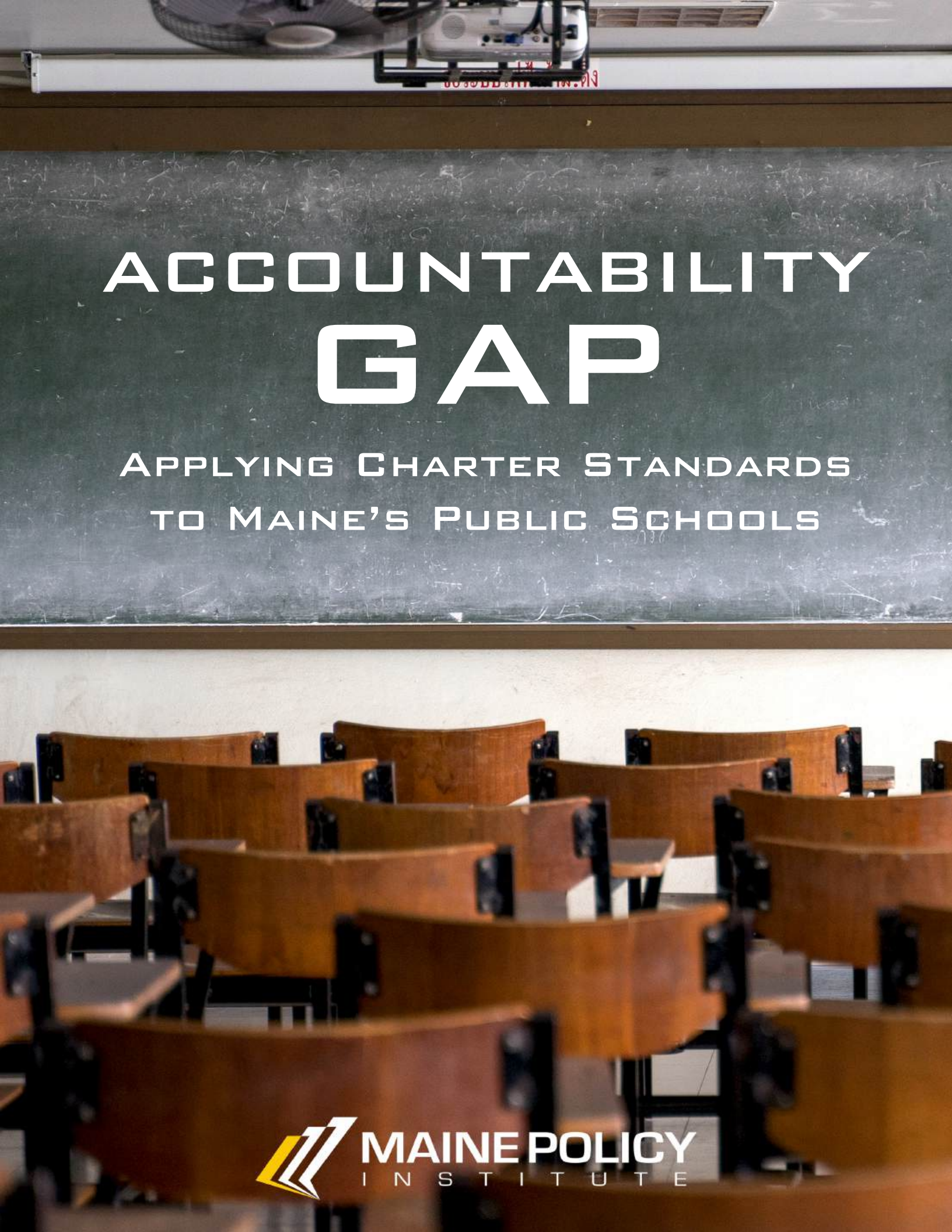

ACCOUNTABILITY GAP

Applying Charter Standards to Maine's Public Schools

MAINE POLICY INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

Maine charter schools are held to far higher standards by law than the state's traditional public schools, despite often serving more disadvantaged students with fewer resources. While charter schools face the threat of closure for failing to meet certain benchmarks, noncharter public schools are rarely held accountable to the same degree. This report applies the Maine Charter School Commission's accountability standards to the state's noncharter public schools, revealing disparities in oversight, performance, and regulatory burden.

The data show that if noncharter public schools were evaluated using the same standards applied to charter schools, many would be at risk of closure. Approximately one-in-seven Maine schools would fail three or more standards—the same threshold used to shut down the Harpswell Coastal Academy charter school. This analysis underscores the necessity for a consistent and equitable regulatory framework, and it raises significant questions about the state's artificial cap on the number of charter schools.

Key Findings

- More than three in five (61.28%) noncharter public schools in Maine would fail at least one charter compliance standard; almost one in three (31.23%) would fail at least two; and 14% would fail at least three, putting them on the same level of failure as Harpswell Coastal Academy.
- More than two-in-seven (29.29%) of noncharter high schools are in violation of the graduation rate standard set for charter schools.
- Nearly 37% of noncharter schools are failing to meet the chronic absenteeism expectations imposed on charter schools.
- Charter schools consistently outperform noncharter public schools in fiscal efficiency, producing better academic outcomes per dollar spent. The average Charter school spends approximately $14,000 total per pupil, while the average noncharter spends more than $24,800.
- Maine charter schools serve disproportionately higher numbers of low-income students, yet meet or exceed expectations in English Language Arts and Science performance.

Policy Recommendations

- **Lift the Charter Cap**: Remove the arbitrary limit on the number of charter schools.
- **Remove the Cap on Enrollment:** Remove the ceiling on how many students can enroll in an individual charter school.
- **Equalize Standards**: Hold all public schools to the same performance expectations. If noncharters aren't held to a certain standard, then charter schools shouldn't be either.
- **Reward Efficiency**: Focus on outcomes per dollar spent. Schools that deliver better results for less should be incentivized with increased funding and greater curriculum flexibility.

- **Reform Oversight**: Eliminate subjective and duplicative oversight standards that are only applied to charter schools. Use transparent, objective, growth-based measurements.
- **Improve Access**: Expand transportation support to ensure low-income and rural students can attend charter schools.
- **Embrace Educational Pluralism**: View charter schools as complementary to traditional schools, rather than as threats. Policy should prioritize student outcomes, not bureaucratic parity.

Conclusion

Charter schools in Maine are subject to scrutiny that noncharter public schools are not—and yet they frequently perform just as well or better, particularly when adjusted for funding and demographics. If the standards used to judge charter schools are valid, they should apply to all schools. If they are too onerous for noncharter schools, they are also too onerous for charters. The state must either level the playing field or acknowledge that its current system penalizes innovation and rewards failure.

I. Introduction

In Maine, charter schools are required to comply with specific standards, and their compliance with these standards is regularly reviewed by the Maine Charter School Commission (the Commission).[1] If a charter school fails to comply with these standards too egregiously, the Commission may choose to shut it down. This is a highly subjective process, with no bright line established for several of the standards of review, as well as how many violations would lead to a charter school being shut down.

Charter schools are effectively a merger of several characteristics of private schools and public schools, as they involve a private organization contracting with the state to operate a public school under certain conditions established by a contract, or "charter." Many states are light handed in their regulations of charter schools,[2] but Maine instead creates a regulatory structure that places many burdens on charter schools wishing to operate in the state.[3]

In Maine there are only 10 charter schools allowed by statute, although some operate multiple campuses, akin to a charter school district.[4] The justification the state of Maine uses for this cap is that, while charter schools are public schools, they compete with noncharter public schools for per-pupil funding. Thus, if too many children transfer to charter schools, noncharter public schools may not have a large enough student population to sustain themselves.[5]

While this is one reason that Maine gives to explain why it is so restrictive on charter schools, this justification is greatly undermined by the fact that charter schools disproportionately attract students of low-income backgrounds or specific learning disabilities, such as autism or emotional disturbances.[6] [7] In addition, Maine enrolls the highest proportion of disabled students in their charter schools of any state. The percent of charter schools' student bodies that are disabled is 8.38% higher than the student bodies of Maine's noncharter public schools.[8]

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[1] https://www.maine.gov/csc/home

[2] https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/charter-school-advocates-keep-winning-least-red-states

[3] https://mainepolicy.org/the-case-for-charter-school-reform/#:~:text=Although%20some%20argue%20that%20an,in%20the%20Town%20Tuitioning%20program.

[4] https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/20-A/title20-Asec2405.html

[5] https://www.pressherald.com/2025/05/13/maines-newest-charter-school-concerned-as-legislature-looks-to-lower-statewide-cap/#:~:text=James%20Libby%2C%20R%2DCumberland%2C%20who%20proposed%20the%20amendment%2C,re%20so%2C%20so%20close.%E2%80%9D

[6] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/charter-schools-a-report-on-rethinking-the-federal-role-in-education/

[7] https://charterschoolcenter.ed.gov/sites/default/files/upload/reports/280272-NCSECS-Full-Report-WEB.pdf

[8] Id.

Per-pupil funding is designed to provide more funding to schools with more students, and it does so by providing additional funding estimated in part based on the extra cost of teaching an additional student. Since charter schools disproportionately teach students that require special education resources or are low-income, on average they should improve the bottom line for noncharter schools rather than make it worse. This is because while they do reduce other schools' per-pupil funding, they are also removing particularly resource intensive students from the student population.

Because Maine is so restrictive on charter schools, the state has not been able to provide educational services with maximum effectiveness. With major declines in educational quality occurring during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial that Maine invest in innovative education models. Thus, to illustrate the unfairness and burden that Maine's regulatory system places on charter schools, Maine Policy Institute in this report applies those same charter standards to noncharter public schools to estimate how many would be shut down if held to the same requirements. This data will inform policymakers about the unnecessary nature of so many of the requirements applied to charter schools under Maine law, as well as show the benefits of reforming Maine's charter school system as a whole.[9]

It is important to remember that some of these standards are highly subjective, as is the Commission's final determination on whether to shut down a charter school. Maine requires at least five of the seven charter school commissioners to approve renewal, which means while these standards can be somewhat subjective, they are still quite stringent.[10]

Additionally, because many of these standards are not measured for noncharter public schools, Maine Policy Institute had to use or create secondary measures to estimate what a noncharter public school's performance would be if held to that standard. Using the data published primarily through the Maine Department of Education (MDOE), we then estimated how many noncharter public schools would be found in violation of each standard.[11] Because there is no bright line test the Commission uses to judge whether a charter school should be shut down, we cannot be absolutely certain that a given noncharter public school would or would not be approved for renewal.

However, because the one charter school that was ever denied renewal in Maine, Harpswell Coastal Academy, was shut down for violations in three separate standards of measurement, we

[9] https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/20-A/title20-Asec2409.html
[10] https://regulations.justia.com/states/maine/90/668/chapter-3/
[11] https://www.maine.gov/doe/dashboard

place special emphasis on whether a school violates at least three of the three standards we measure.[12] [13] [14]

In our analysis, we measure nine different standards, abandoning others because they rely on exit surveys which noncharter public schools simply don't use. In our final conclusion, out of the more than five-hundred noncharter public schools measured, 71 schools were failing at least three standards (with 28 failing more than three). This means that 14%, or nearly one-in-seven noncharter public schools, would likely be labelled as failing if treated like a charter school.

Additionally, 172 noncharter public schools are failing at least two standards, over one-third of all schools. We consider this a "yellow flag" standard at risk of future closure under the same standards used for charters.

Lastly, 364 schools, or 61.28%, were violating at least one of the standards we measured, which is often enough for the charter commission to begin what is called the "Intervention Protocol Process." The Commission issues a Corrective Action Plan, and failure to meet those standards set by the Commission can lead to the school being placed on probation or having sanctions issued, including charter revocation.[15] On their face, over three in five noncharter public schools in Maine would not be able to function as fully standard-compliant charter schools, and would likely have Corrective Action Plans issued against them.

It should be noted that many charter schools also are below expectations for at least one or two standards. However, the three standard failure rate is quite low among charters, and three standard failures was the same criteria that resulted in Harpswell Coastal's closure. Thus, the 14% failure rate for noncharter public schools is both the more concerning and more pertinent finding in this report.

In our analysis, we look at the nine charter school programs currently operating in Maine. Data from Harpswell Coastal Academy, which closed in 2023, is not used in this report. Nonetheless, the Harpswell Coastal Academy provides a clear example of what conduct will result in a charter school being closed. However, we only consider currently active charter schools in our analysis of noncharter public schools' performance in our standards, as there is no up-to-date 2023-2024 school year data for Harpswell Coastal Academy from which to compare.

Additionally, for several of the standards that are based on grade range, we divide the Community Regional Charter School into its subsidiary programs. There are three campuses for this charter, each with separate grade ranges served: Overman Academy (Grades 6-12),

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[12] https://www.pressherald.com/2022/10/11/harpswell-charter-academy-set-to-close-after-commissioners-shoot-down-renewal-bid/

[13] https://harpswellanchor.org/2022/10/state-declines-to-renew-harpswell-coastal-academy-charter-forcing-closure-at-end-of-school-year/

[14] https://www.mainepublic.org/maine/2022-10-12/a-harpswell-charter-school-will-close-at-the-end-of-the-school-year

[15] https://legislature.maine.gov/doc/3828

Dimensions Academy (K-8), and Creative Children's Academy (Preschool-Kindergarten). The Overman Academy and Dimensions Academy have very different grade ranges, leading to them being compared to different types of noncharter schools for academic performance. Meanwhile, the Creative Children's Academy doesn't have old enough students for standardized testing or other school performance standards to apply.

First, the report will discuss the methodology we apply across nine standards of review applying charter school standards to noncharter schools. After applying the standards, we measure how many noncharter schools would fail each standard, then combine failed standards to measure how many noncharter schools would be considered failing if held to the same charter standards used to close Harpswell Coastal Academy.

II. Methodology

In this project, we analyzed nine different standards with which charter schools are responsible for complying. The nine standards we reviewed were: Graduation Rates, Academic Performance (Math and English Language Arts)[16], Postsecondary Enrollment, Chronic Absenteeism, Campus Safety, Financial Efficiency, and Demographic Achievement Gaps (Math and English Language Arts). When analyzing these standards, we used 2023-2024 school year data for all charter and noncharter public schools, unless otherwise noted. Included in the analysis of noncharter public schools are the nine Maine private schools which receive above 60% in public funding. Additionally, we analyzed the nine charter school districts, which ended up being a total of 10 charter schools due to the makeup of Community Regional Charter School. Overman Academy and Dimensions Academy were treated as their own schools, and since Creative Children's Academy had no data available under these standards, it was excluded from the analysis leaving us with 10 individual charter schools to measure.

There are several standards that charter schools are reviewed under that we did not include for many reasons. One of these standards was Parent and Community Engagement. While charter schools are required to circulate regular surveys and similar reporting documents to measure these variables, noncharter public schools are not.[17] Since there are no similar reporting forms that noncharter public schools circulate and publicly report, we simply cannot apply this standard to them. It is worth noting that this is effectively an entire regulatory standard with which only charter schools are required to comply.

