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Enrollment Trends in Northwest Arkansas Charter Schools

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Summary Points

- The nine public open-enrollment charter schools enroll about 3% of all public school students in NWA.
- NWA charter schools have grown increasingly diverse, but continue to enroll a smaller proportion of minority students than the traditional public schools.
- NWA charter schools have not substantially increased their FRL, EL, and SPED student enrollments.
- Students switching to charters from traditional public schools tend to perform above the state average on standardized tests and come from high-performing schools.
- NWA students switching to traditional public schools from charters tend to perform above the state average on standardized tests but are average performers for the schools that they are leaving schools.

Enrollment Trends in Northwest Arkansas Charter Schools

Northwest Arkansas is home to nine public charter schools, with plans to open a new charter school for the 2020-21 school year. These schools, which serve unique missions, are some of the most highly ranked schools in the State of Arkansas. While critics argue that public charter schools segregate based on race or academic ability, national evidence finds that these claims are highly context specific. What conclusions can we draw about northwest Arkansas charter schools based on enrollment trends in recent years?

Introduction

In 1995, the Arkansas General Assembly passed the state’s first charter school law, which allowed some district schools to be converted to charter schools. Four years later, the Assembly passed a new charter school law allowing for new open-enrollment schools to be chartered. Subsequent laws in 2005, 2007, 2011, and 2013 raised the cap on the number of charter schools allowed, passing new standards for how these schools would be evaluated (Holley & Collins, 2018).

Northwest Arkansas currently features nine public charter schools, each serving a unique mission. Arkansas Arts Academy schools provide an arts-based approach to learning. Northwest Arkansas Classical Academy schools have a classical focus, including the Socratic method and instruction in Latin. Each of the four Haas Hall campuses emphasize preparation for higher

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education with a semester block schedule. LISA Academy offers a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum. Finally, Hope Academy, which plans to open for the 2020-21 school year, will serve children who have experienced trauma.

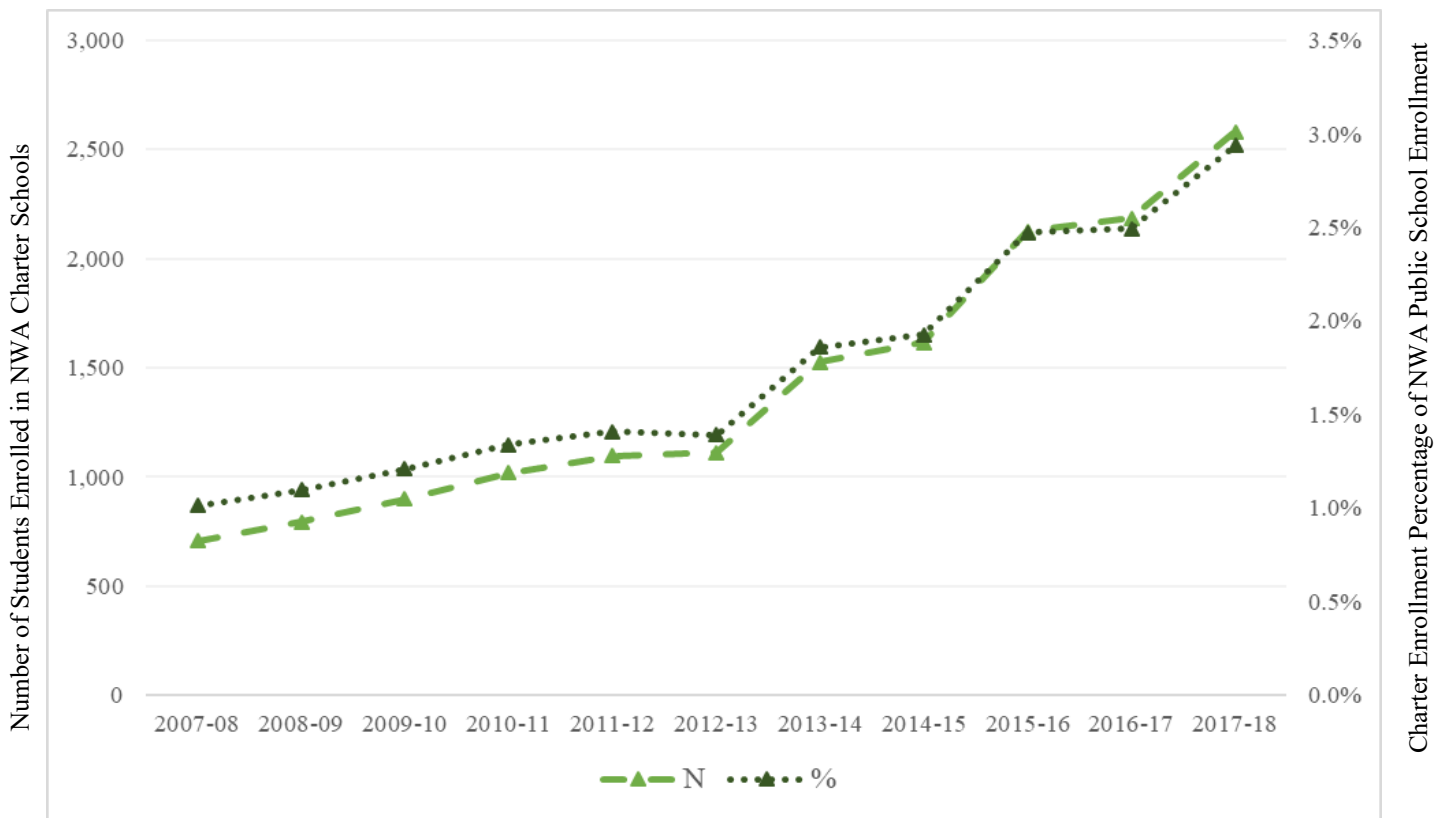
All of these schools are open-enrollment public charter schools. They are open-enrollment in that students do not have to live within a specific district in order to enroll. They are publicly-funded and free of tuition. They receive their charter from the Arkansas Department of Education, which holds these schools accountable to certain standards in order to stay open.

