

Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis

Response and Rebuttal to What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review

Thank you so much for giving us a preview of your review before publication. In the response that follows, there are several points of clarification with regard to our report and the data analyses that we request you consider. In addition, we are providing a response to several of the conclusions drawn in your review. We hope our response helps you accurately summarize and respond to our report.

Corrections Needed:

Our report assessed 2006-2007 median API base, growth, and change scores. We did not analyze charter and traditional public schools from 2005-06 to 2006-07.

Your review is incorrect when it states that our report analyzed charter and traditional public schools from 2005-06 to 2006-07. Our report assessed 2006-2007 median API base, growth, and change scores. Unfortunately this is incorrectly stated four times in your review. Because this point is critical to the basis of our study, it should be corrected before you publish your review.

In the fourth paragraph of your review, you state that “The study measured the effect of charter schools by comparing the change in the API from 2005-06 to 2006-07 for charter schools to the change for their matched comparison schools during the same period.” We believe that you were likely referring to the analysis detailed on page 12 of our report which in the first paragraph discusses schools that increased their API growth score by 50 points or more. This single point however, as your review suggests, does not accurately characterize the thrust of our report. Furthermore, your review is incorrect when it states that the 2005-06 to 2006-07 change analysis was of matched comparison schools. It was not. That particular analysis was of charter and traditional public schools in LAUSD at the aggregate district level (i.e. all schools, not matched comparison schools). Our report clearly delineates those findings that are specific to the matched comparison analysis. These data points typically have those exact words attached to the discussion of them throughout the report. It is critical that our report not be characterized as solely a matched comparison analysis (most of the analyses were of all schools) and that the matched comparison results are not generally applied to every finding.

Our study conducted two different types of API change analyses

Under the WWC Rating you then state that “The study compared the annual API change in charter schools to the change in traditional schools.” This statement 1) contradicts your original summary of our report and 2) is incorrect. There is a very important analytical and theoretical difference between California Department of Education (CDE) calculated API change scores and an analysis of the change in median API growth scores from one year to the next. Our report contains both analyses. CDE API change scores are assessed throughout the report and an analysis of the change in median API growth scores is discussed on page 12 of the report. The two are not the same and cannot be used interchangeably as you have done in your review. Given that you do not discuss any of the details pertinent to the numerous analyses of 2007 API change scores, we must assume that you are referring to the analysis of the change in median API growth scores discussed on page 12 of the report. As stated above, your review is incorrect when it states that this analysis was of matched comparison schools. It was not. Therefore, the statements concerning the merits of a matched comparison analysis that follow are then irrelevant as your review does not discuss any of our matched comparison analysis results.

Furthermore, the statement that our report is about either one of those analyses is extremely misleading. While we understand that your review clearly states that “The WWC rating refers only to the results summarized above and not necessarily to all results presented in the study”, we are concerned your summary does not accurately capture nor represent the central findings of our research. Your summary focuses on a less significant point while omitting the truly

significant findings regarding African American students, charter middle schools, and the API growth scores, which are the central analyses and findings of the report. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our report and these important findings in a more detailed discussion if you like. If, however, you prefer to move forward with publication as planned, we ask that you state that the finding you chose to highlight is only one of many in the report or more fully review the entire report.

In order to ensure that your review is an accurate summary of our research, we reiterate our hope that the WWC will correct the following:

1. Correctly state that our report was an analysis of 2006-2007 API data (not 2005-06 to 2006-07)
2. Clarify the finding chosen: it is either of API change scores which are detailed throughout the report (though not in your current review) or just about the analysis on page 12 concerning the change in median API growth scores from 2006 to 2007
3. Correct that the finding you chose to highlight was not of matched comparison schools
 - Furthermore, unless you decide to discuss some of our matched comparison analyses, we would recommend that you reconsider your discussion of the merits of comparing matched schools. Without an actual discussion of that data, your refutation of the methodology will appear random and irrelevant.