Another standard we did not fully review was school social environments. While we did consider campus safety, other social environment standards were not considered. This is due again to a lack of reporting by noncharter public schools and the concerning subjectivity of this standard.

[16] We review and compare Science performance as well, however because the Charter Commission does not require Academic Performance in Science to be considered for charter renewal, we did not fail any noncharters specifically for Science academic performance. We did include Science in the larger context of the academic efficiency metric, which is discussed later.

[17] https://www.maine.gov/csc/sites/maine.gov.csc/files/inline-files/FINAL%20SY2023-24%20Annual%20Monitoring%20Report%20-%20Community%20Regional%20Charter%20School.pdf

We also did not review governing board performance, because while charter schools are expected to maintain a frequency and level of transparency of governing board meetings, noncharter public school boards are not a comparable system. This is because while noncharter school boards are also held to public meeting requirements, the frequency and transparency of those meetings are irrelevant in decisions whether to shut down the schools they govern, while the same is not true for charter schools.

Lastly, we did not analyze student yearly academic growth or multiyear student persistence. While we did discuss year-by-year academic change in the context of achievement gaps, charter schools are measured not only on total academic performance, but also on year-to-year change. Most of these schools must create year-over-year academic growth targets for individual students and may become at risk of non-renewal if these goals are not reached. Thus, a charter school may be flagged even if enough students score far above the state average for two years in a row, but the second highest score is comparatively lower than the first one. No similar measurements are applied to noncharter public schools; thus, we simply could not apply this standard to them. The Maine Department of Education actually reviews only a few of these standards for noncharter public schools, and, unlike the Commission, does not consider shutting down noncharter public schools for failing to meet these expectations. In full, the Commission reviews as many as 55 individual criteria for charter school compliance, most of which have little to no equivalent measurement for noncharter public schools.

In a general sense, a school fails if it would be considered to be in the "not meeting expectations" category under charter standards. The number of failing standards for noncharter public schools is listed within the findings section, in addition to the total number of schools considered under that standard. A school is only considered below that standard if it has enough data to fail or meet the standard. For example, if a school only provided data for two standards, it would not be included in the total number of schools failing three or more standards.

Because so many charter standards are not applied to noncharter public schools, there is no equivalent data reported by noncharters to make a fair comparison. Thus, for several of the nine measured standards, we had to use similar or secondary variables and statistics to estimate whether a noncharter public school would be shut down if held to the same standards. In these cases, we included only schools that egregiously violated these secondary standards rather than those with borderline violations.

Graduation rate is the first standard we comparatively review, and is one of the few standards that noncharter public schools are actually responsible for reporting and keeping high, making this standard quite easy to review. One difference is that while charters are threatened with shutdowns for continual low performance, noncharter schools with similar rates are not. Instead they are typically labelled as "Comprehensive Supports and Improvement/Instruction" or "Targeted Supports and Improvement/Instruction" schools, both labels coming with additional funding and Maine DOE leadership support.[18] While school closure is on the table, it is a last

[18] https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/inline-files/ESEA%20-%20Consolidated%20State%20Plan%20-%202.25.2025.pdf

resort and requires a decision by the local school board and then approval by a majority of the voters in the district.[19]

This requirement is, of course, only applied to high schools, and there were 99 noncharter public high schools in the state reporting four-year graduation rates in the 2023-2024 school year. Of them, 29 were below the graduation rate expected for charter schools, which is a concerningly high number of high schools not meeting state graduation goals.

The second and third standards we reviewed were academic performance, one being Math performance and the other being English Language Arts. State-level assessments also test public schools for Science performance, however Science performance is not mandatorily included in the charter school review system. Thus, substandard Science scores don't count towards a charter being shut down or negatively reviewed by the Charter Commission. This is likely due to less frequent testing for science and less noncharter data for comparison. The one exception to this is Baxter Academy, which volunteered to include their science performance as a custom metric in their Charter Performance Framework reviews. Because charter schools are not reviewed under Science, we do not fail any noncharter schools for poor Science performance.

Notably, charter schools significantly outperformed noncharters in science, and Baxter did so well that it asked for science performance to be included in its school-specific custom review standards. Because of this, and Science's overall role in the comparative academic performance in these schools, we still compare charter schools to noncharters in the academic performance section of the report, although we fail no noncharters for substandard science academic performance, because charter schools aren't held to that standard.

We also review chronic absenteeism rates, which is the percentage of the student body that misses at least 10 percent of school days during a school year.[20] This is one of the standards with the worst performance from noncharter public schools, with more than one-in-three not meeting the standard to which charter schools are held.

Campus safety is another standard we measured, and this is one of the standards in which noncharter public schools comparatively performed better. While there is no official public "safety measurement" that these schools release, we estimated overall safety by considering total incident rates in Maine noncharter schools and compared these statewide data to the safety rates in Maine's charter schools, accounting for grade level. We considered a school to be failing this standard if they had a total incident rate higher than the highest total incident rate of a charter school, which is Maine Academy of Natural Sciences.

The sixth standard we measured was financial efficiency, because, unlike noncharter public schools, charter schools can get shut down in part due to poor financial outlook. Charter schools will be assessed on the following financial standards:

- Current assets to liabilities ratio of 1.1 to 1

[19] https://legislature.maine.gov/statutes/20-A/title20-Asec1512.html
[20] https://www.mainelegislature.org/legis/statutes/20-a/title20-Asec5171.html

- At least 30 days of unrestricted days cash on hand (enough unrestricted cash to survive for 30 days on assets alone) (Unrestricted cash divided by ([total expenses minus depreciation expense]/365))
- Actual enrollment within 5% of projected in approved budget
- School meets all debt and real estate led obligations
- The aggregated three-year total margin (Net Surplus divided by Total Revenue) must be positive, and the most recent year's total margin must be positive
- Debt-to-asset ratio of less than 90%
- Charter district leadership must keep a positive cumulative two-year cash flow
- Charter district leadership has to be capable of paying current debt principal, interest and lease payments from the current year surplus
- The school must publish a three-year annual financial plan that includes a two-year annual budget and a one-year projection for year three that is board-approved

Almost all of these substandards can't be applied to noncharter public schools because they don't publicly report this information through the DOE in any comparable centralized method. However, this report measures the dollars spent per pupil in noncharter public schools and compares that to charter schools with similar or better academic performance to estimate the overall financial efficiency of noncharter public schools versus charter schools.

We create this financial efficiency metric by taking total per-pupil spending (total expenditures divided by number of enrolled students) and dividing it by the percent of students at or above the state's expectations for a given academic subject. This financial efficiency metric equates to the cost per successful student outcome in a given academic subject. Thus, a school with a high financial efficiency metric doesn't get great test results in relation to their spending, making a lower financial efficiency metric more optimal.

We analyze this financial efficiency metric across the three academic subjects: English Language Arts, Math, and Science scores. Although this report did not present science proficiency as an isolated academic performance measure, science outcomes are included in our academic efficiency standard because this standard is designed to assess cumulative student achievement across multiple core subjects, combining the scarcer data with data from other categories. We then look for schools with poor fiscal performance in at least two of these categories to identify the most egregiously inefficient schools. To measure failure in an individual category, we look for the charter school with the worst financial efficiency metric in that category and use that as a benchmark for noncharters.

In effect, schools are only labelled as failing the financial efficiency standard if they are less efficient than the least financially efficient charter school in at least two of the three measured standards. For English Language Arts, the most financially inefficient charter is Ecology Learning Center, with a cost per successful student outcome of $30,252.68 for English Language Arts. For Math, the worst performing charter school was Overman Academy, with a cost per successful student outcome of $91,810.95. Finally, the least financially efficient charter school for Science was Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, with a cost per successful student outcome of $53,929.47.

Lastly, we analyze the achievement gaps of various demographics at noncharter public schools. Under Maine Regulations 90-668 Chapter 2.10, the Commission reviews the achievement gaps at charter schools, including the achievement gaps affecting English language learners, special education students, male and female students, economically disadvantaged students, and ethnic or racial minority students.[21] In short, an achievement gap is when a particular demographic performs on average significantly worse than the overall population. While charter schools are expected to follow these achievement gap standards, they are not rigorously applied to Maine noncharter public schools.

In particular, this section focuses on noncharter public schools that had significant growth in achievement gaps from 2020 to 2024. If these gaps grew substantially over this period, then the schools measured were clearly failing to close their experienced achievement gaps. While certain demographics like ethnicity were impossible to measure due to small sample size and high DOE redaction rates, achievement gaps for sex, economic background, and special education status all had enough data to measure. We did not analyze the achievement gaps for charter schools, as there was simply not enough data to draw any meaningful conclusions. Instead, we focused on which noncharter schools were outliers in comparison to the rest.

[21] https://www.maine.gov/sos/rulemaking/agency-rules/independent-agencies-rules

III. Variable-by-Variable Analysis

A. Graduation Rate

The four-year graduation rate is one of the standards used for evaluating charter schools. Charter schools are considered to be meeting expectations if they have a graduation rate of 87% or higher. Approaching expectations is defined as being within 5% below the target, which equates to rates between 82% and 87%. Lastly, failing expectations is when the school has a graduation rate of 82% or less. The sample size for this section is smaller than most others at 99 schools overall, since only schools serving grade 12 report four-year graduation rates.

Figure A-1: Four-Year Graduation Rates by School Type

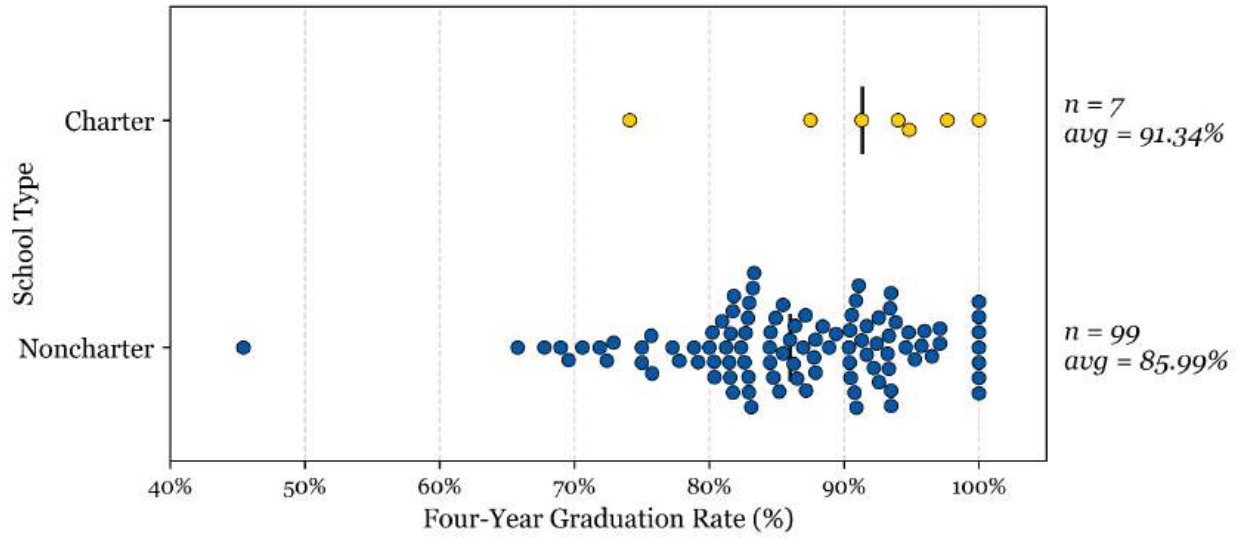


Figure A-1 summarizes our findings regarding the four-year graduation rate. Charter schools in Maine, on average, do better than the noncharter public schools. Four of the seven (57.14%) charter high schools have better graduation rates than 75% of the noncharter public high schools. Moreover, the median charter school graduation rate is 92.65%, compared to 86.36% for noncharter public schools.

If the same graduation rate standard for charter schools were applied to noncharter public high schools, 29 would outright fail expectations, or 29.29%. For charter schools, only the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences failed to meet expectations. Put differently, 14.29% of charter schools serving grade 12 failed expectations in this category (one-in- seven). Twenty-three noncharter public high schools would be approaching expectations, or 23.23%, while not one charter school is labelled as approaching expectations. Additionally, 52.53% of noncharter public high schools would be considered below "meeting expectations" in the four-year graduation rate standard, whereas only two of the seven charter schools (28.57%) would be considered as not "meeting expectations."

It is worth noting that the small sample size for charter schools in this standard impacts the

significance of this comparison, but it remains the case that a majority of noncharter public high schools would not be meeting expectations if the four-year graduation rate standard for charter schools was applied to them.

B. Academic Performance

In Maine, the academic performance of noncharters and charter schools is evaluated across three subject areas: English Language Arts, Math, and Science. The test for English Language Arts and Math is given annually to students in grades 3-8 and to students in their second year of high school.[22] This test assesses students on the Common Core State Standards.[23] The test for Science is taken annually by students in grades five, eight, and by those in their third year of high school, and it assesses students based on the Next Generation Science Standards.[24] [25] It should be noted that students with significant disabilities may qualify to take an alternate assessment in each of these subject areas.

In the 2023-2024 Annual Report to the Commissioner, the academic performance of each charter school by subject was evaluated by comparing the percentage of students at or above expectations at that school to the statewide average, to which the thresholds can be seen below.

Exceeding Expectations	Meeting Expectations	Approaching Expectations	Not Meeting Expectations
≥5% of state average of schools "at or above state expectation"	Between ≥-5% and <5% of state average of schools "at or above state expectation"	Between ≥-15% and <-5% of state average of schools "at or above state expectation"	<-15% of state average of schools "at or above state expectation"

As previously mentioned, only Math and English Language Arts are used as standards by the Commission. The statewide average for students at or above achievement level was 65.4% for English Language Arts and 47.2% for Math. Based on the above outline, schools more than 15% below the state average are failing expectations for an academic category. Therefore, the threshold for a school to be failing expectations would be less than 50.4% of students at or above state expectations for English Language Arts and less than 32.2% for Math.

Based on the threshold, 55 of 502 (10.96%) noncharter public schools with English Language Arts data would be considered to be failing English Language Arts expectations. Additionally, 72 of 502 (14.34%) noncharter public schools with Math data would be considered to be failing Math standards. In contrast, only Dimensions Academy of Community Regional Charter School fails by the English Language Arts expectations, or 10% of charter schools. However, Maine Connections Academy, Maine Virtual Academy, and both Overman Academy and Dimensions Academy of Community Regional Charter School fail Math standards, or 40% of charter schools. Essentially, charter schools and noncharter public schools have a nearly identical proportion of failures under the English Language Arts standard, but a larger proportion of charter schools fail under Math standards.

[22] https://www.maine.gov/doe/Testing_Accountability/MECAS/NWEA
[23] https://corestandards.org
[24] https://www.maine.gov/doe/Testing_Accountability/MECAS/materials/meascience
[25] https://www.nextgenscience.org

For each subject assessed, we created dot plots based on the grade levels each school serves. Maine charter schools serve a range of grades, including PK–K, PK–06, PK–08, K–08, 06–12, 07–12, and 09–12.

