In the current fiscally constrained environment, there is a consensus that traditional public school reform has not worked and funding for it cannot continue unabated. With the spotlight thus shining ever brighter on charter schools as a school reform effort, reaching actionable conclusions about charters has become essential. However, media coverage of charter schools is often polarized rather than productive, and data can be found to support both sides of the debate. This is largely because the literature on charter school effectiveness, until recently, was dominated by single-location studies that each used a slightly different research approach. The CREDO study, “Multiple Choice: Charter School Performance in 16 States,” was among the first studies to attempt a broader picture of overall charter school effectiveness, and it used a novel quasi-experimental method called virtual control records (VCRs).

As a new analytic method, questions arose about the strengths and weaknesses of the VCR methodology vis-a-vis the most commonly used quasi-experimental method in education research, student fixed effects (FE). This study documents the results of a first look at such a head-to-head comparison of the two methods. We find that estimates of charter school effectiveness are highly similar between the two methods when the sample is restricted to the same set of charter students. Whether the samples are restricted in this manner or allowed to vary between the VCR and FE models, results showed variation in charter school effectiveness across student subgroups and across locations regardless of the methodology being used.

Other recent multi-location studies of charter schools have also uncovered variation in charter school quality. There are two possible conclusions to this now-common finding. Detractors decry charter schools because they are not a silver-bullet answer to all education’s problems. But this knee-jerk reaction ignores a more nuanced point: some charter schools are effective, and they are often effective for students whom the traditional public school sector has historically failed to serve well, such as low-income students, minority students and English language learners.

Recognizing this fact, the conclusion reached about the widespread variation in quality is that the conditions that bring about a high-quality charter school sector need to be investigated. This discussion focuses on the accountability side of the flexibility-for-accountability bargain made with charter schools, including the parameters of strong charter school authorizing and the frameworks that can be used to revoke or deny renewal of under-performing charters. If used properly, these policies and procedures increase the odds that only high-quality charter schools will be allowed to open and to continue operating.