Unsubstantiated Opinions

Although none of our matched comparison analysis results were discussed in your review, your review concludes with some strong opinions about why a matched comparison analysis lacks merit. Below we offer some alternative understandings of the points you raise.

Your refutation of the methodology state that:

- “it does not provide evidence that these two groups were initially equivalent on academic achievement”
 - It is of course ideal to be able to control for initial equivalency on academic achievement in any educational research. That, however, requires and is best utilized when assessing individual student level data. When assessing, as we did, aggregate school-level API scores, demographic variables are the available and widely used control variables. Although, given our data constraints, we did not directly assess initial or matched differences in students’ academic performance between charter and traditional public schools, other researchers have. A 2005 study by RAND which assessed the trends among students who transfer to charter schools in California and Texas, analyzed data from 1997-98 to 2001-02 across six CA districts (LAUSD included) and 1.1 million students and found that CA charters generally attract students who are about average students in their traditional schools (Booker et al., 2005). Therefore, the research that currently exists on this issue confirms that differences in students’ academic achievement were not likely a factor in our API comparisons.
- “parents who are more committed to their children’s education may be more likely to send them to a charter school”:
 - It seems problematic to us that your review critiques the rigor of our research methods on the one hand but then goes on to make a claim without any data to support it. This is the oldest argument used to refute the clear merits of charters and is one that carries with it both the burden of and absence of proof. Those that know charters and the student recruitment process as well as we do, know that many charters have to recruit, with strict equity guidelines, parents and students to fill their rosters. Furthermore, EdSource’s 2008 California’s Charter Schools report found that CA charters were more likely to have more disadvantaged students based on School Characteristic Index scores, underscoring the essence of our report which is that charters in the LAUSD region are serving the underserved

students with stellar results. If you have any additional data on this point we welcome the opportunity to review it.

- “schools with very low API levels may make greater gains than other schools simply because they have more room for improvement”
 - Given that charter schools in LAUSD earned higher median API base scores than traditional public schools (page 9 of our report), charter schools in LAUSD started with higher scores than their traditional counterparts and still demonstrated significant growth.

We thank you for the opportunity to preview your review. Again, we welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the points we have raised in a more detailed discussion. We are excited that you read our report and hope that you will make the changes we have indicated above to accurately represent the scope and findings for your readers.

From: Aisha Toney [aishat@charterassociation.org]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 12:52 PM
To: What Works; Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Cc: info@whatworks.ed.gov.
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Thank you so much for giving us a preview of your review before publication.

Please be advised that we will be sending you a response to your review detailing a number of ways in which our report was completely misinterpreted and incorrectly summarized as well as a rebuttal to some of the opinions stated in your review.

Aisha N. Toney, Ph.D.
Senior Data Analyst
California Charter Schools Association
aishat@charterassociation.org
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From: What Works [mailto:whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 7:37 AM
To: Elizabeth Robitaille; Aisha Toney
Subject: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Dear Dr. Toney & Ms. Robitaille,

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Sincerely,
The What Works Clearinghouse Team

From: Aisha Toney [aishat@charterassociation.org]
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Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study
Attachments: Response to What Works Quick Review.doc

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From: Caprice Young [caprice@charterassociation.org]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 4:29 PM
To: Aisha Toney; What Works; Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

We need to find the live humans... who are we dealing with? (at 4:30 pm EST...)

Caprice
(213)244-1446 x212

From: Aisha Toney
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 1:18 PM
To: What Works; Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Cc: info@whatworks.ed.gov
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From: Rebecca Tomasini [rebeccat@charterassociation.org]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 9:52 PM
To: What Works
Cc: Aisha Toney; Elizabeth Robitaille
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Thank you.

If at all possible, our team would like the opportunity to discuss this report with you before the embargo is lifted tomorrow morning at 10am EST. You can reach me anytime on my cell which is 213.254.7235 but please be advised I am on PST.

