experience.

Dr. Garcia incorrectly critiques that CCSA dismisses the role of socioeconomic status (SES) and does not use SES variables in any analyses other than an initial comparison of charter/traditional SES levels on page 9 of the report. This is false: socioeconomic status variables of parent education and income level (as measured by Free and Reduced Price Lunch) were controlled for in CCSA’s regression model, (used throughout of CCSA’s quantitative analyses).

As explained in greater detail in both the *Portrait of the Movement* and CCSA’s Technical Guide for the Similar Students Measure “SSM” (CCSA’s regression model) CCSA controls for several demographic variables including ones related to socioeconomic status.³ The results of these regression models say that based on the parent education, income levels, retention rates (and other variables), this is how we would predict the school to perform on the API based on how all the other charter and traditional schools in California are doing. What we find is that charters are dramatically outperforming their predictions in comparison to traditionals (findings 3 and 4 of the report, pages 16-19).

- Other key variables in our regression model include English learner status, students with disabilities, ethnicity and enrollment size.
- The regression models are also calculated separately for elementary, middle and high schools (another incorrect point from Dr. Garcia who critiques that CCSA does not take grade level into account in its analyses of the impact of socioeconomic status).
- CCSA’s Similar Students Measure regression model and the *Portrait of the Movement* report based on this regression model just won Research Project of the Year, from the National Association of Charter

³ The Portrait of the Movement can be accessed here: <http://www.calcharters.org/advocacy/accountability/portraitofthemovement/> and the SSM Technical Guide can be accessed here: <http://www.calcharters.org/2011/02/technical-guide-construction-of-aspp-and-ssm.html>

School Authorizers (NACSA), garnering the Award for Excellence in Advancing Knowledge during the 2011 NACSA Annual Leadership Conference.⁴ Moreover, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) sees the value and accuracy of our research – out of 11,000 research items, only 250 selected including the *Portrait of the Movement* report based on this regression model.

Dr. Garcia critiques the regression model and specifically the finding that charter schools are reversing the trend of underperformance among African American students.

The report clearly states that the predictive relation is negative for both charters and non-charters. This and all other analyses have been represented accurately. We however see these as promising trends versus anomalies to be ignored.

- He notes: "This does not mean, however, that the predicted outcomes in charter schools are 'three times' better," (page 6). We did not say it was. We said exactly what we said: The statistical relationship is weaker. We do not state there is a 3 times greater "effect". We simply said the relationship is weaker. Dr. Garcia does not refute that - his critique is about other elements of the regression, none of which we claimed. We did not claim it was a large effect. We agree the overall variance explained is low. We do not address that directly in the report, but that is obvious for anyone knowledgeable about regression in the regression tables we included. We did not discuss that explicitly because that isn't our audience.
- These critiques, while accurate, do not change our finding: The relationship is weaker. Yes, it is still negative. Yes, the % of AA students is a small part of what makes a school's API. But still, the relationship between % of AA students and a school's API is statistically significant and it is weaker in charters.

Dr. Garcia says: CCSA claims charters are centers of innovation, but then concludes no practices observed in CA charters that are not also present in traditional. He goes on to say: "[A]s the authors eventually conclude themselves, there were not instructional practices observed in California charter schools that are not also present in traditional public schools." (Dr. Garcia, page 1).

That's not what we said. We said: "In the operational context of the full autonomy that chartering provides, these [charter] schools have created successful cultures of achievement, and made conscious choices about how to accelerate success – yet none of their practices are inherently inaccessible to traditional public schools," (page 5). Dr. Garcia in fact reiterates our own point that these are not charter-specific practices. We said that. Our point was that these practices can and do exist in traditional schools as well. We are simply saying it is easier for charters to operate in these ways.

- We didn't observe traditional public schools but the lower test scores and history of non-gains leads us to believe that these practices AREN'T going on in traditionals. It may well be that there are a few traditionals that are utilizing elements of effective practice but the test scores and overall low performance make clear that these practices are not consistently and effectively adopted in traditional schools. Despite Dr. Garcia's assertion from the research literature that charter school autonomy is not as fully utilized as it ought to be, the fact is that charters have significant autonomy in choosing their teaching practices, building their school culture, and changing quickly, nimbly, flexibly to implement and learn from other schools without undue bureaucracy slowing down the process or the time it takes to implement change.

⁴ See the full news release here:

<http://www.calcharters.org/blog/2011/10/ccsa-statement-on-portrait-of-the-movement-report-national-recognition.html>

We have to question what extent Dr. Garcia set about his analysis with a goal of attempting to deride and minimize the import of the research work.

For example, he chooses to highlight some small details among CCSA's identified list of best practices, such as "school is clean" and "teacher is patient in explaining concepts" (Dr. Garcia, page 2). Yet he fails to list the 12 key findings that CCSA identified based on a lengthy review of scholarly literature in the field (listed below). To ignore the very important detailed descriptions of what was actually observed in the case study schools and highlight a select number of minute details raises concerns that Dr. Garcia approached his research review with a specific goal of discrediting the work, rather than attempting to provide a fair and balanced research critique.

Strategies Observed at Successful Schools

In each case, the schools were found to consistently use the strategies discussed in scholarly literature as effective for African American students, and all can be implemented by any public school.

1. A clear mission statement focused on academic achievement and developing students
2. Knowing, understanding and catering to students' diverse needs
3. A standards-based curriculum focused on critical thinking skills
4. Results-focused instructional practices
5. Curricular and instructional decisions are based on data
6. Explicitly teaching test taking strategies
7. School leader serves as instructional leader
8. Strong school culture is explicitly built and re-enforced at the start of each school year
9. Parents are included as full partners in students' education
10. All members of the school are held accountable
11. Structures are intentionally put into place to help achieve the mission of the school

Practices Not Observed

1. Militaristic Discipline
2. Teaching to the test
3. Superficial celebrations of culture

Ultimately, Dr. Garcia's critique rests on the fact that the research was not produced to a standard that would meet the research guidelines established by the national charter school achievement consensus panel and would speak primary to a research audience.

That is not the intended audience or purpose of our report. We are not conducting an academic analysis for an academic audience. Rather, our aim is to assess general trends, using publicly available, aggregate, school-level data to present to parents and community members the merits of the charter option.

###