



WHY THE GAP?

English Language Learners and New York City Charter Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The significant growth of charter schools in the United States has brought both praise for the excellent results achieved by some schools and criticism that charter schools may not be serving the most disadvantaged students.

In New York City and elsewhere, a significantly smaller proportion of students enrolled in charter schools are classified as English language learners (ELL) than in traditional public schools. This observation has produced considerable discussion and some policy responses.

Though it is simple to quantify this “ELL gap” in enrollment across the charter and traditional public school sectors, we currently have very little understanding about why the gap exists. This is unfortunate: without a better understanding of the factors responsible, policymakers are more likely to adopt policies that not only fail to tackle the gap but also risk producing unintended consequences.

This paper—which builds on a joint 2013 report by the Manhattan Institute and the Center on Reinventing Public Education, *Why the Gap? Special Education and New York City Charter Schools*—uses longitudinal student-level enrollment data to explain the ELL gap between New York City charter and traditional public schools. Key findings include:

- The ELL gap *does* indeed exist. The proportion of students enrolled in charter schools with an ELL classification is significantly—and substantially—smaller than the proportion of ELL students in traditional public schools. The gap, though largest in kindergarten and first grade, is considerable at every grade level.
- The ELL gap is *not* primarily due to the movement of students with existing ELL classifications across the charter and traditional public school sectors, or out of New York City entirely. ELL students are less likely to exit charter elementary schools than traditional public elementary schools and no more likely to exit charter middle schools than traditional public middle schools. Moreover, ELL students are more likely to enter charter schools in non-gateway grades than to exit them. (“Gateway grades” are those in which students tend to make structural moves, such as from elementary to middle school.)
- The vast majority of the ELL gap is, instead, explained by the fact that ELL students are far less likely to apply to attend charter schools in gateway grades than non-ELL students. Students with particularly poor English skills are least likely to apply to attend charter schools in a gateway grade.
- Charter schools declassify a significantly larger proportion of their ELL students than do traditional public schools. The ELL gap nevertheless narrows as students progress through grade levels because the proportion of ELL students in charter schools is, from the outset, considerably smaller than in traditional public schools.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction
2	I. English Language Learners
3	II. Data
3	III. Quantifying the ELL Gap
4	IV. Who Enters Charter Schools?
6	V. Do ELL Students Exit Charter Schools at Particularly High Rates?
8	VI. Differences in ELL Declassifications by Sector
9	VII. Deconstructing Changes in ELL Gap as Students Progress Through Grade Levels
11	Conclusion
12	Endnotes

WHY THE GAP? ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND NEW YORK CITY CHARTER SCHOOLS

Marcus A. Winters

INTRODUCTION

Findings from recent empirical research leave little doubt that students attending a New York City charter school—public schools of choice operating independently of the surrounding district—perform better, on average, than they would had they attended a traditional public school.¹ But important questions about the inclusiveness of charter schools remain. In particular, a common complaint about charter schools in New York City and elsewhere is that they fail to adequately enroll difficult-to-educate students, such as special-education students and those learning English. As public schools, charters are legally (and, arguably, morally) required to educate all types of students who wish to enroll.

A smaller proportion of charter school students are, it is true, classified as disabled or as English language learners than in traditional public schools. This observation has produced considerable discussion and some policy responses. For instance, the New York state legislature recently revised its charter school law to require authorizers to take into account a charter school's progress toward serving a proportionate number of special-needs and ELL students during reauthorization proceedings.

Despite such initiatives, we currently know remarkably little about the underlying causes of these student enrollment gaps. This is unfortunate: sound policymaking designed to address such gaps requires not only verifying their existence but also better understanding the factors that produce them. As such, initiatives that fail to tackle the root causes risk creating unintended—and potentially harmful—consequences.

This paper represents the third in a series of ongoing research projects designed to understand the factors producing differences in the proportion of students with certain classifications in charter and traditional public school sectors. Previously, I utilized data from New York City and Denver to deconstruct the factors leading to the gap in the proportion of special-ed students enrolled in charter and traditional public schools. That research demonstrated that the causes of the so-called special-education gap are more complex than they appear at first blush. Despite conventional wisdom that the gap is due to the “counseling-out” of difficult-to-educate students, in both cities I found that the gap is not markedly influenced by students with existing disability classifications moving out of the charter sector.

In this paper, I expand upon previous research by focusing on another group of difficult-to-educate students disproportionately underrepresented in charter schools, relative to traditional public schools: English language learners (ELL). I use longitudinal student-level enrollment data for New York City public school students to identify factors responsible for the difference in the proportion of ELL-designated students in charter and traditional public schools in New York City.

I first demonstrate that there is indeed an ELL gap. The proportion of ELL students enrolled in charter schools is significantly smaller than the proportion of ELL traditional public school students.² This gap is considerable at every grade level.

As similarly found in my earlier research on students with disabilities, the ELL gap is *not* primarily due to the shuffling of students with ELL classifications across the charter and traditional public school sectors—or out of New York City entirely. In fact, ELL students are less likely to exit charter elementary schools than they are to exit traditional public elementary schools, and they are no more likely to exit charter middle schools than to exit traditional public middle schools. Moreover, students with existing ELL classifications are more likely to enter charter schools in non-gateway grades than to exit them. (A “gateway grade” is one in which

students are expected to make a structural move: in sixth grade, one such gateway grade, students usually change schools, moving from elementary to middle school.)

In reality, the vast majority of the ELL gap is explained by the fact that ELL students are far less likely to apply to attend charter schools in gateway grades than non-ELL students. Indeed, students with particularly poor English skills are least likely to apply to attend a charter school in a gateway grade.