As Aisha explained in her report, we are concerned that there are substantial errors in how you have summarized the data and methodology. We would like to speak with your researchers to ensure that the report you publish tomorrow is accurate. We welcome a difference of opinion, but want to make sure it grows out of accurate data and methodology.

We look forward to speaking with you.

Rebecca

Rebecca Tomasini, Director
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From: What Works [mailto:whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 2:45 PM
To: Aisha Toney; Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Dear Dr. Toney:

Thank you for contacting the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). We have received your comments about the Quick Review of your study. WWC staff are reviewing them and will prepare a response.

The What Works Clearinghouse

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From: What Works
Sent: Tuesday, August 12, 2008 4:04 PM
To: 'Rebecca Tomasini'
Cc: 'Aisha Toney'; 'Elizabeth Robitaille'
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Dear Ms. Tomasini and Dr. Toney-

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The WWC's policy is that the review will remain on the web site and be revised if the WWC team determines it contains inaccuracies.

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To: Elizabeth Robitaille; Aisha Toney
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Senior Data Analyst
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My School . . . because a meritocracy is possible and equitable education is the key.

From: What Works [mailto:whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Tuesday, August 12, 2008 1:04 PM
To: Rebecca Tomasini
Cc: Aisha Toney; Elizabeth Robitaille
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Dear Ms. Tomasini and Dr. Toney-

The WWC director received Dr. Toney's voice message. WWC staff are reviewing the comments on the Quick Review of your study that you sent us yesterday, and will prepare a written response. We will let you know the timeline for this response once staff have completed their review of your comments.

The What Works Clearinghouse

From: Rebecca Tomasini [mailto:rebeccat@charterassociation.org]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 9:52 PM
To: What Works
Cc: Aisha Toney; Elizabeth Robitaille
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Thank you.

If at all possible, our team would like the opportunity to discuss this report with you before the embargo is lifted tomorrow morning at 10am EST. You can reach me anytime on my cell which is 213.254.7235 but please be advised I am on PST.

As Aisha explained in her report, we are concerned that there are substantial errors in how you have summarized the data and methodology. We would like to speak with your researchers to ensure that the report you publish tomorrow is accurate. We welcome a difference of opinion, but want to make sure it grows out of accurate data and methodology.

We look forward to speaking with you.

Rebecca

Rebecca Tomasini, Director
ZOOM! Data Source
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250 E. 1st Street, Ste 1000 (10th floor)
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My School because..... social justice begins with the freedom to choose.

From: What Works [mailto:whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 2:45 PM
To: Aisha Toney; Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Dear Dr. Toney:

Thank you for contacting the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). We have received your comments about the Quick Review of your study. WWC staff are reviewing them and will prepare a response.

The What Works Clearinghouse

From: Aisha Toney [mailto:aishat@charterassociation.org]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 4:18 PM
To: What Works; Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Cc: info@whatworks.ed.gov
Subject: RE: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Thank you again for giving us an opportunity to preview your review of our report before publishing it.

In the attached we discuss some areas where our report was misinterpreted as well as some thoughts on the conclusions drawn at the end of your review. We hope that the necessary corrections can be made before publication.

We welcome an opportunity to discuss this with you further at your earliest convenience.

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From: What Works [mailto:whatworks@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Monday, August 11, 2008 7:37 AM

To: Elizabeth Robitaille; Aisha Toney

Subject: What Works Clearinghouse Quick Review of Study

Dear Dr. Toney & Ms. Robitaille,

We are emailing to inform you that a What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) quick review of your study, "Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis," will be posted on the WWC website tomorrow, August 12, 2008. As part of this process, we are sharing with you a courtesy copy of the quick review (attached as a PDF to this e-mail). **This quick review is embargoed until tomorrow, August 12, 2008, at 10am Eastern Time and cannot be circulated until that time.**

To learn more about WWC quick reviews, you can visit the WWC quick review page at:

<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/publications/quickreviews/>.