As of the 2017-18 school year, charter schools in northwest Arkansas enrolled 2,581 students, just under 3% of nearly 90,000 public school students in both Benton and Washington counties (Fig. 1). Who are the students enrolling in northwest Arkansas’ public charter schools?

Demographic Characteristics of NWA charter school students

Students enrolled in northwest Arkansas traditional public schools (TPS) and open-enrollment public charter schools (Charter) are predominantly White. The largest minority group is Hispanic, comprising just under 30% of the district public school population. Blacks, Asians, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and students with multiple ethnic backgrounds make up about 3%

Figure 1. Charter School Enrollment in NWA, 2007-08 through 2017-18



of the district public school population each. At about 1% the student population, Native American and Alaskan students form the smallest minority group.

Table 1 summarizes enrollment demographic data from the 2017-18 school year. Charter schools in northwest Arkansas enroll a larger proportion of White, Asian, and multi-racial students, but a smaller proportion of other

Table 1. Enrollment Characteristics of NWA Schools by School Sector, 2017-18

	Traditional Public	Charter
White	57.6%	69.4%
Black	3.0%	1.3%
Hispanic	28.3%	13.4%
Asian	3.0%	9.7%
Native/Alaskan	1.3%	0.8%
Native/Pacific Islander	3.9%	0.4%
Multiple Ethnicities	3.0%	5.0%
Free/ Reduced Lunch	51.3%	13.8%
English Learners	20.9%	1.9%
Special Education	6.1%	3.2%
Total Number	85,312	2,581

Notes. Data on special education status is from 2016-17. All other data is from 2017-18.