As students progress through grade levels, the ELL gap remains large but narrows somewhat. This is mostly the result of student declassification in charter and traditional public schools, rather than student movement across the two sectors, or out of New York City public schools altogether. Each year, charter schools actually declassify a significantly *larger* proportion of ELL students than do traditional public schools. Nonetheless, the much smaller share of ELL students enrolled in charter schools, relative to traditional public schools, means that the overall impact of declassification is to narrow the ELL gap.

In short, analysis of student enrollment data suggests that the only policy levers capable of meaningfully decreasing the ELL gap are those that increase the likelihood that ELL students will apply to attend charter schools. Thus, contrary to conventional wisdom, the movement of students—with or without an ELL classification—explains noticeably little of the ELL gap. As a consequence, efforts focused on decreasing counseling-out of ELL students are unlikely to be productive.

I. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) defines ELL students as those who speak a language other than English at home and score below proficient on English assessments when entering the school system.³ The system offers both Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, depending on student need. The amount of instruction

students receive in English increases with their understanding of English.

ELL services keep students advancing academically until they become proficient in English and can enter an English-only classroom environment. Students are meant to eventually jettison their ELL classification status.

Each spring, ELL students in kindergarten through 12th grade who receive ESL services are administered the New York State English as a Second Language Achievement Test (NYSELAT) to determine their English proficiency. The test consists of assessments for English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening comprehension. The student's cumulative score falls into one of four bands: Beginning, Intermediate, Advanced, and Proficient. Students scoring Proficient are "declassified" from ELL status.

II. DATA

I utilize a student-level longitudinal data set made available by the NYCDOE. The administrative data set includes information for students enrolled in a New York City charter or traditional public school in each (school calendar) year, from 2008–09 through 2011–12. A unique masked student identifier tracks individual students over time, while a school identifier indicates the school attended.

For each student and year, the data set identifies whether the student was classified as ELL as of June of the (concluding) school year: for 2008–09 data, for instance, the "flag" indicates whether the student was ELL-classified as of June 2009.

As mentioned, ELL students take the NYSELAT annually in the spring to assess their understanding of English and to determine whether they will remain classified as ELL. The data set includes an indicator for students' overall performance on the NYSELAT.

An important limitation of the data set is that ELL classification and NYSELAT data are not available for students until the conclusion of the kindergarten year. As such, the data do not allow assessment

of a student's English proficiency *prior* to entering kindergarten. In other words, are differences in kindergarten ELL enrollment due to ELL students being less likely to enter an elementary charter school? Or are students enrolled in charters less likely to be newly classified as ELL during the kindergarten year? Still, since students cannot "test out" of their ELL designation until the spring—with the administrative data set not updated until after June—the ELL flag nevertheless identifies students classified as ELL at any time during the school year.⁴

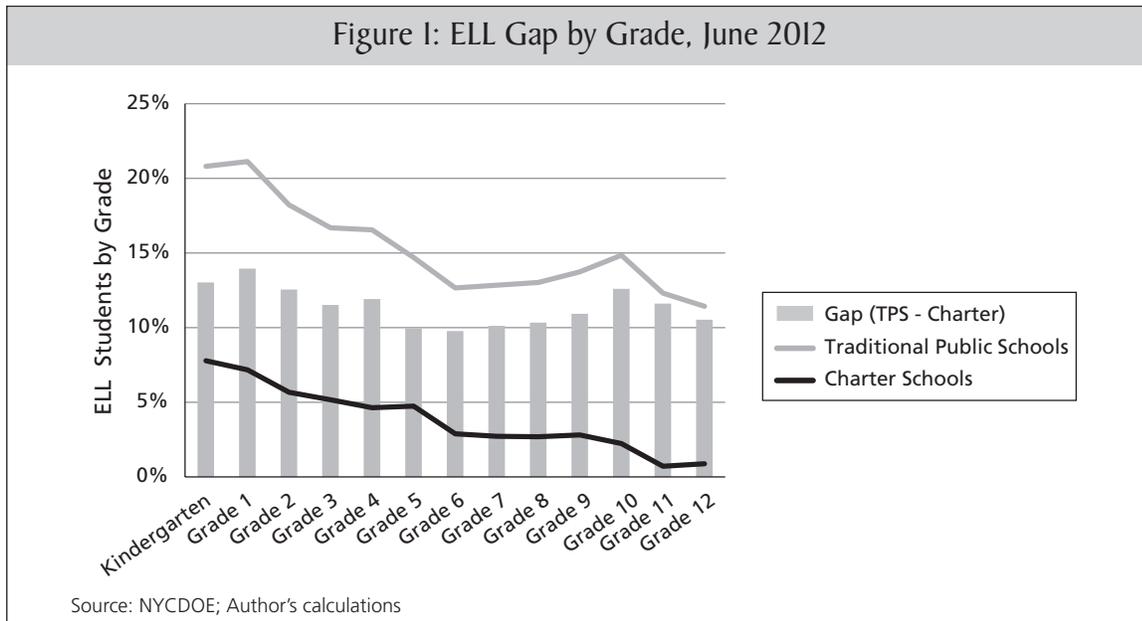
III. QUANTIFYING THE ELL GAP

Figure 1 illustrates the ELL gap by grade, as of June 2012. The two lines illustrate the percentage of ELL students in charter and traditional public schools, respectively, for each grade level. Since charter schools serve certain grades disproportionately relative to traditional public schools, comparisons of aggregated figures by sector can be misleading. That is why it is important to consider the ELL gap *by grade level*. The bars illustrate the ELL gap—calculated by subtracting the ELL percentage in charter schools from the ELL percentage in traditional public schools, for the given grade level.

