

READY TO LEARN: OHIO ASSESSMENT SHOWS CHARTERS, MAGNETS GET HEAD START

Children enrolling in kindergarten at charter and magnet schools in Ohio’s urban districts performed significantly better on a required early literacy assessment than did their counterparts in district neighborhood or “default” schools.

A Policy Matters Ohio analysis of the state’s Kindergarten Readiness Assessment-Literacy, which measures preparation before beginning school, reveals that children entering charter schools in the seven districts studied scored nearly 8 percent higher than did children entering district schools.

When district magnet school scores were removed from the district average, charter schools averaged more than 10 percent higher on the KRA-L than did district default schools. The magnet school average was more than 18 percent higher than the average score for district default schools. Statistical testing showed that these differences, shown in Table 1, are significant.

Table 1 Average scores on the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment-Literacy aggregated by school type for seven urban districts in Ohio: Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown.

	Average score	Percent difference
District magnets	20	Magnets averaged 18.2 percent higher than neighborhood or "default" district schools.
Charter schools	18.27	Magnets averaged 8.7 percent higher than charters.
All district schools	16.89	Charters averaged 7.6 percent higher than all district schools (magnet and default).
Default district schools	16.37	Charters averaged 10.4 percent higher than default district schools.

Source: Charter data from the Ohio Department of Education; school-level district data from individual districts; all data 2008. Maximum possible score on the KRA-L is 29.

We also performed district-level analyses for five of the larger districts: Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Toledo. Overall, the same pattern held true at the district level – magnet schools posted higher KRA-L averages than charters, which reported higher scores than district default schools. Only in Dayton did charters post higher averages than magnets.

In these five districts, the schools with the highest KRA-L averages were much more likely than those with the lowest averages to be charters or magnets and to be designated by the

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state as Excellent or Effective. Those with the lowest average scores were much more likely to be district default schools and to be designated in Academic Watch or Academic Emergency.

The KRA-L is a screening tool that assesses oral language, rhyming, letter identification and alliteration. The assessment is intended to help target instruction appropriately depending on children's literacy skills when they enter kindergarten. Because educators administer it at the start of the school year, instruction offered by a school does not affect children's scores. KRA-L data from the assessment administered at the beginning of the 2008-09 school year were used for this study.

Higher KRA-L scores at charter and magnet schools suggest that children are coming to these schools better equipped in terms of early literacy, one of several areas that contribute to school readiness. These findings align with research showing that, on the whole, parents who enroll their children in schools that require a decision beyond automatic enrollment in a neighborhood school are more engaged with their children's education. Research has shown that such parental involvement is a key factor in a child's school success.

In practical terms, more involved parents are more likely to have the time to be able to visit a school, sign a "contract" requiring a certain level of involvement with the school or the child's education, or have the resources to pay the application fee charged by some charters.

Recent research on the KRA-L in Cincinnati showed that low-income students and those with no documented preschool experience scored significantly lower on the assessment, and that students who did well on the KRA-L were more likely to score at or above proficiency on the 3rd-grade Ohio Achievement Test in reading.

A separate analysis for this report found an association between the kindergarten assessment and 3rd-grade scores in reading and math on the Ohio Achievement Test. The analysis showed that charter schools with kindergartners who scored higher on the KRA-L at the beginning of the 2008-09 school year tend to have 3rd-grade students who scored higher on the OAT in the same school year. Because these results measure scores of different tests taken by separate cohorts of students, they are not evidence of a causal effect; they do, however, provide strong suggestive evidence that higher KRA-L scores among kindergartners may be carrying over to 3rd-grade test results.

Our findings indicate that charters and magnets get a head start in terms of student preparedness. Given recent research that shows Ohio charter students performing at or below the levels of students enrolled in district schools, both state and federal policymakers need to take another look at their reliance on charters as the solution to the challenges we face in educating children in struggling communities.

Policy Matters Ohio is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute dedicated to researching an economy that will work better for all in Ohio. Learn more about Policy Matters Ohio at www.policymattersohio.org.