Because of the volume of correspondence the WWC receives, questions regarding WWC reports and quick reviews should be submitted to the Help Desk at info@whatworks.ed.gov. Your questions will be forwarded to the appropriate staff member on the WWC team and you will receive an e-mail response.

Sincerely,

The What Works Clearinghouse Team

September 12, 2008

Ms. Aisha Toney
Senior Data Analyst
California Charter Schools Association

Dear Ms. Toney:

Thank you for your August 11 letter concerning the WWC quick review of “Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis.” We have carefully examined the issues you raised and our review of the study. We conclude that the WWC standards were applied correctly and that no corrections to the review are needed.

The WWC provides educators, policymakers, researchers, and the public with a central and credible source of scientific evidence about what works in educational programs, products, practices, and policies to improve student performance. To ensure objectivity, the WWC uses evidence standards and consistent and transparent procedures to assess the strength of a study’s data, the adequacy of its statistical procedures, and its causal validity.

In the case of the “Charter School Performance” study, the matched comparison approach is a quasi-experimental design (QED). One of the WWC standards requires that in a QED, the study must show that groups being compared are equivalent at pretest in terms of outcomes of interest. This standard ensures that differences in outcomes can be reasonably attributed to the intervention being studied (in this case, charter schools) and not to differences in the groups. “Charter School Performance” was rated as not consistent with WWC evidence standards because there has been no equivalence on achievement outcomes demonstrated between the charter schools and the comparison schools.

Your letter raises three specific concerns about the WWC quick review. First, you raise questions about the type of analysis presented in the review. Second, you raise questions about the type of measures discussed in the WWC quick review. Third, you raise concerns over the justification for the WWC rating. A response to each issue is provided below.

(1) Type of analyses addressed in the review

Your letter suggests that the focus of the WWC review was on the “change in median API growth” presented on page 12, and requests that we also examine the matched comparison analysis. In fact the WWC review only discusses the matched comparison data analyses (described on page 11). The confusion over what was reviewed stems from the WWC’s decision to refer to the API change outcomes examined as measures of “growth.” This decision is explained under the second point, below.

LETTER TO: Ms. Aisha Toney
FROM: Mark Dynarski
DATE: September 12, 2008
PAGE: 2

This decision to discuss only the matched comparison analysis was based in part because the WWC concluded that the matched comparison analysis made the most extensive efforts to control for differences between the charter schools and the comparison schools, by matching each charter school to three nearby public schools with demographically similar student populations. The analysis of charter and traditional public schools in LAUSD at the district level (which used all schools, not matched comparison schools) had the same shortcoming as the matched comparison analysis. The analysis did not use a pretest of academic achievement to equate the groups. In addition, it did not match groups on demographic variables or use statistical techniques to adjust for differences. The subgroup analyses also did not use pretest of academic achievement to equate the groups.

(2) Type of measures used in the WWC review

Your letter suggests that the WWC review is not accurately describing the measures examined in the study. The study conducted an analysis of the California Department of Education (CDE) “API change scores” and an analysis of the change in median CDE “API growth scores.” For the matched comparison analysis, the study only examines the API change scores. Therefore, the WWC only looked at API change score analyses.

To be clearer to a reader who may not be familiar with the CDE’s terminology, the WWC did not refer to the study’s measures by the names used by the CDE. Instead, it referred to the outcome measure “API change” in a way that described what that outcome captures. As the study indicated (p.28), “API change” was calculated by subtracting the 2006 Base API from the 2007 Growth API. The 2007 Growth API was calculated from the 2006-2007 standardized test results, while the 2006 Base was calculated using the 2005-2006 results. Generally, this type of measure is referred to as a growth measure. When the WWC review states that “The study examined whether charter schools have higher growth in student achievement”, we believe most readers will understand this means that the study examined whether achievement grew more for charter schools than for traditional schools from one point in time to another.