Figure 1 demonstrates that, in each grade level, a substantially larger proportion of students enrolled in traditional public schools are classified as ELL. In each case, the difference in the percentage of ELL students is statistically significant. In both sectors, the percentage of students classified as ELL is largest in kindergarten and first grade, declining considerably in later grades. This is no surprise: ELL students are expected to eventually progress out of their ELL classification, while few students are newly classified as ELL. The number of ELL students in later grades only increases when new students enter the city's schools in those later grades (a number still smaller than the number declassified out of ELL).

The decline in the percentage of ELL students is somewhat faster in the traditional public school sector than in the charter sector, leading to a reduction in the ELL gap as grade levels increase. However, as illustrated by the bars in Figure 1, the ELL gap

Figure 1: ELL Gap by Grade, June 2012



remains relatively consistent across grade levels. The gap drops from 13 percentage points in kindergarten to 10.5 percentage points in 12th grade.

In short, Figure 1 reveals that the ELL gap is real. The gap begins when students enter charter and traditional public schools in kindergarten, remaining relatively consistent across grades. Though a substantially smaller percentage of charter school students are classified as ELL, the trajectory of changes to the ELL percentage is similar across sectors. This result suggests that the gap is largely a consequence

of students' decisions on *whether* to apply to charter schools, rather than differences in the behavior of ELL students once enrolled. To confirm such a hypothesis, however, further analysis is required.

IV. WHO ENTERS CHARTER SCHOOLS?

Figure 2 compares the percentage of ELL students enrolled in charter schools for the first time in 2011–12 (classified as of June 2012) with the percentage of *all* ELL students enrolled in traditional public schools (likewise classified as of June 2012).

Figure 2: Percent of New Charter School Entrants Classified as ELL, by Sector and Grade Level, 2011–2012

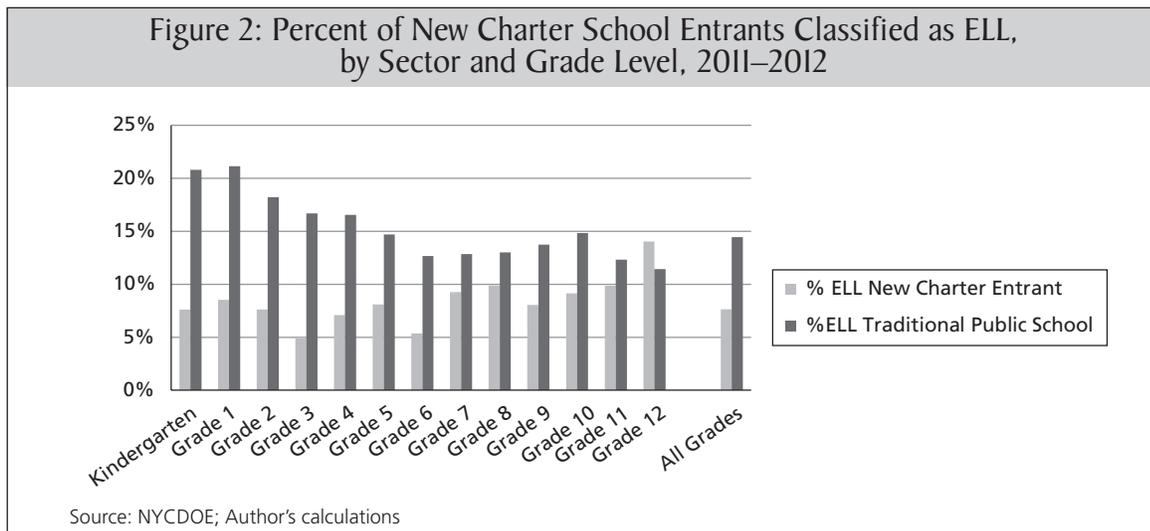


Figure 2 demonstrates that, in nearly all grade levels, the percentage of new charter school entrants with an existing ELL classification is substantially smaller than the percentage of ELL students enrolled in traditional public schools (at the comparable grade level).⁵

Revealingly, the percentage of new charter school entrants in kindergarten classified as ELL is nearly the same as the percentage of charter school kindergarten students who *are* ELL (as reported in Figure 1). This result demonstrates that the initial percentage of charter school students in ELL—when the gap is close to its widest—is primarily due to *who* applies to charters.