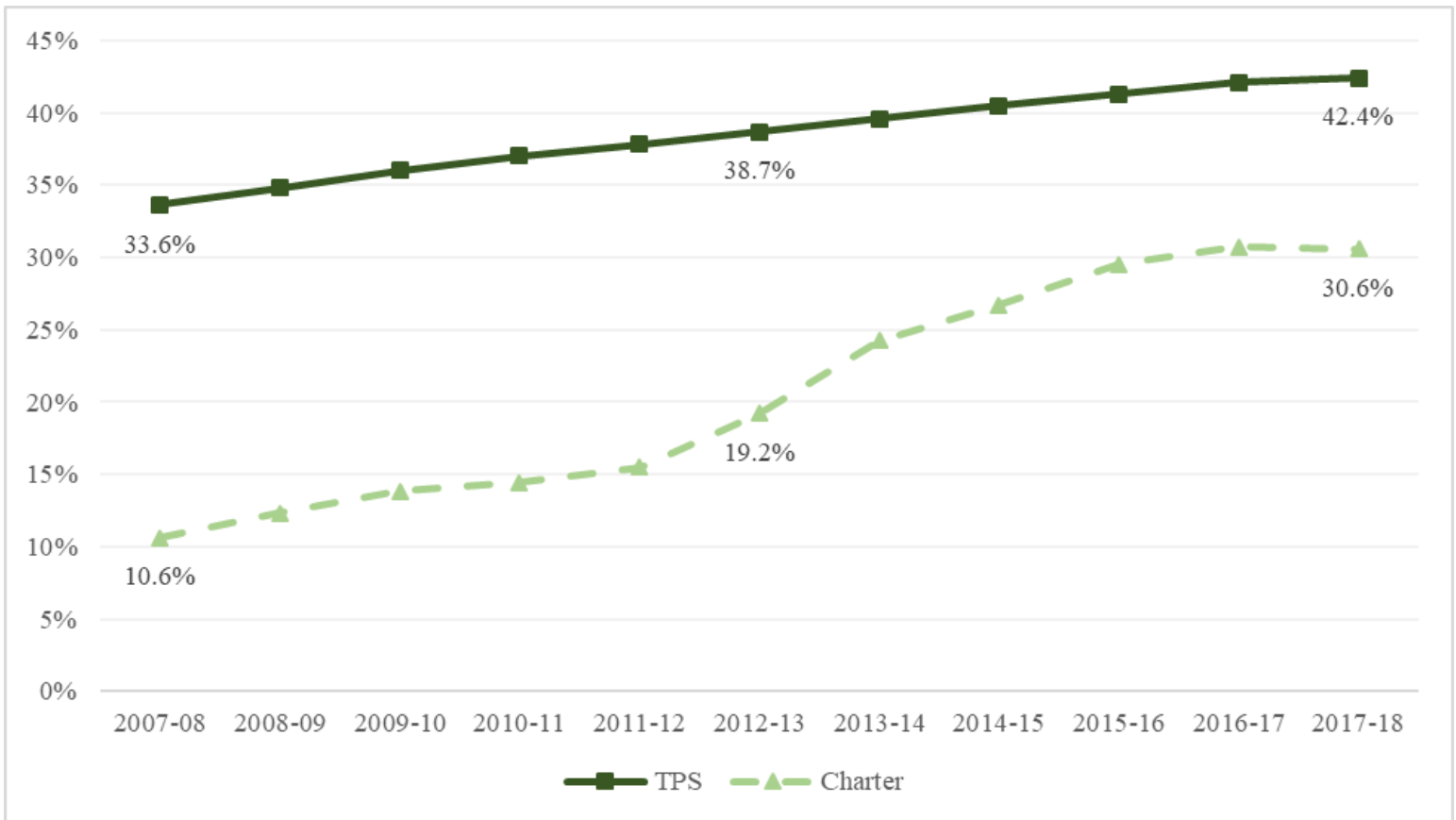
ethnic groups, students eligible for free- and reduced-priced lunch, students with limited English proficiency, and students eligible for special education services.

This snapshot gives us a sense of enrollment differences in a single year, but it is also helpful to consider enrollment trends. When examining demographic characteristics of students enrolling in northwest Arkansas charter schools between 2007-08 and 2017-18 (Fig. 2), three trends are identified.

First, northwest Arkansas schools are growing increasingly racially/ ethnically diverse. In 2007-08, less than 35% of students enrolled in NWA traditional public schools and around 10% enrolled in NWA charter schools identified with a minority group. In 2017-18, over 40% the TPS population and 30% the charter school population identify as a minority race or ethnicity.

Second, charter schools are growing more similar to district public schools in their race/ ethnicity demographic composition. The district-charter minority enrollment gap in 2007-08 was nearly 25 percentage points. The gap shrank to just over 10 percentage points ten years later.

Figure 2. Minority Student Enrollment by Sector, 2007-08 through 2017-18



Third, traditional public schools enroll a greater proportion of racially/ ethnically minority students and a smaller proportion of White students for every year of our analysis. While the trend suggests that charter schools are enrolling a greater percentage of minority students, and in this regard more closely resemble district public schools in northwest Arkansas, it is also true that district public schools enrolled a greater proportion of students from a racial/ethnic minority for every year of this analysis. And while the gap between district and charter schools is the smallest it has been over this period of time, district public schools still enroll a higher percentage of students that identify with a racial/ethnic minority than do charter schools in the area.

Even while enrolling a smaller proportion of racial/ethnic minority students, open-enrollment charter schools, which do not draw students from a defined catchment area (such as a district enrollment zone) may be more representative of the overall population of Benton and Washington counties, especially if some district boundaries are more densely populated with certain racial/ ethnic minority groups than others. If we define a racially-integrated school as one enrolling a student population within ten percentage points of the demographic characteristics of northwest Arkansas, in 2017-18, a greater percentage of NWA charter school

students enrolled in a Hispanic-integrated school than traditional public school students (Fig. 3).