Because standardized testing in these subjects begins in third grade, we grouped schools serving grades 3–6 together—even if they also serve students below third grade—as long as they do not serve any grades above sixth. We applied the same logic to group schools serving grades 3–8.

One charter school, Creative Children's Academy, serves only PK–K. Since it does not enroll students in tested grades, it does not report data for this analysis.

Math Performance

Figure B-1: Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

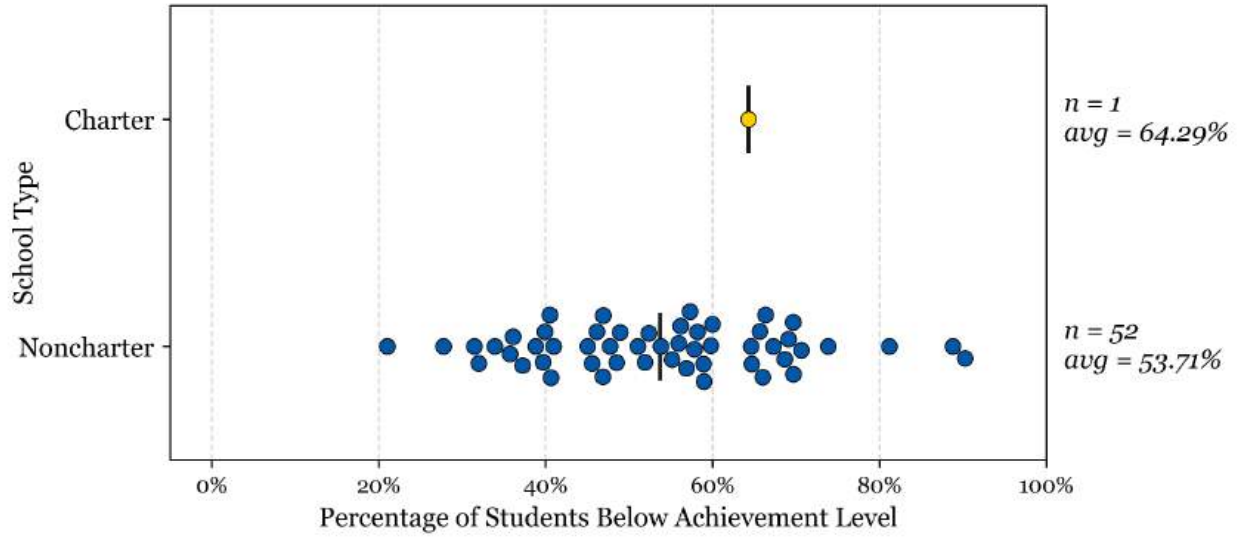


Figure B-1 represents the percentage of students below state expectations in Math from 3-6 charter schools serving grades 3-6 and noncharter public schools serving the same grade level. Acadia Academy was the one charter school applicable, which saw 64.29% of its students below state expectations. This was higher than the noncharter public school average (mean) of 53.71%, as well as the median for noncharter public schools of 55.12%. It is important to remember that for these standards, a higher percentage is worse, as it is a measure of the percent of students below state expectations.

Figure B-2: Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

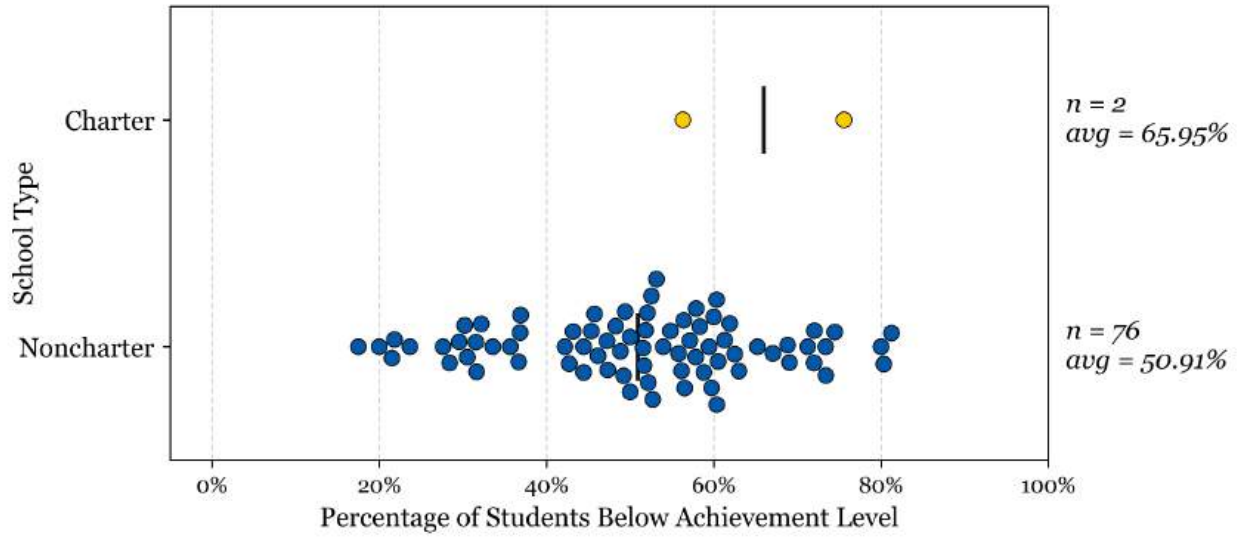


Figure B-2 portrays the percentage of students below state expectations in Math from charter schools serving grades 3-8 and noncharter public schools serving the same grade levels. Dimensions Academy from Community Regional Charter School and Fiddlehead School of Arts & Science were the two 3-8 charter schools, which had a mean and median of 65.95% of its students below state expectations. This was again higher than the noncharter public school average of 50.91% and the median of 52.11% of students below state expectations for Math.

Figure B-3: Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

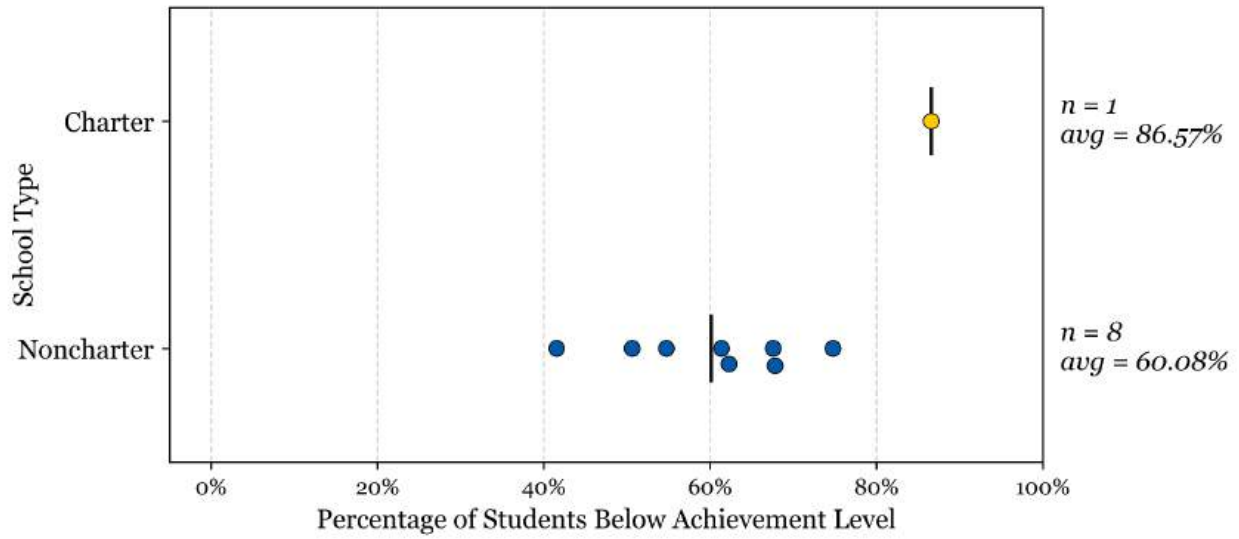


Figure B-3 demonstrates the percentage of students below state expectations in Math from charter schools serving grades 6-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grade levels. Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School was the only charter school serving

grades 6-12, which had 86.57% of its students below state expectations. On the contrary, noncharter public schools had a lower mean percentage of students below state expectations of 60.08%, and a lower median of 61.82%.

Figure B-4: Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

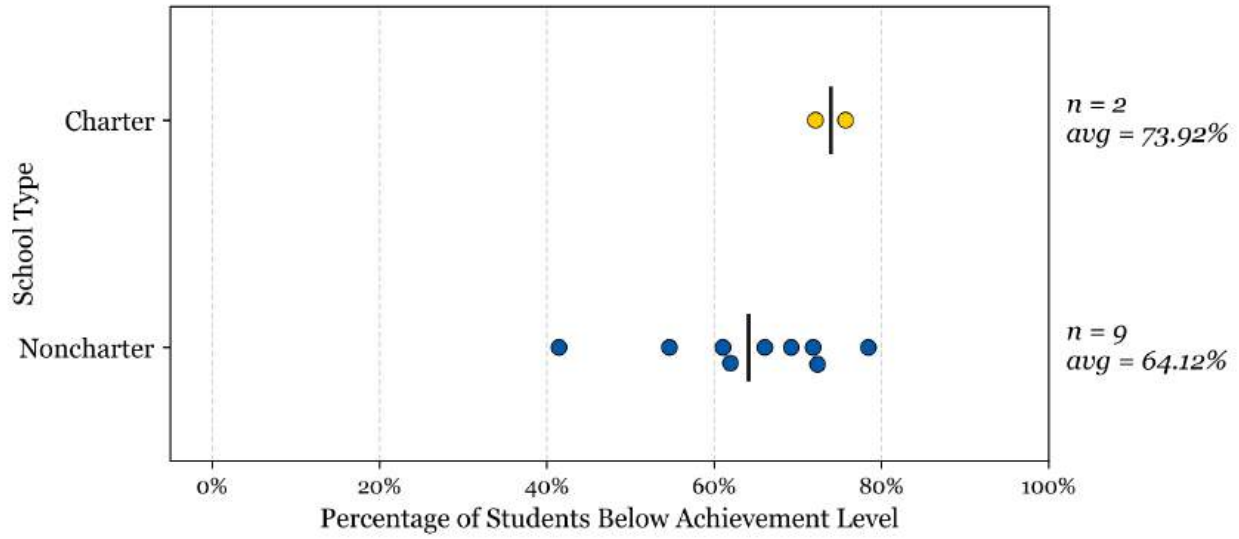


Figure B-4 illustrates the percentage of students below state expectations in Math from charter schools serving grades 7-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grade levels. Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy were the two charter schools serving grades 7-12, which had a mean and median of 73.92% of students below state expectations. On the contrary, noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12 had a lower mean percentage of students below state expectations of 64.12%, and a lower median of 66.07%.

Figure B-5: Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

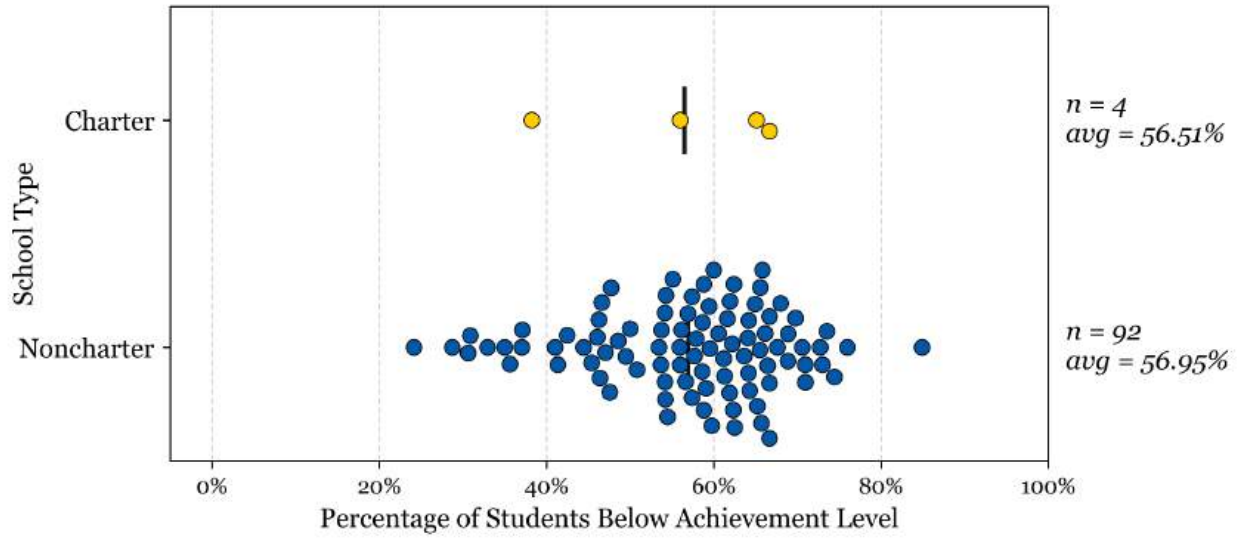


Figure B-5 displays the percentage of students below state expectations in Math from charter schools serving grades 9-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grade levels. Baxter Academy for Tech & Sciences, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and Maine Arts Academy School were the four grades 9-12 charter schools represented. They had a mean percentage of students below state expectations of 56.51% and a median of 60.56%. Noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12 had a mean percentage of students below state expectations of 56.95%, but a lower median of 58.82%.

Figure B-6: Math Achievement for All Schools

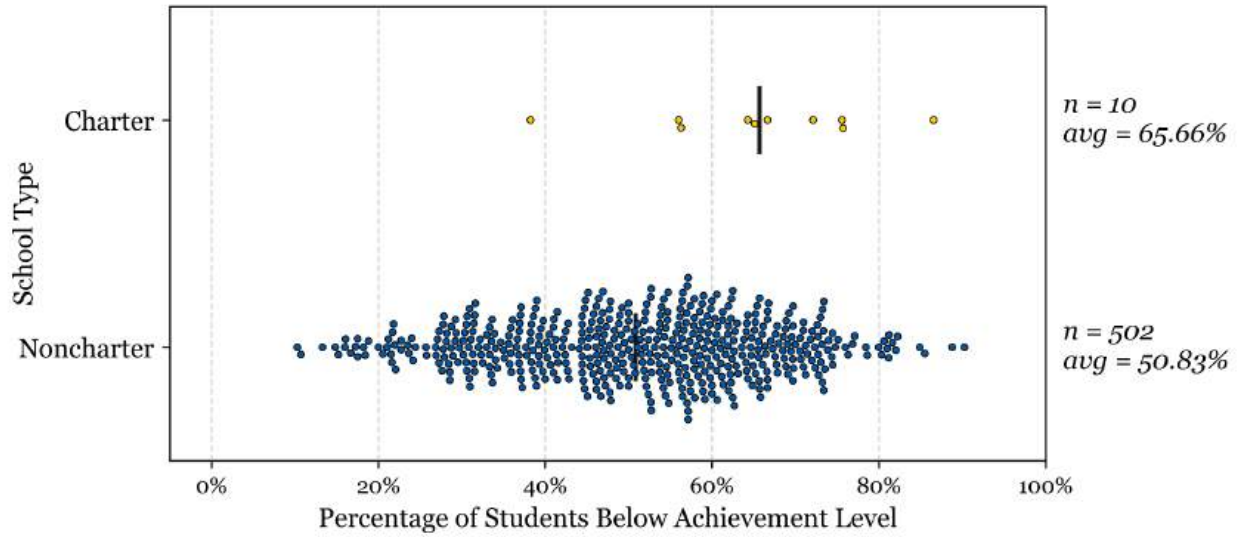


Figure B-6 shows the percentage of students below achievement level in Math of all charter schools and noncharter public schools which reported data. Contrary to English Language Arts and Science performance, noncharter public schools clearly outperform charter schools in Math. The median percentage of students below state expectations for noncharter public schools was 52.46% while the median for charter schools was 65.90%, a difference of 13.44%. Additionally, charter schools had a 15% higher mean than noncharter public schools (65.66% vs. 50.83%).