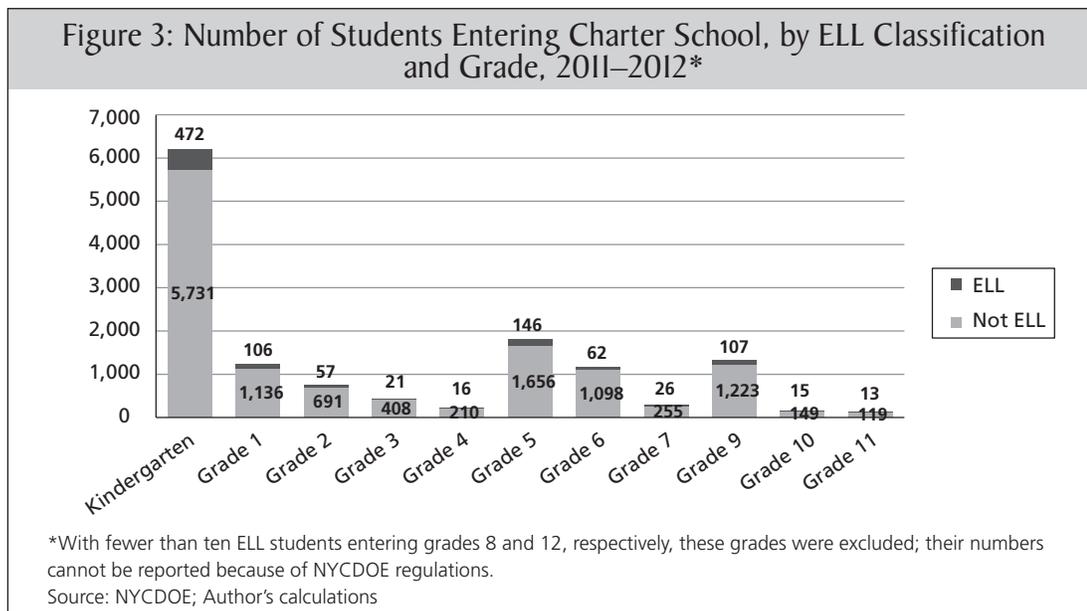
It is worth noting that because students do not tend to enter kindergarten with an ELL classification, the aforementioned analysis is unable to distinguish between (i) the influences of who applies to charter schools, and (ii) differences in the likelihood that charter schools classify students as ELL, on the overall percentage of kindergarten students with ELL classifications. Still, the gap in this case is so wide that differences in classification decisions seem unlikely to play the dominant explanatory role.

Figure 3 further illustrates the number of students entering charter schools in school year 2011–12, by grade and ELL classification.

Figure 3 shows that kindergarten is, by far, the grade level with the largest new enrollment into charter schools. Grades 5 and 6, the two grades in which charter middle schools open in the city, also see significant numbers of new enrollees. While it is interesting that the percentage of ELL students entering charters in non-gateway grades is lower than in traditional public schools, Figure 3 makes clear that the “who applies” factor for explaining the ELL gap is largely driven by the gateway grades, particularly kindergarten.

Though ELL is a stand-alone classification, the classification does account for differences in students’ English language proficiency. Figure 4 examines the type of ELL student entering charter schools by reporting the percentage of students scoring at each level of the NYSELAT.

Due to their disproportionately large intake of new enrollees (Figure 3), Figure 4 reports only results for the gateway elementary and middle school grades. For grades 5 and 6, the table reports the percentage of students scoring at each level when they were administered the exam the previous spring (thus representing the students’ ELL proficiency as they entered the charter school). Because students are not administered the exam prior to entering kindergarten, for that grade the table re-



ports the percentage of students scoring in each level in the spring of their kindergarten year. As such, kindergarten results cannot completely distinguish between a student’s English proficiency prior to entering the charter school and the effectiveness of the English instruction that the student received in the kindergarten year.

Figure 4 demonstrates that ELL students who enter charter schools tend to have a better understanding of English than their ELL counterparts who did not enter charter schools. For each grade except sixth, a significantly smaller percentage of ELL charter school entrants scored at the Beginning level on the NYSELAT the year prior to entering (or, in the case of kindergarten, the year of enrollment) than did ELL students who remained in traditional public schools. Similarly, in all but sixth grade, a significantly higher percentage of ELL charter school entrants scored at the Proficient level (and thus would not be classified as ELL the following year) than did students who remained in traditional public schools. The differences at the Intermediate and Advanced levels, while smaller, are still (in certain cases) statistically significant.

These results suggest that the lower probability that an ELL student will choose to apply to a charter school in kindergarten is a key driver of the ELL gap. In particular, students significantly lagging in English proficiency are especially unlikely to apply to attend a charter school. This initial difference in ELL rates (as shown in Figure 1) is the most meaningful driver of the ELL gap.

V. DO ELL STUDENTS EXIT CHARTER SCHOOLS AT PARTICULARLY HIGH RATES?

A common criticism of charter schools is that they “counsel-out” their most difficult-to-educate students, including those with ELL classifications. Charter school critics point to numerous anecdotes from former charter school parents that their child was subtly (or not so subtly) asked to leave the school because the school was incapable of dealing with their particular needs.

If counseling-out is indeed a meaningful driver of the ELL gap, one would suspect ELL charter school students to be more likely to exit their school than ELL students in traditional public schools. Figures 5, 6, and 7 shine light on this issue by examining the exiting behavior of charter and traditional public school students, by grade of entry.

Figure 5 illustrates the mobility of students enrolled in kindergarten in 2008–09. Each line illustrates the proportion of students meeting a certain classification who remained enrolled in their original kindergarten school each subsequent year: dashed (grey and black) lines indicate charter schools; grey lines represent students classified as ELL when in kindergarten; and black lines represent non-ELL students in kindergarten.

Figure 5 demonstrates that for the three years after enrollment in kindergarten, student mobility among ELL and non-ELL students alike was lower