We can't observe in administrative data the reasons for which families and students choose to remain enrolled in their residentially-assigned district public schools, or to enroll in an open-enrollment charter school of choice. Some qualitative research suggests that attending a racially-stratified school provides an opportunity for minority students to understand their ethnic heritage (Buchanan &

Figure 3. Percentage of NWA Students Enrolled in Hispanic-Integrated Schools by Sector

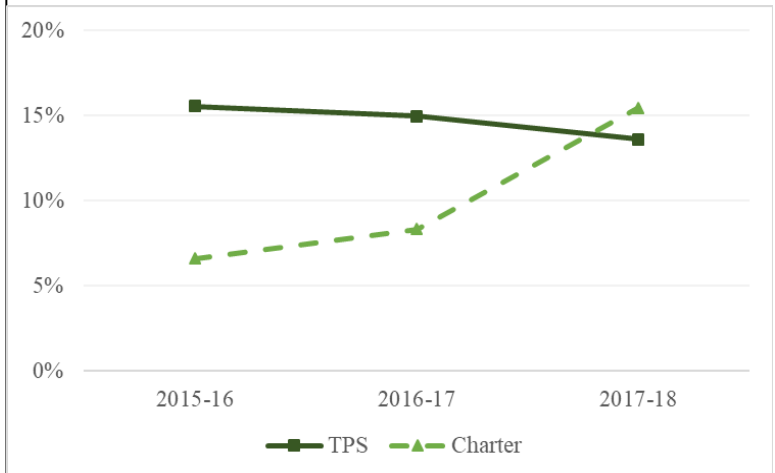
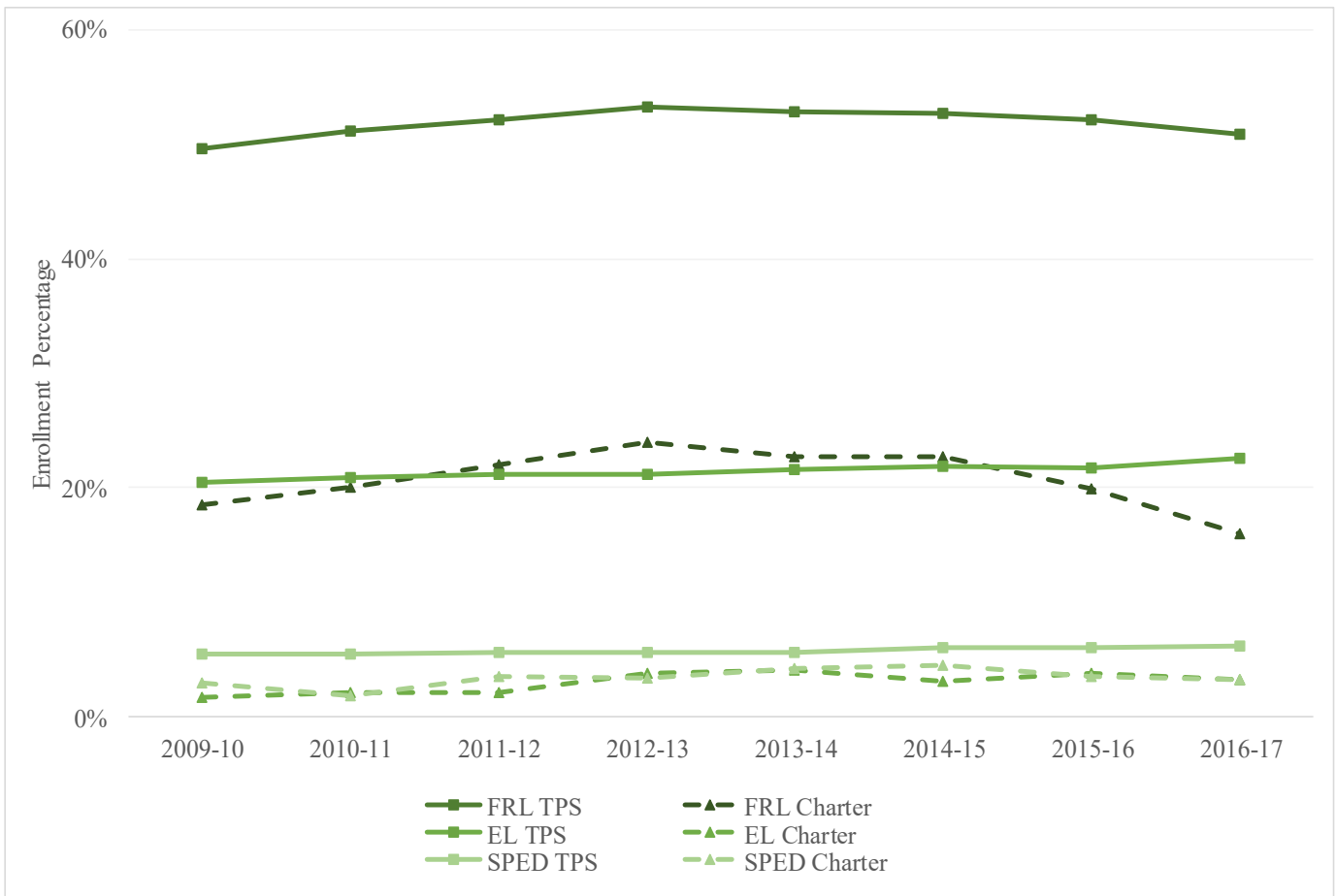