In essence, charter schools performed worse than noncharter public schools in Math standards. However, for schools serving grades 9-12, charter schools had the same mean of 57% as noncharter public schools. Additionally, the median for charter schools serving grades 9-12 was only 3.56% greater than noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Charter schools performed the worst in the grades 6-12 category, where the lone charter school was 27% greater than the mean noncharter public school and 25.18% greater than the median noncharter public school.

English Language Arts Performance

Figure B-7: ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

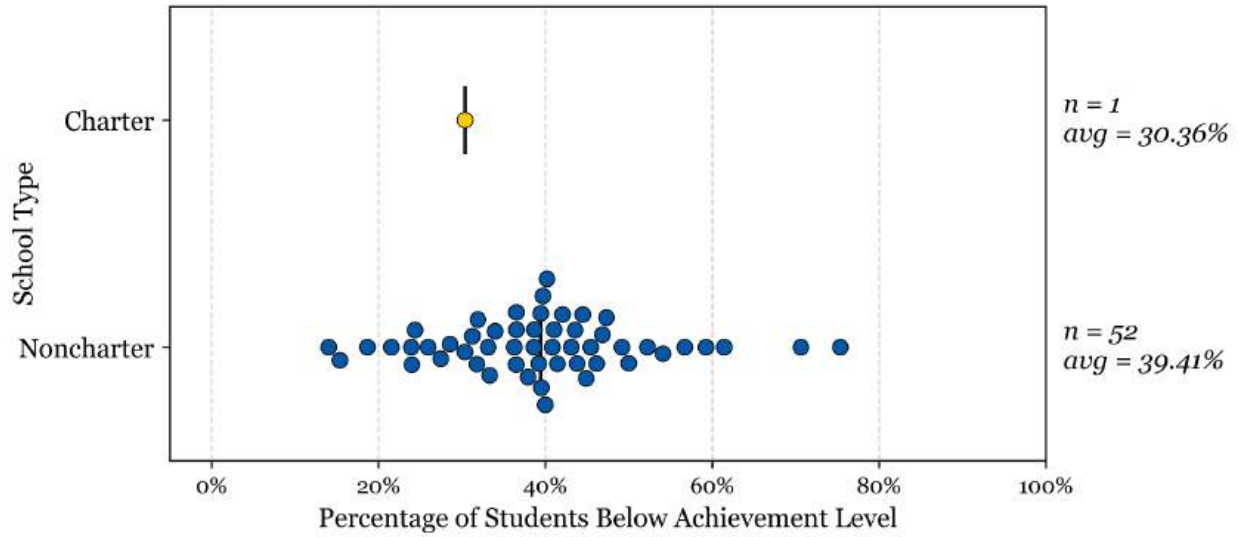


Figure B-7 shows the percentage of students below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter schools serving grades 3-6 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Acadia Academy was the one charter school applicable, which saw 30.36% of its students below state expectations. This was lower than the noncharter public school mean of 39.41%, as well as the median for noncharter public schools of 39.52%. Since these charts measure the percent below state standards for each school, a lower number is better.

Figure B-8: ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

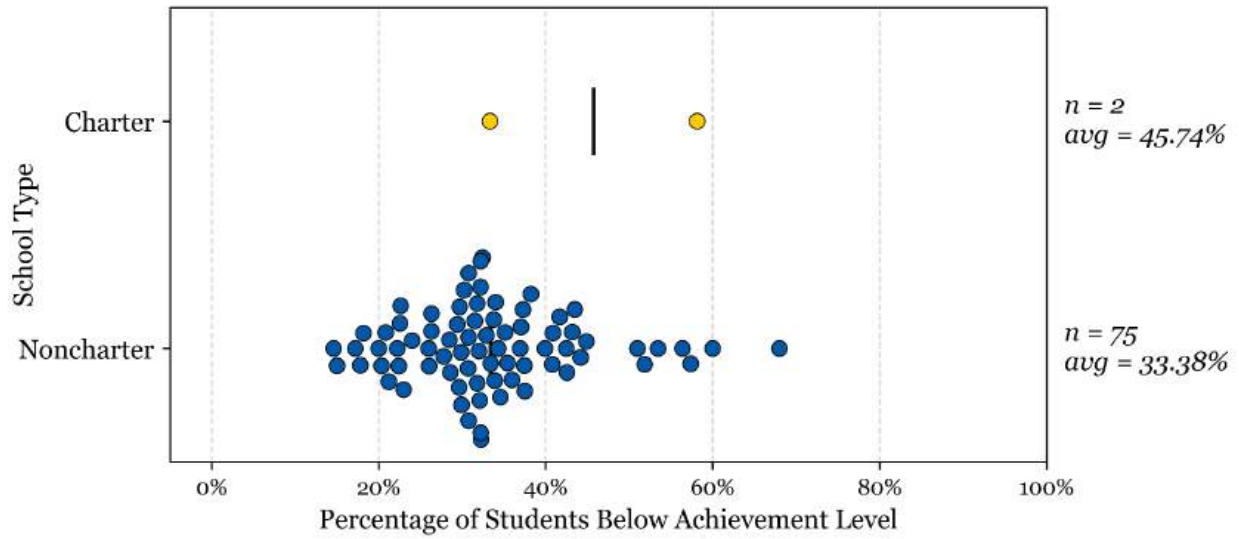


Figure B-8 presents the percentage of students below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter schools serving grades 3-8 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Dimensions Academy from Community Regional Charter School and Fiddlehead School of Arts & Science are the two charter schools represented, which had a mean and median of 45.74% of its students below state expectations. This was higher than the noncharter public school mean of 33.38% and the median of 32.2% of students below state expectations for English Language Arts.

Figure B-9: ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

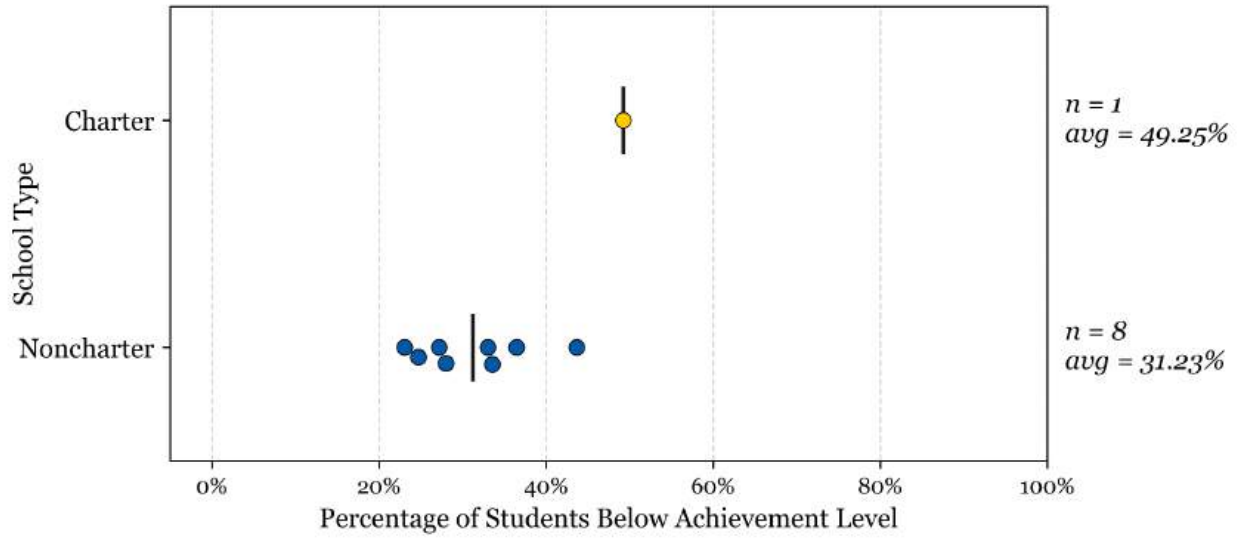


Figure B-9 represents the percentage of students below state expectations in English Language Arts from charters serving grades 6-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School was the only charter school serving grades 6-12, which had 49.25% of its students below state expectations. On the contrary, noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12 had a lower mean percentage of students below state expectations of 31.23%, and a lower median of 30.54%.

Figure B-10: ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

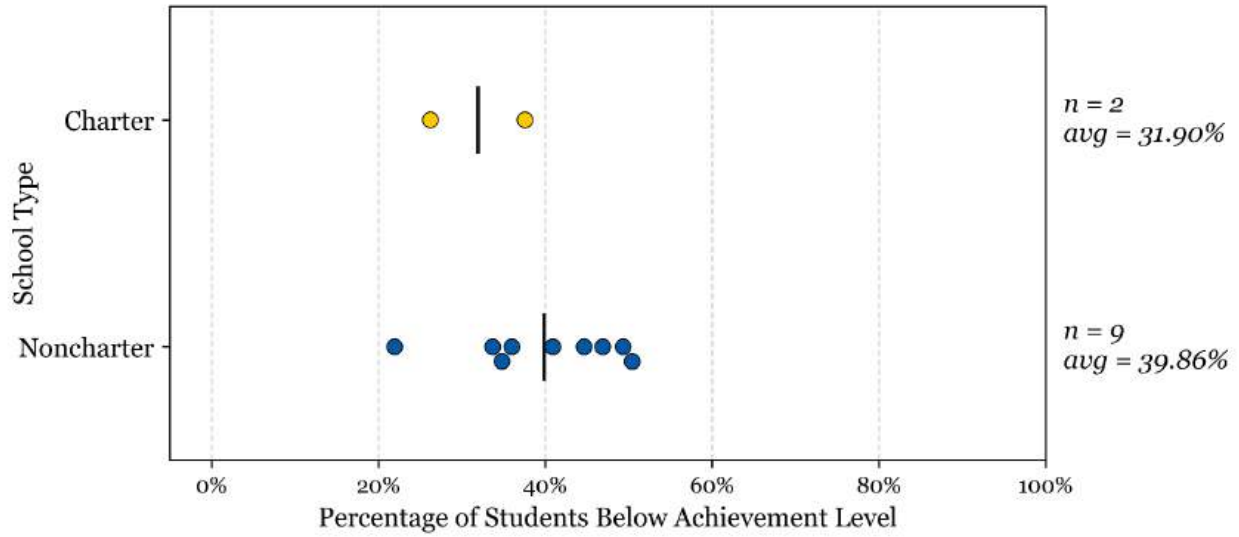


Figure B-10 contrasts the percentage of students below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter schools serving grades 7-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy were the two charter schools serving these grades, which had a mean of 31.90% and median of 32% of its students below state expectations. Noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12 had a greater mean percentage of students below state expectations of 39.86%, and a greater median of 40.91%.

Figure B-11: ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

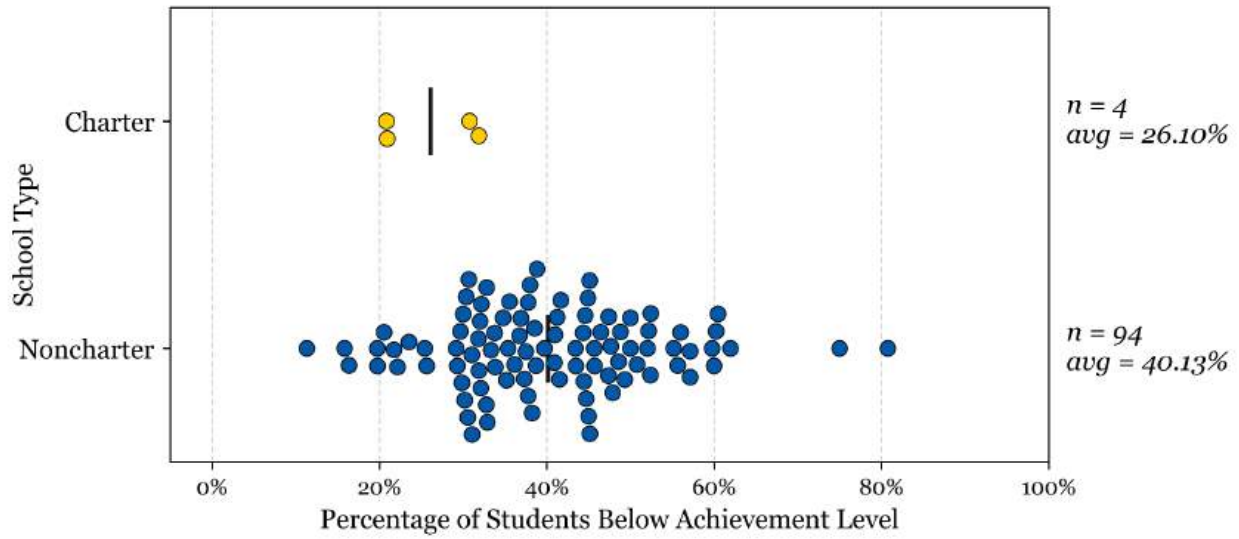


Figure B-11 reflects the percentage of students below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter schools serving grades 9-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Baxter Academy, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and

Maine Arts Academy School were the four charter high schools represented. They had a mean percentage of students below state expectations of 26.10% and a median of 25.85%. Noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12 had a larger mean percentage of students below state expectations of 40.13% and a larger median of 38.63%.

Since almost half of the charter schools are within the 9-12 category, this last graph's measure of the substantially lower failure rate shows that charter high school students do substantially better in English Language Arts. This is so substantial that across four charter schools, the average charter school has more than 10% more students meeting state standards than the average noncharter public school.