Figure 4: NYSELAT Scores for NYC Public School Gateway Grade Enrollees

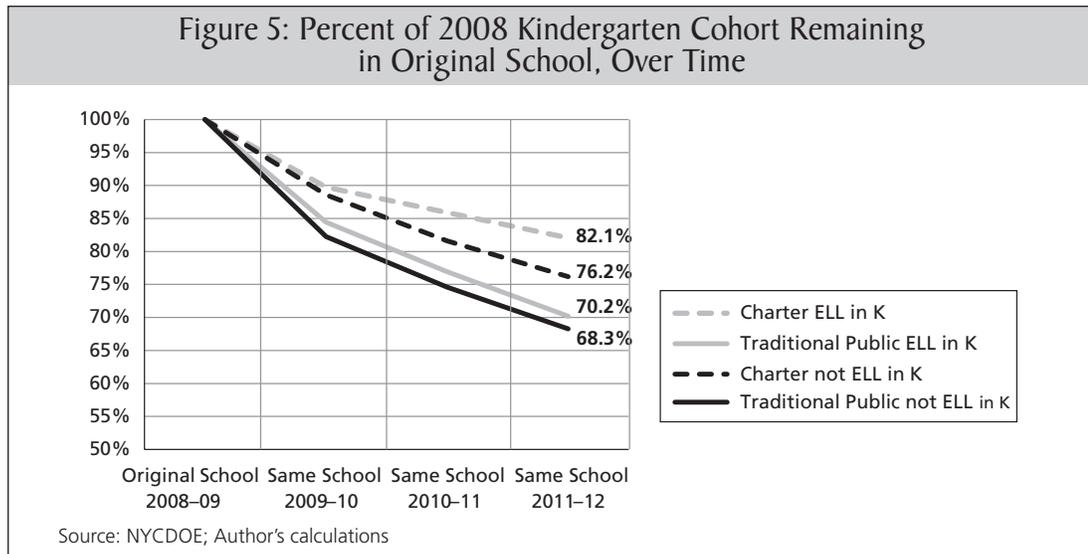
	Beginning		Intermediate		Advanced		Proficient	
	Not Charter Entrant	Charter Entrant						
Kindergarten*	41.8%	27.6%***	32.9%	37.4%**	15.1%	22.4%***	10.1%	12.6%*
Grade 5	11.4%	4.1%***	22.4%	19.6%	43.4%	47.9%	22.8%	28.4%*
Grade 6	15.0%	9.1%	19.6%	6.8%***	38.8%	51.1%**	26.6%	33.0%
Grade 9	24.8%	13.9%***	35.8%	34.8%	22.0%	26.1%	17.4%	25.2%**
All Grades	19.8%	11.8%***	32.0%	25.9%***	31.7%	38.4%***	16.5%	23.8%***

*Kindergarten scores are for spring 2011. All other scores are for spring 2010. Current year scores are used for kindergarten because prior year’s scores are unobserved. The analysis cannot distinguish effect of charter schooling on test scores during kindergarten year.

*Significant at 10% level **Significant at 5% level ***Significant at 1% level

Source: NYCDOE; Author’s calculations

Figure 5: Percent of 2008 Kindergarten Cohort Remaining in Original School, Over Time



for students enrolled in a charter school for kindergarten than for students enrolled in a traditional public school. Each of the differences between charter and traditional public school students of a certain classification (i.e., charter school ELL students compared with traditional public school ELL students; charter school non-ELL students compared with traditional public school non-ELL students) is statistically significant.⁶

Similar analysis examining students attending charter middle schools is complicated by two factors. First, in New York City some charter middle schools begin in fifth grade, while others begin in sixth: to address this issue, separate analyses are reported for students based on their fifth- or sixth-grade school. Second, one would suspect different mobility behavior among students previously enrolled in a charter school (perhaps one covering grades K–12) than for students entering a charter school for the first time. To address this issue, the analysis includes only students who were not enrolled in a charter school in the previous year (which, in turn, requires beginning the analysis with the fifth- and sixth-grade cohorts from 2009–10).

Figures 6 and 7 report similar analyses as reported in Figure 5 for students, based on the school in which they were enrolled in fifth or sixth grade, respectively. Though included for the sake of completeness, the

mobility of traditional public school students attending fifth grade in 2009–10 is highly misleading: in the majority of New York City’s traditional public schools, sixth grade is a gateway grade (when students are expected to change schools). It is worth noting, however, that the percentages of students with, or without, ELL classifications attending charter schools for the first time in fifth grade are consistent with the modest mobility levels seen in kindergarten.

Figure 7 tells a similar story for students attending sixth grade in 2009–10. In this case, it appears that charter school ELL students were somewhat more likely to exit their charter school than ELL students enrolled in traditional public schools. Yet this difference is not statistically significant. In short, for middle school grades, too, ELL students are statistically as likely to exit charter schools as they are to exit traditional public schools.

Overall, these results suggest that ELL students in different grades are just as likely—or even less likely—to exit their school if it is a charter. This finding contradicts the conventional wisdom that charter schools often counsel-out their ELL students. That is not to say that such behavior does not occur. Yet the fact that ELL students in charter schools are, at worst, as mobile as ELL students in traditional public schools suggests that such mobility is not a significant driver of the ELL gap.