Figure 4. FRL, LEP, and SPED Enrollment by Sector, 2009-10 through 2016-17



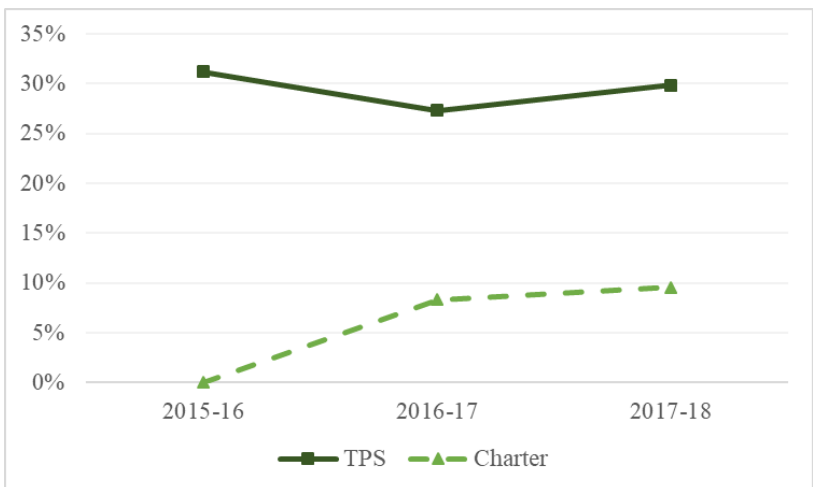
Fox, 2003). One systematic review of private school choice programs finds academic quality to be the most consistent and often the most important reason for parental choice, followed by values alignment, location, and extracurricular offerings (Erickson, 2017). If enrollment decisions are made with these considerations in mind, prioritizing perfect racial integration may have unintended adverse consequences for NWA public schools.

FRL, EL, and SPED Students

Sizable gaps exist between the district and charter sectors for enrollment rates of students who are eligible for free- and reduced-priced lunch (FRL), are English learners (EL), or receive special education services (SPED). In Fig. 4, enrollment trends for traditional public schools are identified with solid lines and square markers; trends for charter schools are identified with dashed lines and triangular markers. Enrollment trends for students in each category can be compared by color: dark green lines identify FRL students, medium green identify EL students, and light green identify SPED students.

Between 2009-10 and 2016-17, approximately 50% of students enrolled in traditional public schools were FRL-eligible. In contrast, approximately 20% of students enrolled in public charter schools were FRL-eligible. Similar disparities persisted for LEP students (around 20% of TPS students and 3% of charter students) and SPED students (around 6% TPS and 3% charter).

Figure 5. Percentage of Students Enrolled in FRL-Integrated Schools by Sector



Again, state administrative data does not examine the reasons as to why these students choose to remain in their district schools at higher rates and enroll in charter schools at lower rates (see Fig. 5). These trends beg the question regarding why NWA charter schools have become more integrated based on race, but not for FRL, EL, and SPED students?

One possible explanation may be related to transportation. NWA school districts are not responsible for providing transportation for students who reside within their catchment area, but choose to enroll in a charter school; likewise, NWA charter schools are not responsible for providing transportation for students who enroll in them. Unlike densely-populated metropolitan areas with many charter school options, northwest Arkansas does not feature an extensive public transportation system that would make choice schools more accessible to more students. It may simply be that choosing a school without guaranteed transportation is too much of a burden for some of these families to consider.