Figure B-12: ELA Achievement for All Schools

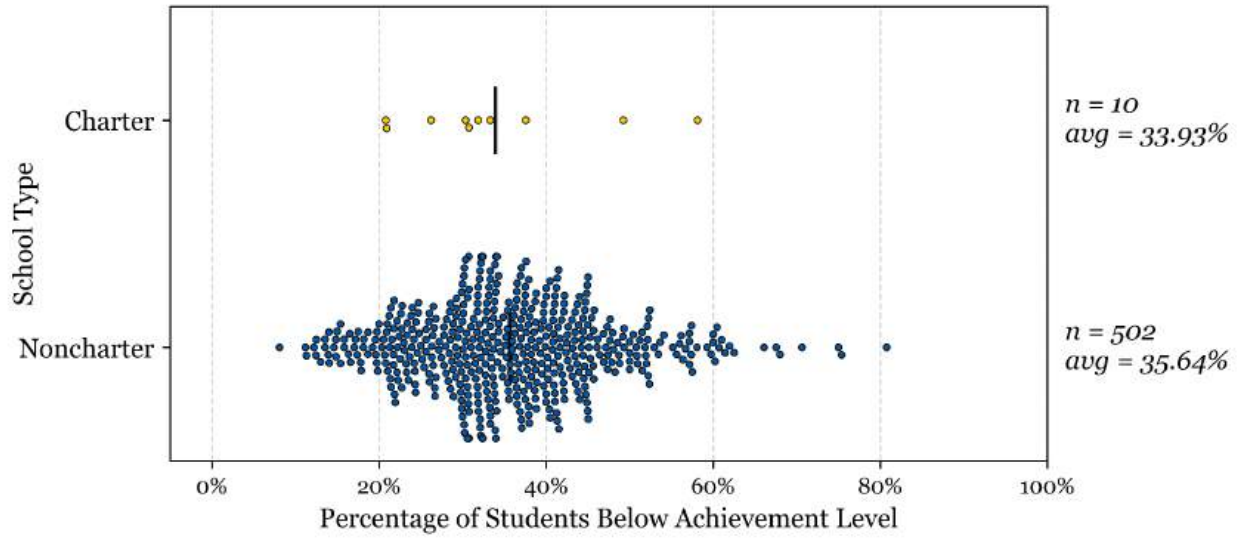


Figure B-12 illustrates the percentage of students below achievement level in English Language Arts for the 10 current Maine charter schools reporting data and the 502 noncharter public schools reporting data. Charter schools had a smaller mean of 33.93% compared to the 35.64% mean for noncharter public schools. Similarly, Charter schools had a median of 31.33%, lower than the median for noncharter public schools of 34.68%.

Overall, charter schools tended to outperform noncharter public schools on English Language Arts standards. Charter schools had lower percentages of students below state expectations for grades 3-6, 7-12, and 9-12 by 8% or more for each category. Charter schools performed worse in grades 3-8 and 6-12 comparatively by roughly 14% or more. Furthermore, charter schools had a 3.35% lower median in comparison to noncharter public schools in the overall English Language Arts data.

Science Performance

Figure B-13: Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

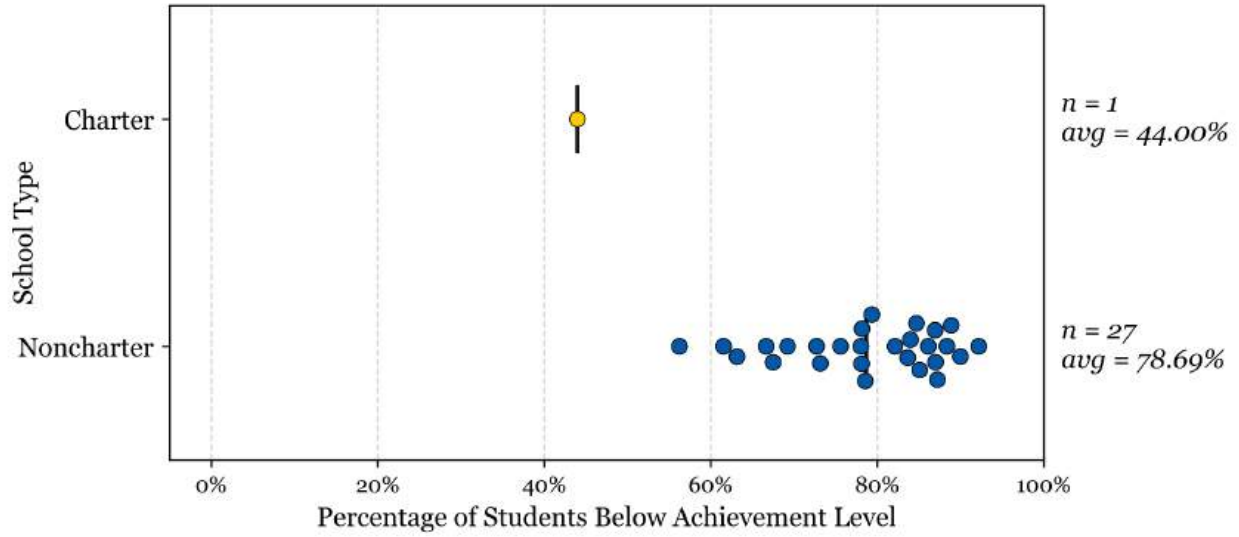


Figure B-13 portrays the percentage of students below state expectations in Science from charter schools serving grades 3-6 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Acadia Academy was the one charter school applicable, which saw 44.00% of its students below state expectations. This was lower than the noncharter public school average of 78.69%, as well as the median for noncharter public schools of 78.97%. While it is striking that Acadia Academy performed better than any other noncharter public school serving students at the same grade levels, Acadia is the only charter to which noncharters can be compared and may not be indicative of statewide trends among all charter schools.

Figure B-14: Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

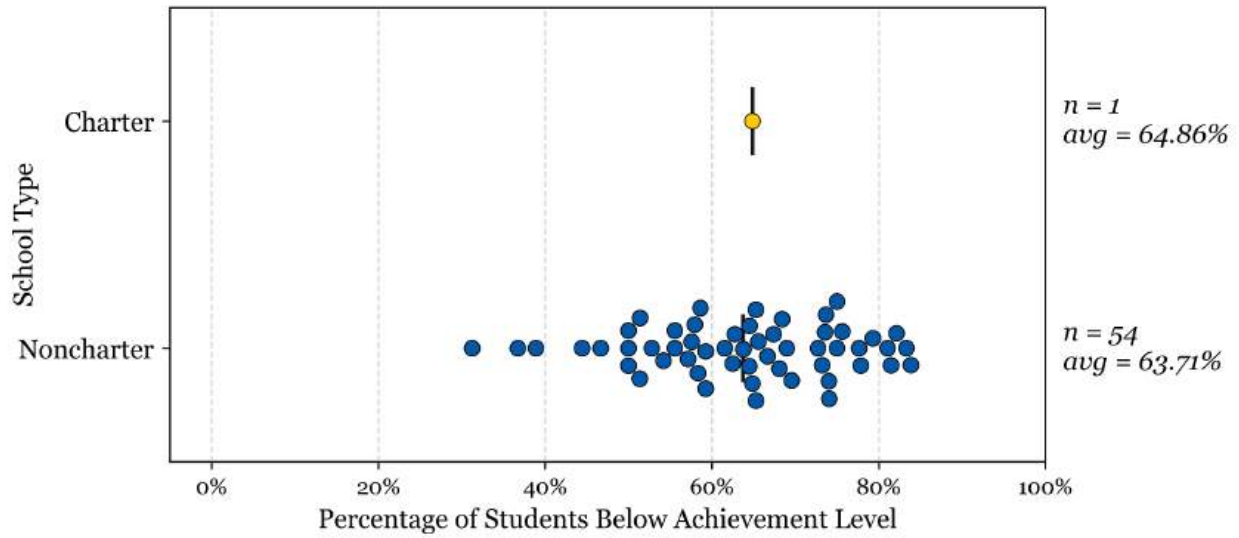


Figure B-14 illustrates the percentage of students below state expectations in Science from charter schools serving grades 3-8 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Fiddlehead School of Arts and Science was the one charter school reporting data for this grade level, which saw 64.86% of its students below state expectations. This was one percent higher than the noncharter public school average of 63.71%, and less than one percent higher than the median for noncharter public schools serving grades 3-8 of 64.69%.

Figure B-15: Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

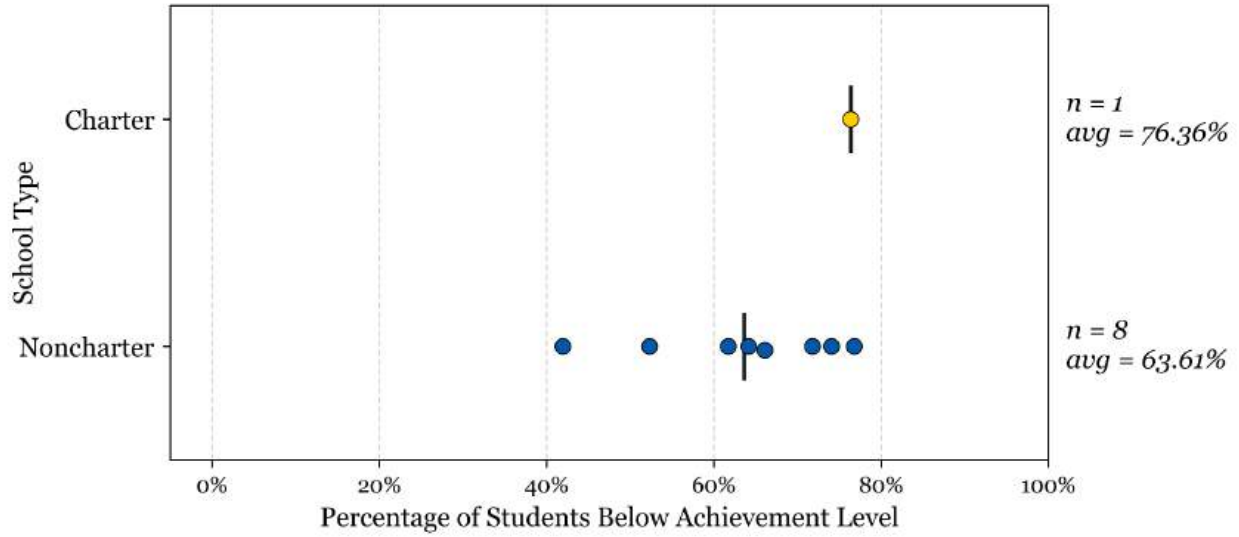


Figure B-15 presents the percentage of students below state expectations in Science from charter schools serving grades 6-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School was the only charter school serving this grade level, which had 76.36% of its students below state expectations. Noncharter public schools serving grades 6-12 had a lower mean percentage of students below state expectations of 63.61%, and a lower median of 65.13%.

Figure B-16: Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

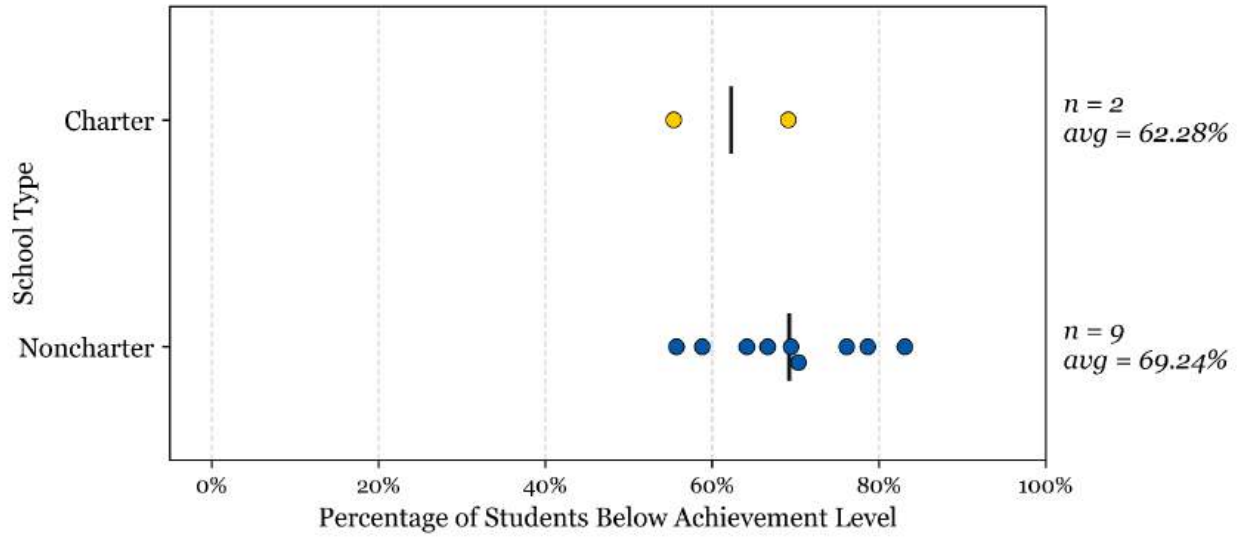


Figure B-16 shows the percentage of students below state expectations in Science from charter schools serving grades 7-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy were the two charter schools serving grades 7-12, which had a mean and median of 62.28% of its students below state expectations. Meanwhile, noncharter public schools serving these grades had a larger mean percentage of students below state expectations of 69.24% and a larger median of 69.47%.

Figure B-17: Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

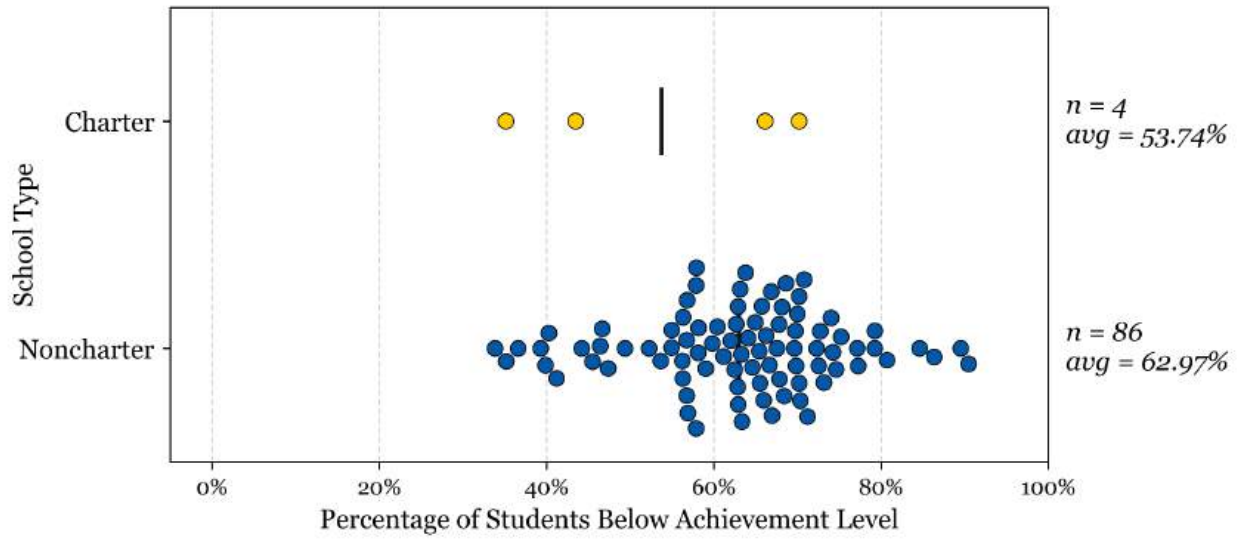


Figure B-17 demonstrates the percentage of students below state expectations in Science from charters serving grades 9-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Baxter Academy, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and Maine Arts

Academy School are the four charter schools represented. They had a mean percentage of students below state expectations of 53.74% and a median of 54.82%. Noncharter public schools serving these grades had a higher mean percentage of students below state expectations of 62.97% and a higher median of 63.96%.