Figure 6: Percent of 2009 Grade 5 Cohort Remaining in Original School, Over Time

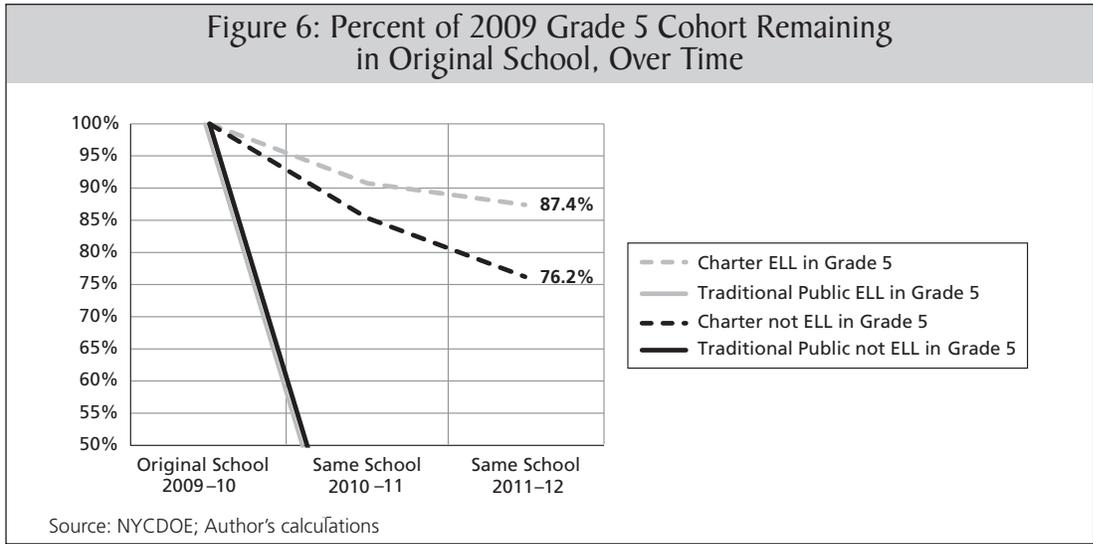
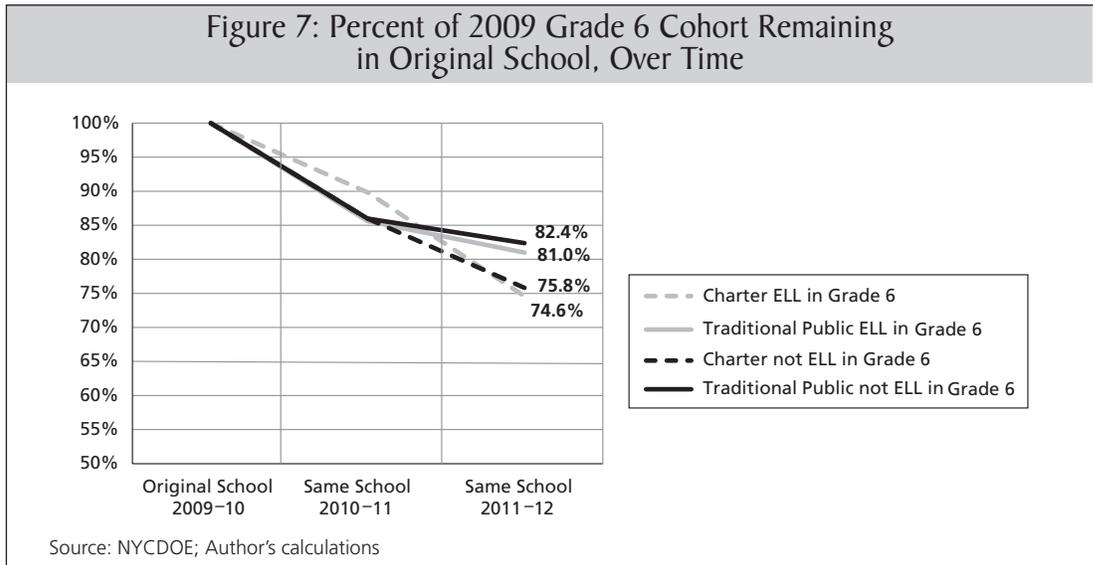


Figure 7: Percent of 2009 Grade 6 Cohort Remaining in Original School, Over Time



VI. DIFFERENCES IN ELL DECLASSIFICATIONS BY SECTOR

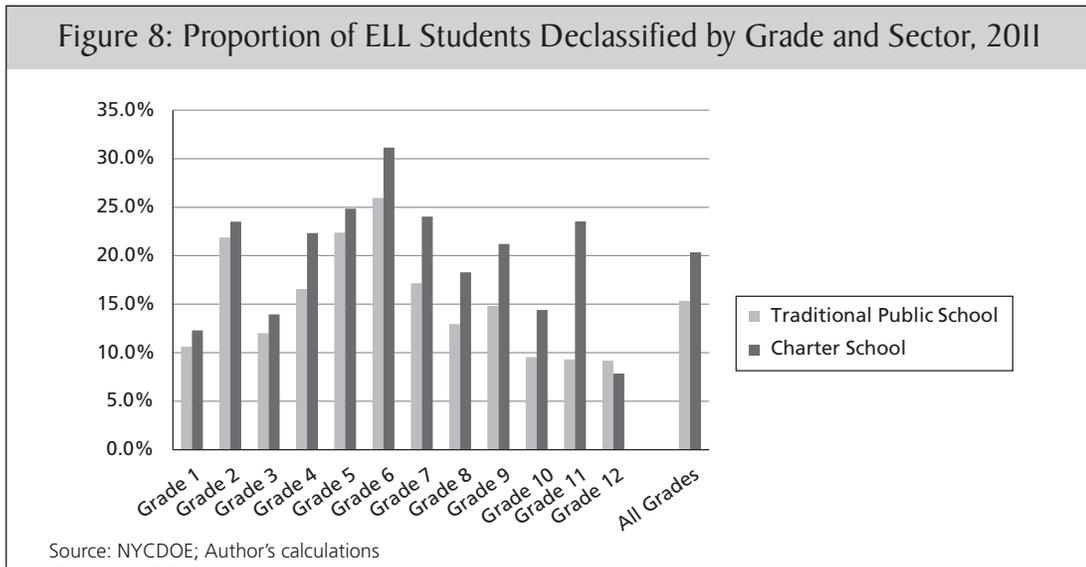
The ultimate goal, of course, of classifying students as ELL is to help narrow their English proficiency gap with that of their peers—and, in the process, be ELL-declassified once a Proficient level score on the NYSELAT is achieved. The consistent decrease in the percentage of students classified as ELL in both charter and traditional public school sectors (Figure 1) is primarily due to such declassification.