Academic Achievement of Sector Switchers

Public charter schools are often accused of “cream skimming” (enrolling higher proportions of high-performing students) and “cropping” (encouraging low-performing students to enroll elsewhere). Do we see evidence of this with northwest Arkansas public charter schools?

Table 2 summarizes the academic achievement characteristics of students switching sectors. The left three columns describe the achievement of students leaving NWA traditional public schools to enroll in a NWA charter school (Column 1), another public school in Arkansas

outside of NWA (Column 2), or to another private or out-of-state school (Column 3). The right two columns describe students leaving NWA charter schools to enroll in a NWA traditional public school (Column 4) or to another private or out-of-state school (Column 5).

“Student Z” refers to the standardized academic achievement levels of these sector switchers. A student with a “Student Z” of 0 scored at the average state performance on standardized tests. A student with a “Student Z” of 1 scored one standard deviation above the state average. “School Z” refers to the average standardized score of students enrolled in a the school that the student is exiting. The bottom two rows in the table describe the proportion of sector switchers who leave a school in the top or bottom third of all NWA public schools (traditional and charter) based on average school Z score.

Students who exit NWA traditional public schools to enroll in a NWA charter school scored, on average, two-thirds of a standard deviation above the state average, and one-third of a standard deviation above the school average of the school that they moved from. Almost 58% of students who exit NWA traditional public schools to enroll in a NWA charter school left a school with a Z score in the top third of all NWA public schools.

Students leaving NWA charter schools to enroll in a NWA traditional school also scored above the state average (0.32 standard deviations). However, they scored similarly to their school average (0.39 standard deviations). About 40% of the students exiting charters left a school in the top third of all NWA public schools in terms of student achievement.

Table 2. Academic Achievement of Sector Switchers, 2008-09 through 2017-18

	Started in:	NWA Traditional Public School			NWA Charter School	
	Switched to:	NWA Charter	Other AR	Unknown	NWA TPS	Unknown
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<i>Total Student Movers</i>		3,054	7,299	39,836	1,505	812
<i>Number of Students with Assessment Scores</i>		2,063	3,651	11,483	953	298
<i>Average Z of Student Mover</i>		0.66	-0.15	0.05	0.32	0.57
<i>Average School Z of School(s) being exited</i>		0.31	0.14	0.20	0.39	0.55
<i>Percentage of Movers From a Top 1/3 School</i>		57.8%	30.5%	40.0%	40.5%	56.7%
<i>Percentage of Movers From a Bottom 1/3 School</i>		13.7%	33.6%	26.0%	10.8%	7.7%

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Taken together, this evidence suggests that higher performing students are leaving traditional schools to attend charter schools. We have no evidence WHY higher performing students are leaving traditional schools, but possible reasons might be that they are attached to curricular options, changes in peer groups, or smaller classes. On the other hand, we do not see evidence that students exiting charter schools are being ‘pushed out’ for low academic performance as they are average academic performers compared to their peers at the charter school that they are exiting.

Conclusions and Implications

The charter sector in NWA has grown rapidly over the past ten years, but continues to serve a small proportion (3%) of all public school students in the area. The region has grown more diverse in that time. Public charter schools have also grown more diverse, though they continue to enroll a smaller proportion of certain minority groups. However, a greater proportion of NWA charter school students attend a school that more closely reflects the demographic characteristics of NWA as a whole than NWA district public school students.. NWA charter schools enroll a substantially smaller proportion of FRL, EL, and SPED students.

1. **Continue to monitor differences in demographic enrollment trends by sector.** It is a laudable goal for the region to feature racially-integrated schools, but it is probably not feasible (and perhaps even undesirable) for school enrollments to perfectly reflect demographic characteristics of the region.
2. **Gain a better understanding of why FRL, EL, and SPED students enroll in charter schools at such low rates.** These enrollment trends may be related to problems with practical solutions, such as transportation. It may be that the families of these students are satisfied with services provided at their residentially-assigned district public school. It may be that students are interested in attending but are not being selected in the random lotteries that charters must hold if oversubscribed. Understanding the reasons for these enrollment trends is essential to crafting policy-relevant solutions.
3. **Respond to market demands.** NWA charter schools enroll only 3% of all public school students in Benton and Washington counties. However, many of these public schools are oversubscribed with waiting lists of students not selected through random lotteries, suggesting many more students may be interested in enrolling in these schools. The opening of LISA Academy this past year and Hope Academy next year may help to address some of these needs.

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