Figure B-18: Science Achievement for All Schools

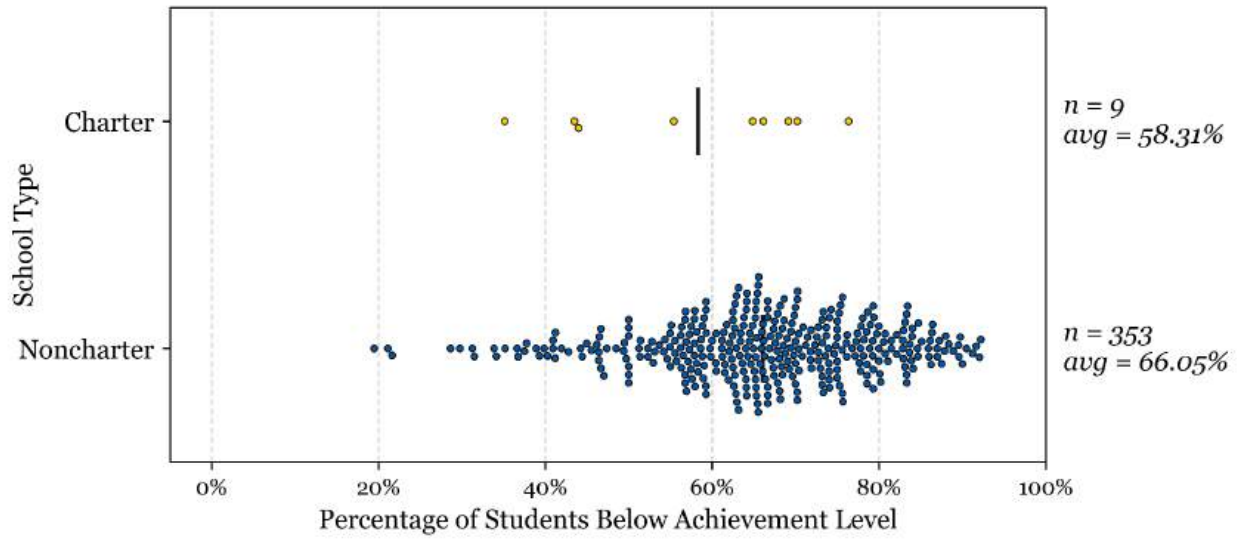


Figure B-18 compares the percentage of students below Science expectations at a given school to the type of school. Nine charter schools (Overman Academy did not have public Science data) and the 353 noncharter public schools with data were analyzed. The number of noncharter schools with science data is lower likely due to the infrequency of Science testing, as well as a lack of emphasis on Science testing in comparison to Math or English Language Arts. As with the English Language Arts, charter schools perform better than noncharter public schools in Science.

For Science, charter schools appeared to perform better for grades 3-6, 7-12, and 9-12 compared to noncharter public schools. For grades 3-8, charter schools performed within a percent of noncharter public schools. Noncharter public schools only outperformed charter schools in Science in schools serving grades 6-12; however, only one charter school was listed in this category. Moreover, charter schools outperformed noncharter public schools in the overall data, with a difference in averages of almost 8%.

Students with Disabilities

Next, we focused on how students with disabilities perform on tests in these subject areas at each school. This was done in part because charter schools had a slightly higher proportion of students with disabilities compared to noncharter public schools. The sample size of this data is much smaller for all sections since the MDOE redacts data if there aren't enough students of a given demographic.

Math Performance

Figure B-19: Math Achievement of Student with Disabilities for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

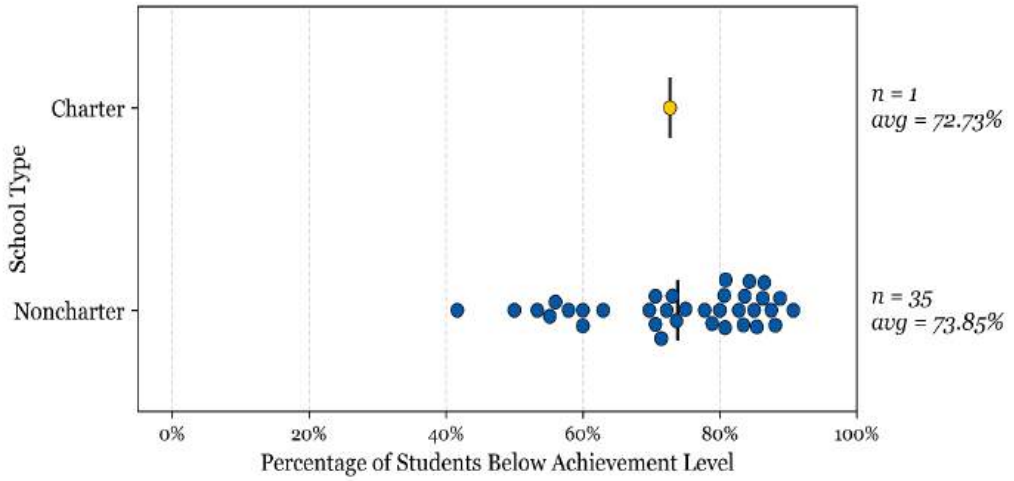
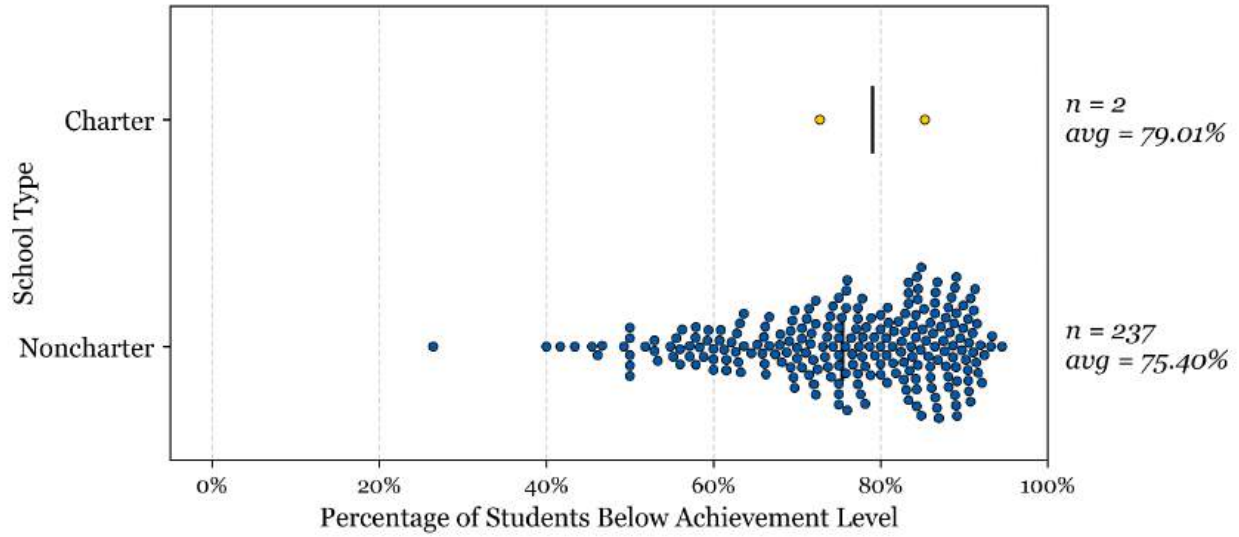


Figure B-19 displays the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in Math from charters serving grades 3-8 and noncharter public schools serving the same grade levels. Fiddlehead School of Arts & Math was the only charter school reporting data on students with disabilities, which had 72.73% of its students with disabilities below Math expectations. This was one percent less than the noncharter public school average of 73.85% and 4.78% below their median of 77.78% of students with disabilities below state expectations for Math.

Figure B-20 below represents the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in Math for all charter schools and noncharter public schools reporting data. Fiddlehead School of Arts & Math and Maine Connections Academy were the two charter schools with data, which gave a mean of 79.01% and a median of 79% of their students below Math expectations. This was four percent more than the noncharter public school average of 75.40% and 1.58% above their median of 77.42% of students below state expectations for Math.

Figure B-20: Math Achievement of Students with Disabilities (All Schools)



English Language Arts Performance

Figure B-21: ELA Achievement of Student with Disabilities for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

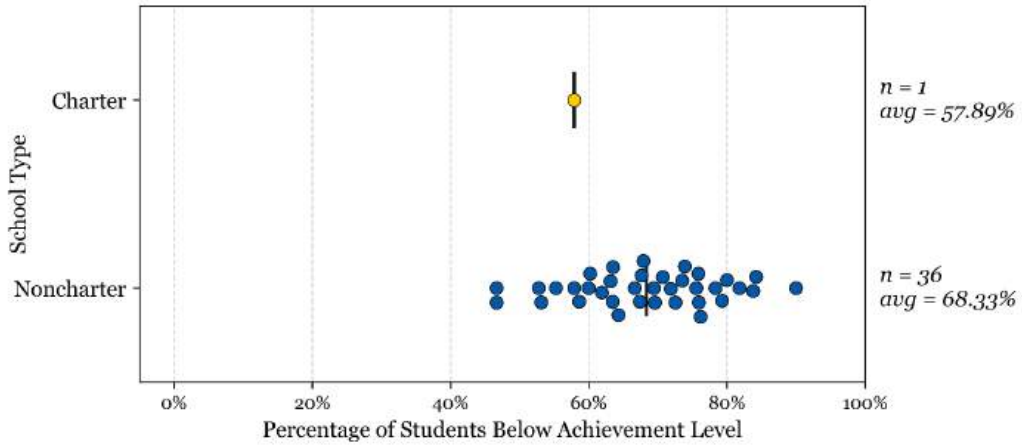


Figure B-21 shows the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter schools serving grades 3-6 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Acadia Academy was the only charter school applicable, which saw 57.89% of its students below state expectations. This was better than the noncharter public school average of 68.33%, as well as the median for noncharter public schools of 69.44%.

Figure B-22: ELA Achievement of Student with Disabilities for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

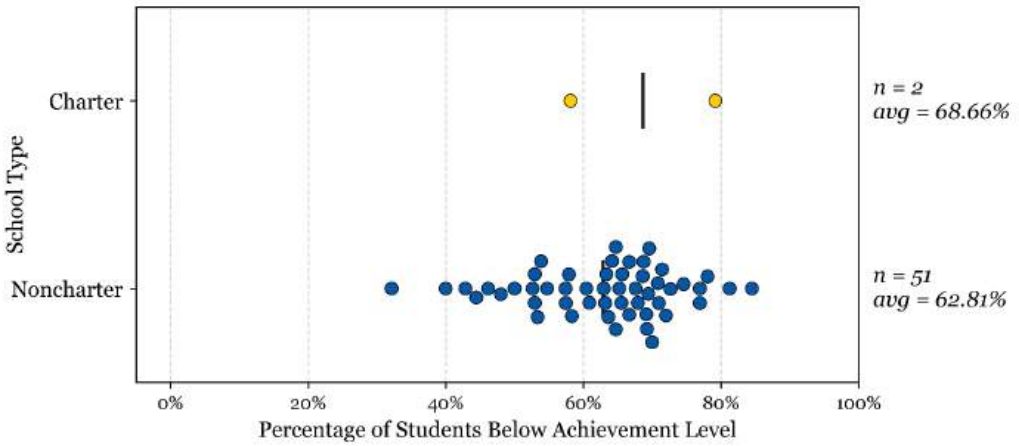


Figure B-22 presents the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter schools serving grades 3-8 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Dimensions Academy from Community Regional Charter School and Fiddlehead School of Arts & Science were the two 03-08 charter schools reporting data, which had a mean and median of 68.66% of its students with disabilities below state expectations. This was worse than the noncharter public school mean of 62.81% and median of 65.37% of students with disabilities below state expectations for English Language Arts.

Figure B-23: ELA Achievement of Student with Disabilities for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

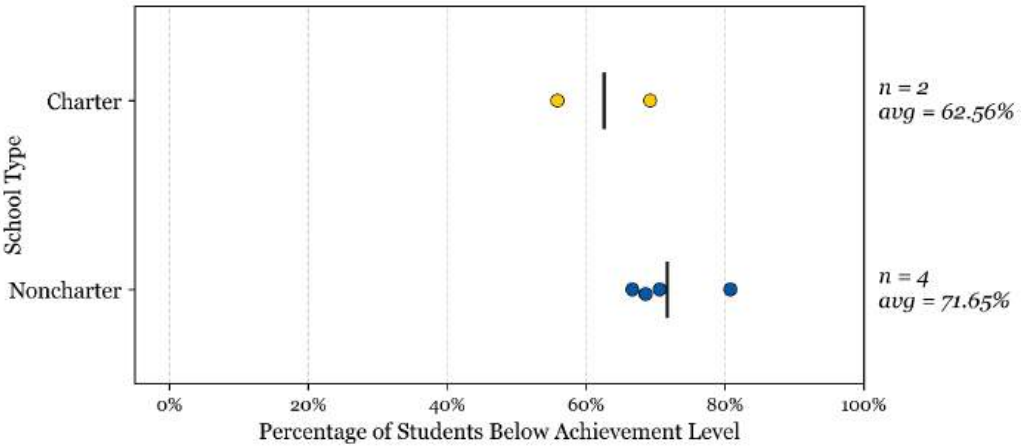


Figure B-23 contrasts the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in English Language Arts from charters serving grades 7-12 and noncharter public schools serving the same grades. Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy were the two charter schools reporting data at these grade levels, which had a mean and median of 62.56% of its students with disabilities below state expectations. On the contrary, noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12 had a greater mean percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations of 71.65%, and a greater median of 69.58%.