Figure 8 considers the declassification rate across sectors by comparing, for each grade, the percentage of

students classified as ELL the previous year who were no longer classified as ELL in June 2011. (Kindergarten is excluded because only students repeating that grade would previously have been classified as ELL.)

Figure 8 demonstrates that, overall, charter schools declassify a larger proportion of their ELL students than do traditional public schools. Among all students previously classified as ELL, the following year charter schools declassified 20.3 percent while traditional public schools declassified 15.3 percent—a statistically significant difference. (Declassification differences are statistically significant in grades 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 11.)

Figure 8: Proportion of ELL Students Declassified by Grade and Sector, 2011



Such differences in declassification could be due to a variety of factors. Perhaps charter schools are more effective at moving students out of the ELL classification. On the other hand, as illustrated in Figure 4, ELL students who enroll in charter schools tend to have higher scores on the NYSELAT prior to entry and thus are closer to declassification to begin with. This paper is not in a position to determine the separate influence of such factors on rates of declassification by sector.

The fact that charter schools declassify a larger percentage of ELL students would intuitively seem to lead to an increase in the ELL gap. However, as explained below in Section VII, this turns out not to be the case. Rather, though charter schools declassify a larger portion of ELL students, the fact that charters enroll a much smaller proportion of ELL students means that declassifications have a larger impact on the percentage of students with ELL classification in traditional public schools.

VII. DECONSTRUCTING CHANGES IN ELL GAP AS STUDENTS PROGRESS THROUGH GRADE LEVELS

The results thus far demonstrate that the ELL gap is primarily driven by student applications to attend charter schools. The ELL gap cannot be meaningfully addressed without influencing the decisions of ELL students to apply to charter schools.

Nonetheless, it is worth considering the factors leading to changes in the ELL gap, as students progress through grade levels, to further understand what happens to students once enrolled in school. This section follows a cohort of students as they enter and progress through the school system to deconstruct the independent influence of student mobility and declassification differences on the proportion of ELL-classified students in each sector.

This section focuses on elementary grades, where the decline in the ELL gap is visible (in contrast, the gap in middle school grades, as demonstrated in Figure 1, remains very consistent). It identifies students enrolled in kindergarten during the 2008–09 school year and follows them through 2011–12 (when the majority would be in third grade). It identifies, for each year, the number of students for whom a change would influence the proportion of ELL students in the charter and/or traditional public school sectors the following year.

Indeed, only factors influencing the total number of students within a sector—and/or the number of ELL students within a sector—could affect such a change. Only six such factors exist, all related to classification changes or student mobility:

Classification Changes

1. **New ELL:** Student without an ELL classification the previous year is newly classified as ELL.

2. **Declassified ELL:** Student with an ELL classification the previous year is no longer classified as ELL.

Student Mobility

3. **Non-ELL Student Exits from a Sector:** Occurs when a student without an ELL classification attends a traditional public school the previous year, then leaves that sector to attend a charter school (or vice versa). Also occurs when a regular education student in either sector exits the New York City system entirely. The departure of such students decreases the total number of students in the sector without influencing the number of ELL students in that sector.
4. **Student with ELL Classification Exits from Sector:** Occurs when a student with an ELL classification attends a traditional public school the previous year, then leaves that sector to attend a charter school (or vice versa). Also occurs when an ELL student in either sector exits the New York City system entirely.
5. **Non-ELL Student Enters a New Sector:** Occurs when a student without an ELL classification attends a traditional public school the previous year, then enters a charter school (or vice versa). Also occurs if a regular education student, who was originally observed from the cohort and had exited the New York City system in a previous year, returns to the system.
6. **Student with ELL Classification Enters a New Sector:** Occurs when a student with an ELL classification attends a traditional public school the previous year, then attends a charter school (or vice versa). Also occurs if an ELL student, who was originally observed from the cohort and had exited the New York City system in a previous year, returns to the system.

By identifying the number of students falling into each particular category in a given year, I can classify the independent influence of that particular category on the percentage of ELL students within the two sectors. If that influence is greater in one of the sectors, it will lead to a change in the ELL gap.

This paper utilizes a formula to calculate the influence of the number of students meeting a certain classification on changes to the percentage of ELL students classified within a sector, in a given year. With this formula, for instance, it is possible to classify by how much the percentage of ELL students in charter schools classified increased because of students with existing ELL classifications entering a charter school—as well as by how much the percentage of ELL students within the sector that year decreased solely because of declassifying ELL students. I can then calculate the *total* effect of that factor on the ELL gap by subtracting its effect on the charter school ELL percentage from its effect on the percentage of ELL students in traditional public schools.

Figure 9 displays the results of these calculations for each year. The bottom row reports the size of the ELL gap among this cohort in that particular year. (This number does not directly correspond to the comparable figure reported in Figure 1 because it follows a different set of students; this analysis, moreover, differs from that shown in Figure 1 because it follows a cohort of students over *time*, even if a particular student has been retained in a grade.)

For students in this kindergarten cohort, the ELL gap declined by about 8.6 percentage points during the four years scrutinized: the vast majority of this decline (7.4 percentage points, or 86.8 percent of the total change) was due to differences in classification across sectors (especially the influence of *declassification*).

At first blush, the result that differences in declassification tend to reduce the ELL gap over time seems counter to the earlier finding that charter schools declassify a larger percentage of their ELL students. It is also true for this cohort that a larger percentage of charter school ELL students are declassified each year. However, the *total* impact of declassification is to decrease the ELL gap because a smaller proportion of charter school enrollments are classified as ELL.