(3) Justifications for WWC rating (under “unsubstantiated opinions”)

The WWC review team concluded that the research described in the report is not consistent with WWC evidence standards because the study does not demonstrate that the students in the charter and traditional schools were equivalent at baseline. The basis for this conclusion is noted above.

The review states that different types of parents may send children to charter schools purely an example. There could be other unobserved differences as well. The point of the statement is that without a demonstration that the groups are equivalent on the outcomes of interest, there is low confidence that the groups are comparable and that differences between groups reflect only the effect of attending charter schools. Another statement in the review, that “schools with very low API levels may make greater gains than other schools simply because they have more room for improvement,” also is used as an example.

The statement that the charter schools have low API levels is based on the finding on page 11 of the report, which states: “looking specifically at the matched comparison analysis sample of charter in

LETTER TO: Ms. Aisha Toney
FROM: Mark Dynarski
DATE: September 12, 2008
PAGE: 3

LAUSD and traditional public schools, 41.2 percent of sampled charter schools earned higher 2006 API base than their three traditional matched peers...” This implies that 58.7 percent of sampled charter schools earned the same or lower 2006 API base scores.

We hope these responses answer your questions.

Sincerely,

(b)(6)

Mark Dynarski



tel: (415) 356-1200 200 Pine Street, 8th Floor, San Francisco, CA 94104

www.myschool.org

September 15, 2008
Mathematic Policy Research, Inc.
P.O. Box 2393
Princeton, NJ 08543

Dear Mr. Dynarski:

Thank you for your response to our concerns regarding the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) review of our June report, "Charter School Performance in Los Angeles Unified School District: A District and Neighborhood Matched Comparison Analysis".

Thank you also for clarifying the differences in WWC variable labels and those of CDE. That greatly helped to clarify which aspects of our report the WWC intended to evaluate. Furthermore, you are correct in your statement that our "analysis did not use a pretest of academic achievement to equate the groups". That is because our descriptive analysis was in no way intended to be experimental or quasi-experimental.

We understand that there are philosophical differences regarding the WWC's goals and choice to evaluate non-experimental studies using experimental standards. On those differences, we will simply agree to disagree.

We are, however, still very concerned about the ways in which our report was misrepresented in the WWC evaluation and are attempting again to clearly identify those misrepresentations.

Your statement on page 2 of your response that, "[f]or the matched comparison analysis, the study only examines the API change scores. Therefore, the WWC only looked at API change score analyses", is actually incorrect. If you look back at page 11 of our report, which, as you stated in your response, is where we describe the matched comparison analysis findings, you will see that we discussed 2006 API base, 2007 API growth, and 2007 API change score analyses for the matched comparison analysis sample (see enclosed verbatim copy of that text). We also discuss regression analyses that were conducted for this sample. Therefore, we request that the WWC examine our matched comparison analysis results in their totality or at least let readers know that only 1 of our matched comparison analysis findings were discussed in your review and provide a rationale for that choice.

Lastly, while we certainly understand the WWC's right and obligation to present alternative possible causes for the research results it evaluates, we still feel very strongly that the WWC could present a more balanced prospective of examples of possible confounding variables. For example, when the WWC states that it is possible that parents who send their students to charters could be more committed, it is just as likely that parents who allow their students to attend charters are the most disenfranchised and disconnected from the educational system. The review does not, as you state in your response, "state that different types of parents may send children to charter schools", but rather offers readers a very specific example that is not in favor of charters. Furthermore, given that there is research on this very topic, it seems reasonable to expect that the WWC would have done due diligence to review and cite that research.

It is our request that the WWC:

- 1) Examine all of our matched comparison analysis findings in their review or be transparent in the review that only 1 finding was reviewed and why; and
- 2) Seek to be more balanced in the discussion of possible confounding variables to include examples that are less anti-charter and that take into account existing research.