Figure B-24: ELA Achievement of Student with Disabilities for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

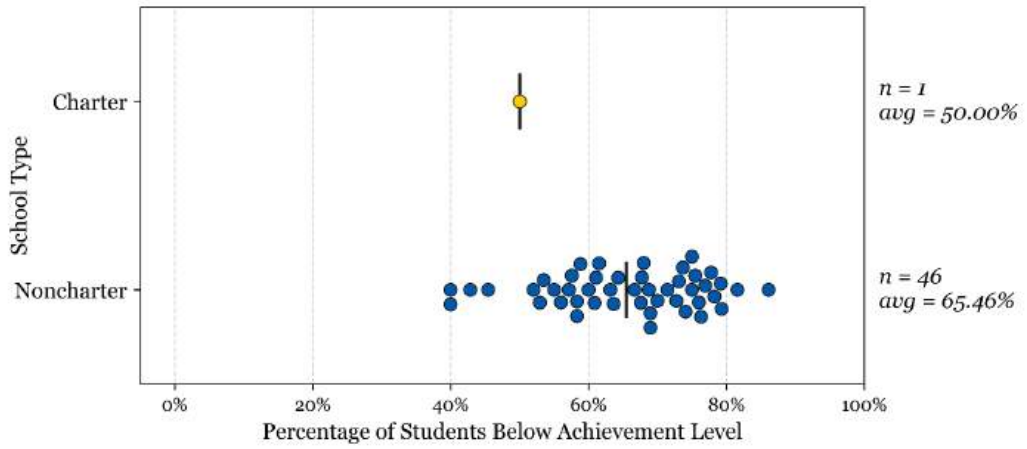


Figure B-24 reflects the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in English Language Arts from charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. Baxter Academy was the only charter school serving grades 9-12 which reported data, and they had 50.00% of their students with disabilities below state expectations. Noncharter public schools serving these grades had a larger mean percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations of 65.46% and a larger median of 67.66%.

Figure B-25: ELA Achievement of Students with Disabilities (All Schools)

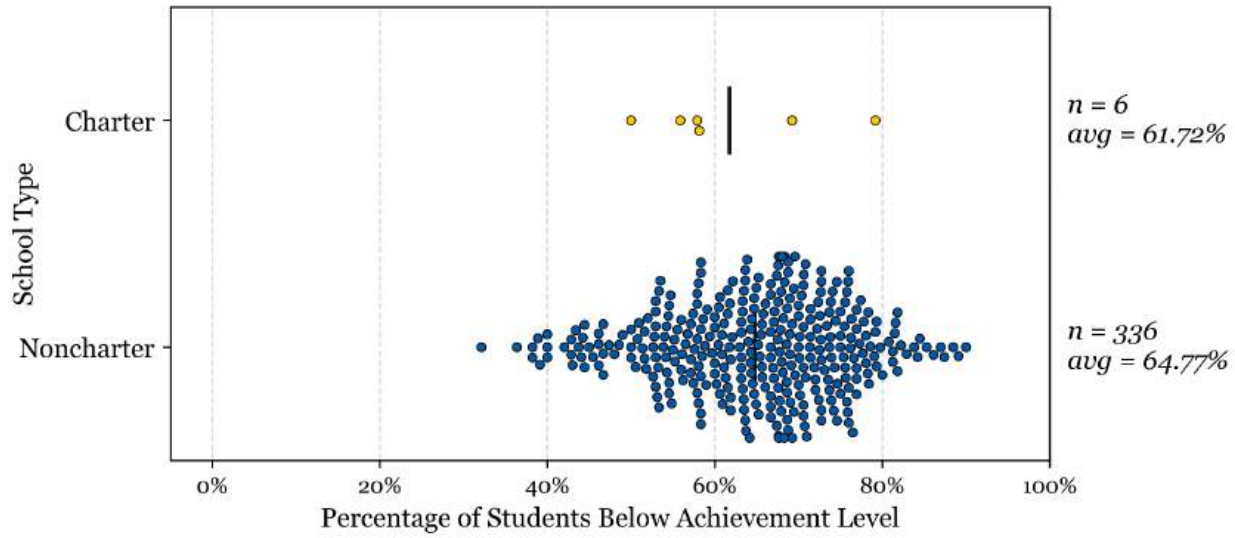


Figure B-25 comprises the English Language Arts data on students with disabilities for all noncharter public schools and charter schools reporting data. The total number of noncharter schools is lower than in other analyses because the MDOE redacts data if there are not enough students of a given demographic to take the test. Students with disabilities at charter schools clearly outperform students with disabilities at noncharter public schools in English Language

Arts. The median percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations for noncharter public schools is 66.37%, above the median for charter schools of 57.89%.

Science Performance

Figure B-26: Science Achievement of Student with Disabilities for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

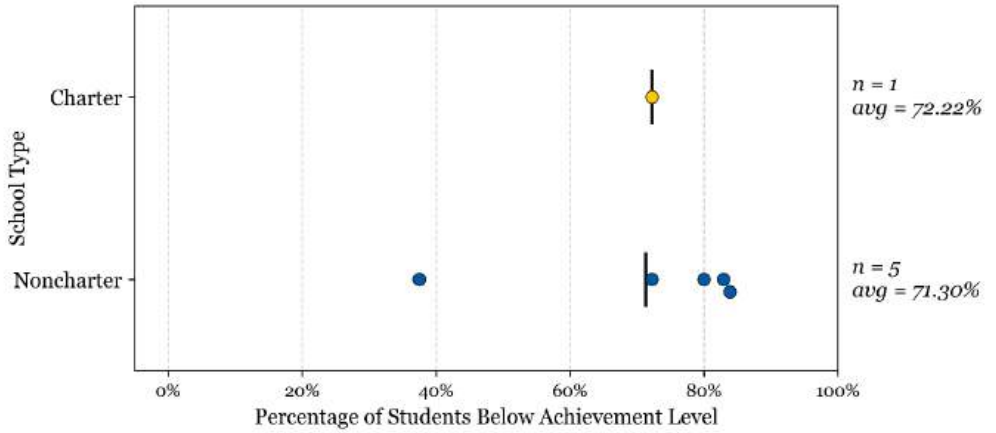


Figure B-26 illustrates the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations in Science from charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. Maine Academy of Natural Sciences was the only charter school represented in the data, with 72.22% of students with disabilities below Science expectations. Noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12 had a lower mean percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations of 71.30% and a higher median of 80%.

Figure B-27: Science Achievement of Students with Disabilities (All Schools)

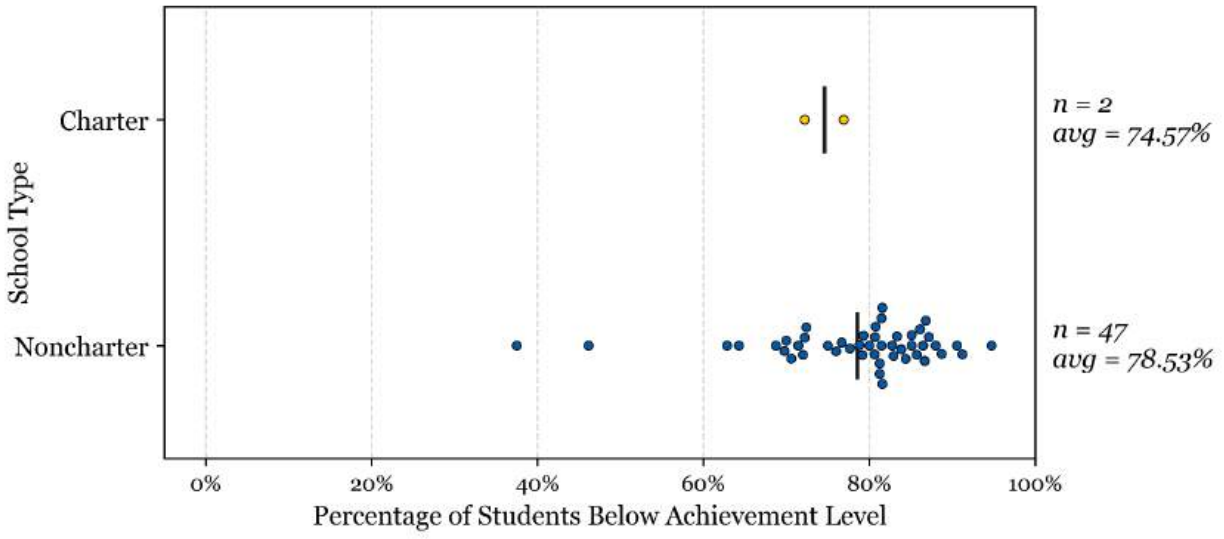


Figure B-27 demonstrates the percentage of students below state expectations in Science from all charters and noncharter public schools. Maine Academy of Natural Sciences and Maine Connections Academy, the two charter schools reporting data, had a mean and median percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations of 74.57%. Noncharter public schools had a higher mean percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations of 78.53% and a higher median of 81.25%.

For Math, charter schools performed worse overall in terms of the percentage of students with disabilities below state expectations. Contrarily, they performed better at the 3-8 grade level compared to noncharter public schools. For English Language Arts, charter schools outperformed noncharter public schools in the overall category. They also outperformed noncharter public schools in schools serving grades 3-6, 7-12, and 9-12. However, they performed worse in schools serving grades 3-8. For Science, charter schools performed similar to noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12 performed better overall in comparison to noncharter public schools.

It should be noted that charter schools disproportionately attract students that fail to flourish in traditional public schools. Thus, charter schools have higher rates of low-income and special education students than noncharter public schools. Once accounting for students with disabilities, charters performed noticeably better in English Language Arts and Science while being slightly behind in Mathematics. This highlights charter schools' proficiency in accommodating students with disabilities in comparison to noncharter public schools.

C. Postsecondary Enrollment

Another standard used to review charter schools is postsecondary/college prep program offerings. However, the standard is not available for noncharter public schools, partially due to SAT, ASVAB, and Accuplacer participation rates not being published for most of these schools. The other reason is that postsecondary offerings like Advanced Placement courses aren't measured for noncharter public schools.

Thus, we use the postsecondary enrollment rate standard to compare the percentage of students that go into a postsecondary program after graduating between noncharter public schools and charter schools. This is not the exact standard on which charter schools are judged, but it's a relatively close and results-based standard. We use 2022-2023 data from 120 noncharter public schools and six Maine Charter schools for this analysis because these data lag a year behind other categories in data reporting. Less schools were available for both noncharter public and charter schools since only schools that serve students up to grade 12 report postsecondary enrollment rates.

Figure C-1: Post-Secondary Enrollment Rate by School Type

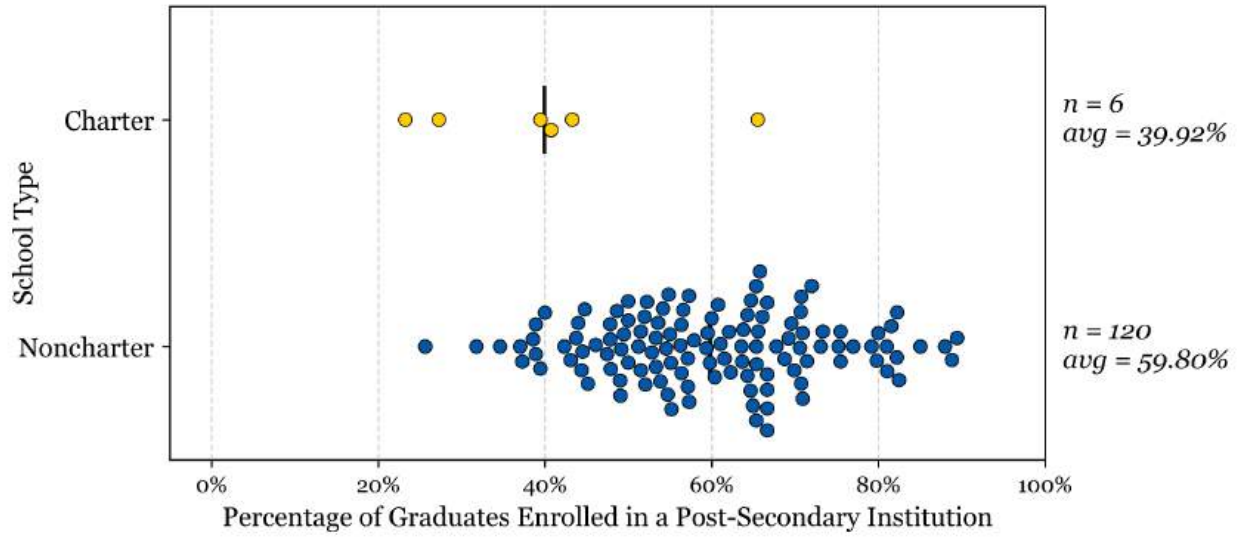


Figure C-1 clearly favors noncharter public schools. The average is over 20% higher for noncharter public schools (39.92% vs 59.80%). Moreover, the median noncharter public school has a postsecondary enrollment rate of 59.64%, greater than the median rate for charter schools of 35.64%. However, there are a variety of reasons for this. First, many of the charter schools are designed for students who don't have postsecondary plans that would be counted under this standard (i.e., students attending the Ecology Learning Center to work on a farm).

In addition, nationwide data from a 2021 working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research on the impact of school spending show that generally, for every $1,000 more in per-pupil spending, schools experience an average 2.65% increase in college enrollment.[26] Based on the 21% inflation rate between the data's adjusted inflation date (2018) and January 2023, this means we can expect a 2.65% increase in college enrollment rates for each $1,210 increase in per-pupil spending.[27]

The median noncharter public school spends approximately $10,481 more per pupil than the median charter. Thus, based on these findings, we would expect an approximately 22.95% lower college enrollment rate for the median charter. But the actual gap is only 22.52%, meaning that charter schools actually outperform what would be expected based on spending by almost half a percent. Additionally, considering that many charter school students have alternative career goals, learning disabilities, low-income backgrounds, or poor historic academic performance, the fact that the postsecondary gap is actually higher than what is expected based on spending is even more of a good sign for charters. All of these demographics tend to have lower postsecondary enrollment already, thus an even larger gap should be expected.

[26] https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w28517/w28517.pdf
[27] https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm

Also of note is that most charter schools have higher rates of students from low-income backgrounds, and this group of students is already less likely to enroll in college. Additionally, since many of these students are those who do not fit in with traditional educational institutions, it is not surprising that many do not wish to enroll in college. A schoolwide postsecondary enrollment measurement can't account for individual student goals, and rather assumes that all students should aim for postsecondary education. We should be careful not to penalize charter schools for attracting students from not-college-bound populations.

According to a report from the Center for Learning Equity, as of 2021, only 2.8% of Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)-identified children attended Advanced Placement courses in noncharter public schools, while noncharter, non-IDEA students enrolled in AP classes at a rate of 20.9%.[28] This shows that IDEA identified students disproportionately do not enroll in college prep courses, highlighting that charter schools which attract larger shares of these student populations may suffer from lower college placement rates as a result.

For income, a similar gap exists according to the Brookings Institution. High schoolers from the bottom socioeconomic quintile (fifth) of society had a 51% chance of going to college within 18 months of expected graduation, while high schoolers from the top quintile had an 89% chance.[29]

Several of Maine's charter schools have substantially higher low income percentiles than the average Maine school, in some cases 20% higher. Meanwhile the mean special education percentile at Maine's charter schools is 25.5%, while statewide, only 19.5% of Maine students are labelled as needing special education services. This 6% increase could further account for this gap in college enrollment upon graduation.