Consider a simplified, stylized example, one with

Figure 9: Influence of Different Factors on ELL Gap

Common Grade	K	1	2	3	Total
Differences Across Sectors	2008	2009	2010	2011	
New ELL		-0.2%	-0.6%	0.0%	-0.8%
Declassified ELL		-1.3%	-4.0%	-1.4%	-6.7%
Reg Exit NYC		0.9%	0.6%	0.4%	1.8%
ELL Exit NYC		-0.8%	-0.6%	-0.4%	-1.9%
Reg Reenter NYC		0.0%	-0.1%	-0.1%	-0.2%
ELL Reenter NYC		0.0%	0.1%	0.2%	0.3%
Reg Exit Sector for Other Sector		0.0%	-0.2%	-0.3%	-0.5%
ELL Exit Sector for Other Sector		0.2%	0.2%	0.3%	0.6%
Reg Enter Sector from Other Sector		0.7%	0.6%	0.4%	1.7%
ELL Enter Sector from Other Sector		-1.2%	-1.3%	-0.5%	-3.1%
% ELL Gap	16.8%	15.0%	9.7%	8.2%	-8.6%

Source: NYCDOE; Author's calculations

100 students in the charter sector and another 100 students in traditional public schools. In charters, two of the 100 students (2 percent) are classified as ELL, compared with 20 of 100 students (20 percent) in traditional public schools. If, hypothetically, the next year charter schools declassified one of their ELL students, charters would have declassified 50 percent of their ELL population that year; if traditional public schools declassified five of their ELL students, traditional public schools would have declassified 25 percent of their ELL population, respectively. Charters would therefore have a larger rate of declassification. Yet in this example, the ELL gap has nonetheless closed from 18 percent (20% – 2%) to 14 percent (15% – 1%). The same holds true for the actual data discussed earlier: the impact of charter schools declassifying a larger share of their ELL students each year is to *reduce* the ELL gap over time.

By contrast, factors related to student mobility explain little of the change in the ELL gap as students progress through elementary school. Still, the overall effect of student mobility (both for ELL and non-ELL students) is to reduce the ELL gap over time. In fact, for the cohort scrutinized, more students with existing ELL classifications enter charter schools each year after kindergarten, rather than exit them.

CONCLUSION

This paper builds upon a recent body of research illuminating factors contributing to differences in the types of students attending charter and traditional public schools.

As was the case for special education, enrollment data suggest that the ELL gap is *not* primarily determined by disproportionate attrition of ELL students out of charter schools. ELL students are as likely—or even less likely—to exit charter schools as they are to exit traditional public schools. In fact, more students with existing ELL classifications enter charter schools in non-gateway grades than exit them.

The conventional wisdom that charters have lower ELL enrollments because they counsel-out a large portion of their ELL students is not supported by enrollment data. This is not, of course, to say that such incidents have not occurred. Yet the fact that mobility of ELL students out of charters is *smaller* than mobility of ELL students out of traditional public schools strongly suggests that such counseling-out is not a major driver of the ELL gap.

The ELL gap is, instead, primarily driven by the fact that ELL students are significantly less likely

to enroll in charter schools in gateway grades than non-ELL students. The ELL gap, then, cannot be meaningfully addressed without increasing the percentage of ELL students who apply to attend charter schools.

This paper is not in a position to evaluate why students with very low English proficiency are less likely to apply to charters. Parents of ELL students may not be sufficiently aware that charter schools are available to them or, perhaps, such parents do

not believe that charters will provide their children with better services than those provided in traditional public schools. It is also possible that parents of ELL students are improperly counseled not to apply to charter schools. Indeed, the extent to which counseling-out, prior to enrolling in charters, drives the ELL gap is not clear from this paper's analysis. Further qualitative research is needed to determine the underlying reasons ELL students do not proportionately apply to attend charter schools.

ENDNOTES

¹ C. M. Hoxby, S. Murarka, and J. Kang, "How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement," New York City Charter Schools Evaluation Project (2009); W. Dobbie and R. G. Fryer, "Getting Beneath the Veil of Effective Schools: Evidence from New York City," NBER Working Paper 17632 (2011); W. Dobbie and R. G. Fryer, "Are High-Quality Schools Enough to Close the Achievement Gap? Evidence from a Social Experiment in Harlem," NBER Working Paper 15473 (2009); "Charter School Performance in New York City," Center for Research on Education Outcomes (2013).

² In research terms, a difference is statistically significant if it is very unlikely to have been generated because of random sampling error (i.e., we can have high confidence that the result is "real" and not due to statistical noise). I use "substantial" to refer to the magnitude of the difference. A precisely measured difference can be significant, even if small, while a seemingly substantial difference might not be statistically significant if measured imprecisely.

³ See <http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/ELL/default.htm>.

⁴ E-mail correspondence with Douglas Coulter, NYCDOE, Research and Policy Support Group, July 2, 2014.

⁵ When there are more applicants for charter schools than available seats, students acquire admission to charter schools via random lottery. A true lottery would ensure that equal proportions of ELL students within the applicant pool would "win" or "lose" the chance to enroll in a charter. Though not done in this paper, recent papers have verified that New York City charter school lotteries are, in fact, randomly determined (see, e.g., Hoxby et al., "How New York City's Charter Schools Affect Achievement"). Therefore, we can confidently assert that the demographics of students enrolling in charter schools for the first time mirror the demographics of students applying to attend charter schools in that particular year.

⁶ The results from kindergarten are consistent with those reported in a recent paper by the New York City Independent Budget Office; see <http://www.ibo.nyc.ny.us/iboreports/2014attritioncharterpublic.pdf>.

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