We sincerely appreciate your consideration of our concerns and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Aisha N. Toney, Ph.D.
Senior Data Analyst
California Charter Schools Association

Copy of the text on page 11 of our report

Matched Comparison Analysis

Looking specifically at the matched comparison analysis sample of charters in LAUSD and traditional public schools, 41.2% of sampled charter schools earned higher 2006 API base than their three traditional matched peers and 44.1% earned higher 2006 API base than their most similar traditional match. Those percentages greatly improve for API growth, where 62.8% of charter schools in LAUSD in the sample earned higher 2007 API growth than their three traditional matched peers and 70.6% earned higher 2007 API growth than their most similar traditional match. Charter schools compared performance on API change was less impressive. Only 49% of sampled charter schools earned higher 2007 API change than their three traditional matched peers and 47.1% earned higher 2007 API change than their most similar traditional match. At the aggregate level, these charter schools performed better on API base by 14 points, API growth by 37 points, and on API change by 7 points than their traditional matched peers.

Regression analyses showed a significant effect in favor of charter schools for API change, indicating that being a charter predicted 7.70** more points in API change. Controlling for demographic variables, regression analyses showed no significant results for API base or growth. Without those controls, charter schools in LAUSD predict 58.71*** more API growth points than their traditional school counterparts.

-----Original Message-----

From: Aisha Toney [mailto:aishat@charterassociation.org]
Sent: Monday, September 15, 2008 06:24 PM Eastern Standard Time
To: Mark Dynarski
Cc: Elizabeth Robitaille; Rebecca Tomasini
Subject: RE: response to letter re: WWC review of "Charter School Performance"

Mr. Dynarski,

Thank you for your response to our concerns.

We still have some outstanding concerns regarding ways in which our report was misrepresented which were reiterated in your response (see our attached letter).

We hope we can come to an mutually agreeable solution.

Thank you,

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-----Original Message-----

From: Mark Dynarski [mailto:MDynarski@mathematica-mpr.com]
Sent: Friday, September 12, 2008 1:10 PM
To: Aisha Toney
Subject: response to letter re: WWC review of "Charter School Performance"

<<WWC_Response_2008009.doc>>

From: What Works
Sent: Wednesday, October 15, 2008 12:40 PM
To: 'aishat@charterassociation.org'
Subject: WWC Review of LA Charter Schools

Dear Dr. Toney,

Thank you for your follow-up letter concerning the WWC quick review of the LA Charter schools. Mathematica Policy Research wants to ensure the quality and accuracy of all information contained in the WWC, and it works with study authors, curriculum developers, and consumers of the WWC to correct inaccurate information. We appreciate your interest in and feedback on the WWC quick review.

Your recent letter raised two specific concerns about the review. First, you request that we look at all of the matched comparison analyses. In our previous correspondence, our statement that “for the matched comparison analysis, the study only examines the API change scores” was not entirely clear. Page 11 of the report does state that the regression analysis looked at the outcome of the “API Change” measure of growth as well as the outcomes of “API Base” or “API Growth”. However, the report only presents coefficient estimates for the “API Change” measure of growth. Because the regression analysis found no significant effects on “API Base” or “API Growth”, those coefficients are not presented.

As we explained in our previous letter, we focused our quick review on the matched comparison analysis because it made the most extensive efforts to control for differences. Similarly, we focused our discussion of the matched comparison analysis on the “API Change” measure of growth because that was the outcome for which estimates were given in the report. It should be noted that even if estimates provided for these other outcomes, the analysis would still be rated as not consistent with WWC standards for the same reasons (failure to demonstrate equivalence between the charter schools and comparison schools).

Your recent letter also requests that we provide a “more balanced discussion of possible confounding variables.” Our statement was provided as an example to support the statement that the groups could be different in terms of unobserved characteristics. We do not view it as an anti-charter statement, and do not think it excludes other potential explanations of differences.

We hope this information clarifies the review and answers your questions.

-The What Works Clearinghouse