In short, while charter schools do not perform at the same level as noncharters in postgraduate enrollment, their performance is either equivalent or better when accounting for funding and demographic differences.

The postsecondary enrollment standard is an indirect measure of postsecondary preparatory offerings and their successfulness, thus we only failed schools in this category that were the most egregiously behind. The worst postsecondary rate for a charter school was a 23.26% postsecondary enrollment rate for the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences (MeANS), and for this standard, we intended to fail only noncharters with a worse postsecondary enrollment rate than the worst charter school. However, MeANS is the school with the worst postsecondary enrollment rate in the state, largely for the reasons listed above.

MeANS in particular through their Threshold program caters to students that face challenges impeding their ability to flourish in traditional academic environments, and this further explains

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[28] https://www.the74million.org/article/report-almost-all-disabled-students-lack-access-to-college-readiness-programs/

[29] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/college-enrollment-gaps-how-academic-preparation-influences-opportunity/

their status as an outlier.[30] Because the school with the worst postsecondary enrollment rate in Maine is a charter school, no noncharter public schools will be considered as failing this standard.

D. Chronic Absenteeism

A student is generally considered chronically absent if they miss more than 10% of the school year. Charter schools are required to have chronic absenteeism rates of 18% or less to meet expectations.[31] Between 18% and 25% is considered to be approaching expectations, similar to a "yellow light" for potential absenteeism problems. Any charter school with more than a 25% chronic absenteeism rate is considered failing to meet expectations.

In this section of the analysis, we also divide results by type of school and the grade levels served by charter schools and their noncharter public school equivalent.

Figure D-1: Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Schools Serving Grades pK-06

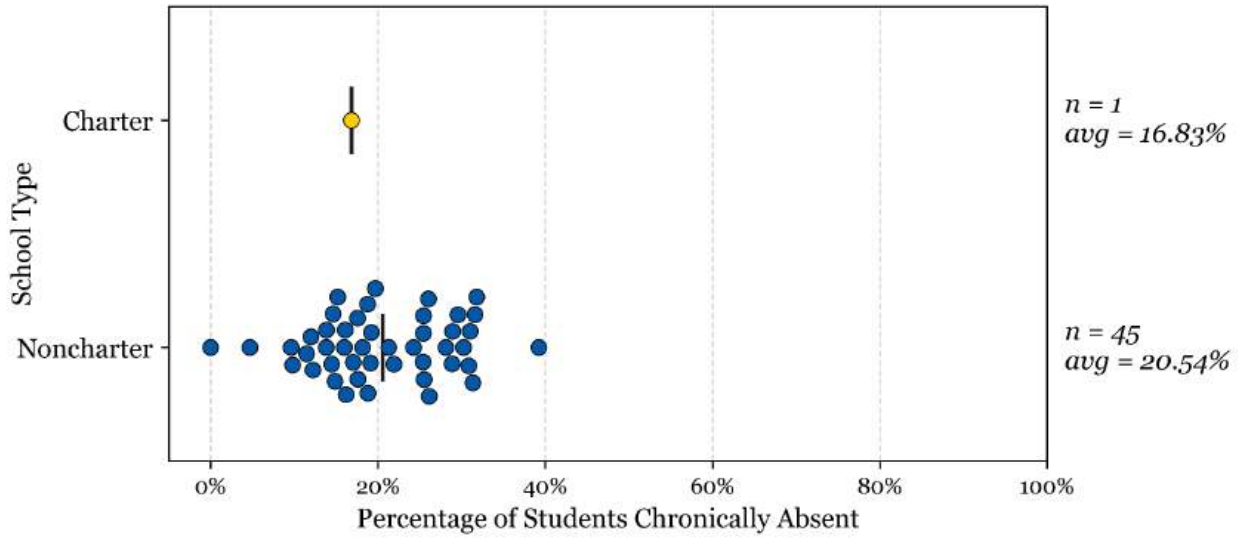


Figure D-1 illustrates the chronic absenteeism rate of charter and noncharter public schools serving grades pK-6. The only charter school that serves pK-6 was Acadia Academy, which had a 16.83% chronic absenteeism rate. Noncharter public schools serving pK-6 fared worse. They had a greater mean chronic absenteeism rate of 20.54%, and a greater median of 19.12%.

[30] https://maineacademy.org/threshold-program/
[31] It should be noted that the annual reports on the Maine Charter School Commission's website state that a charter school is meeting expectations if it has a chronic absenteeism rate within the range of 10-18%, but is approaching expectations if it is within the range of 17.9-25%. These are non-mutally excludable categories.

Figure D-2: Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Schools Serving Grades pK-08

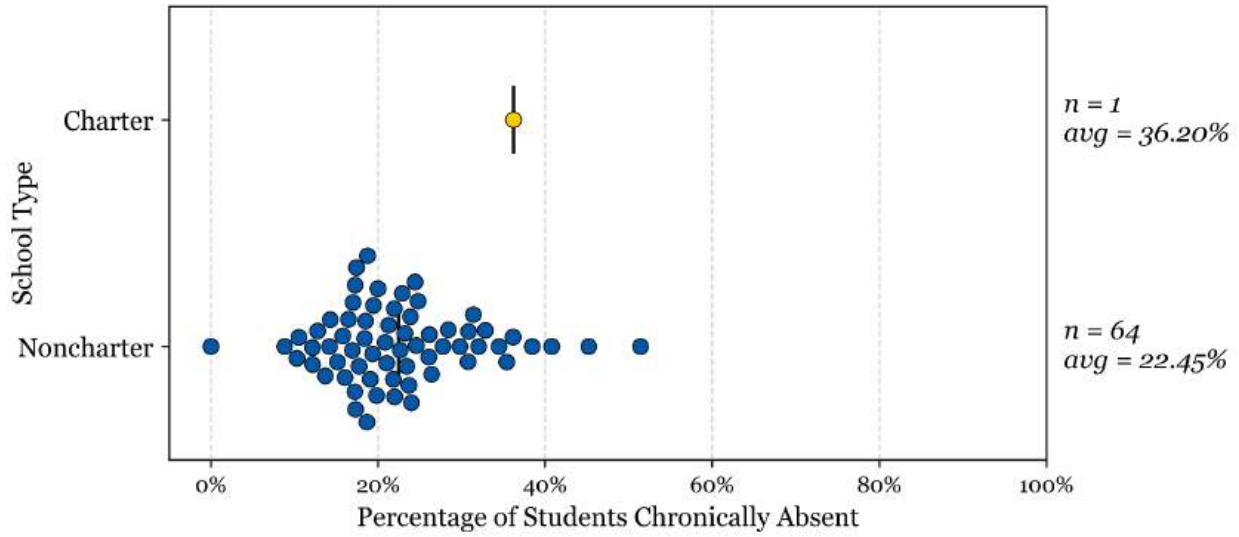


Figure D-2 depicts the chronic absenteeism rate of charter and noncharter public schools serving grades pK-8. The only charter school reporting data was Fiddlehead Center of Arts & Sciences, which had a 36.20% chronic absenteeism rate. Noncharter public schools serving grades pK-8 had a lower mean chronic absenteeism rate of 22.45%, and a lower median of 21.17%.

Figure D-3: Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Schools Serving Grades K-08

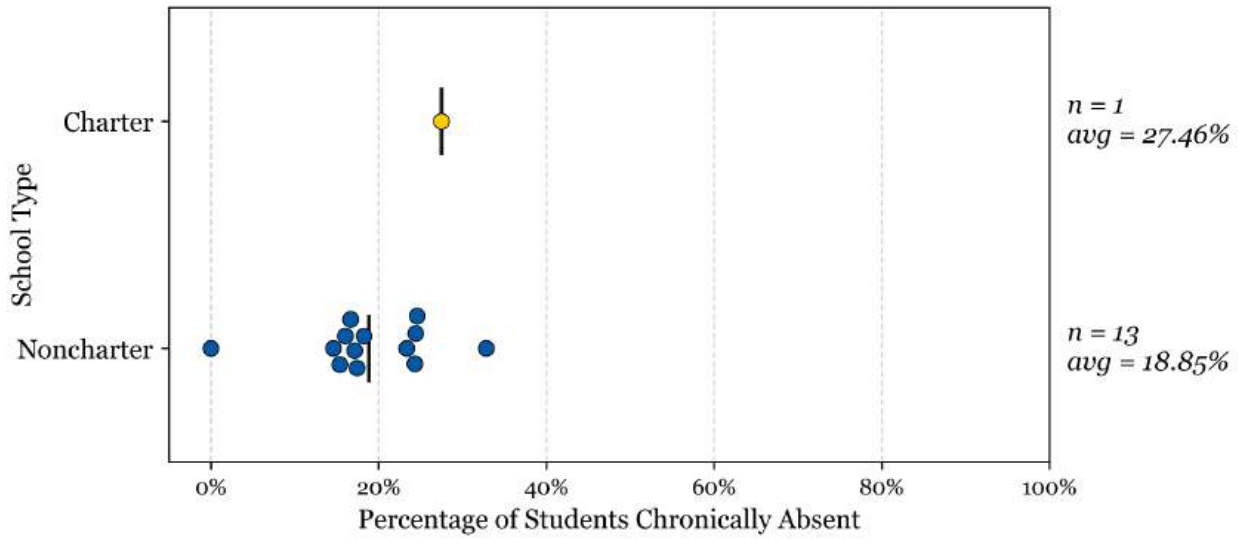


Figure D-3 represents the chronic absenteeism rate of charter and noncharter public schools serving grades K-8. The only charter school that served grades K-8 was Dimensions Academy of Community Regional Charter School, which had a 27.46% chronic absenteeism rate. Noncharter public schools serving grades K-8 outperformed Dimensions Academy, with a lower mean chronic absenteeism rate of 18.85%, and a lower median of 17.43%.

Figure D-4: Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

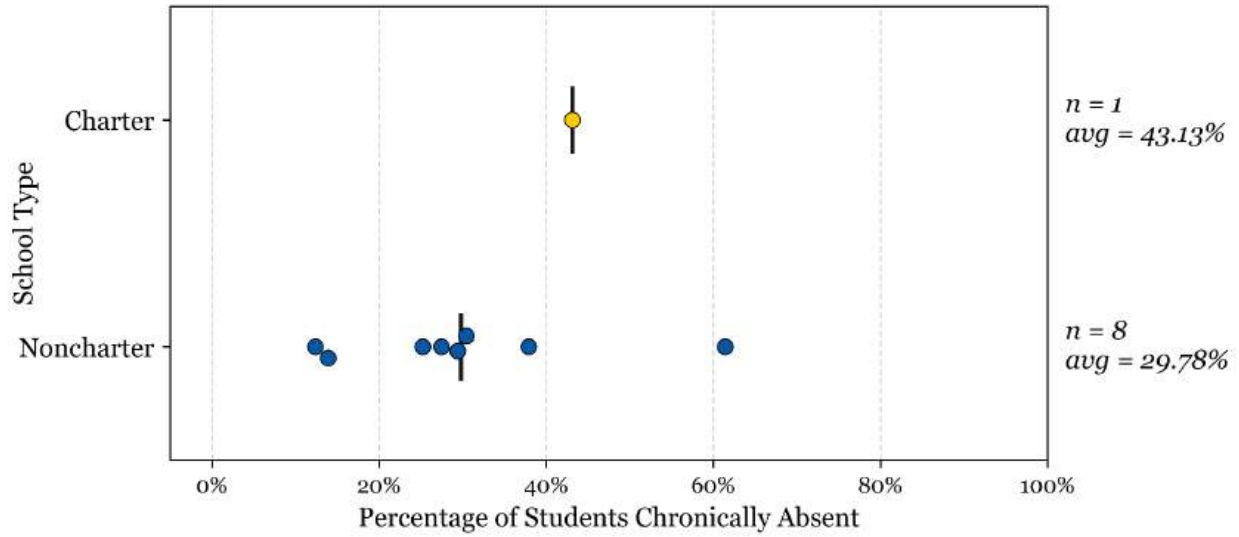


Figure D-4 demonstrates the chronic absenteeism rate of charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 6-12. The only charter school that served grades 6-12 was Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School, which had a 43.13% chronic absenteeism rate. Noncharter public schools serving grades 6-12 had a lower mean chronic absenteeism rate of 29.78%, and a lower median of 28.45%.

Figure D-5: Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

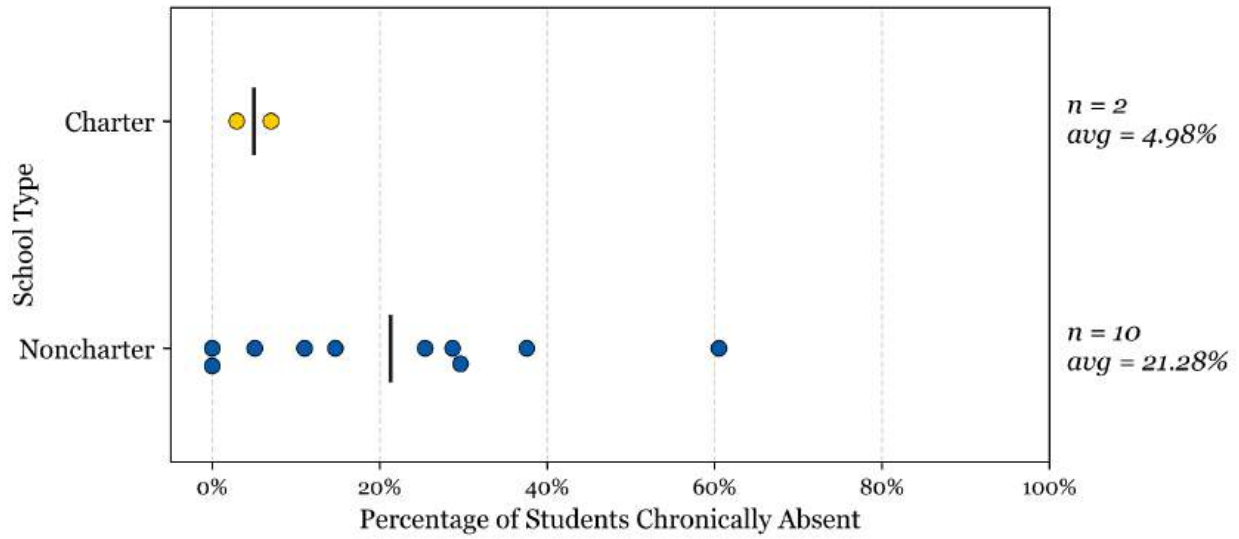


Figure D-5 reflects the chronic absenteeism rate of charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12. Maine Virtual Academy and Maine Connections Academy were the two charter schools serving these grade levels. They had a mean and median percentage of students chronically absent of 4.98%. Noncharter public schools serving 07-12 had a greater mean chronic absenteeism rate of 21.28%, and a greater median of 20.08%. It should be noted that

both charters represented are virtual schools, which helps explain the far lower chronic absenteeism rate.

Figure D-6: Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

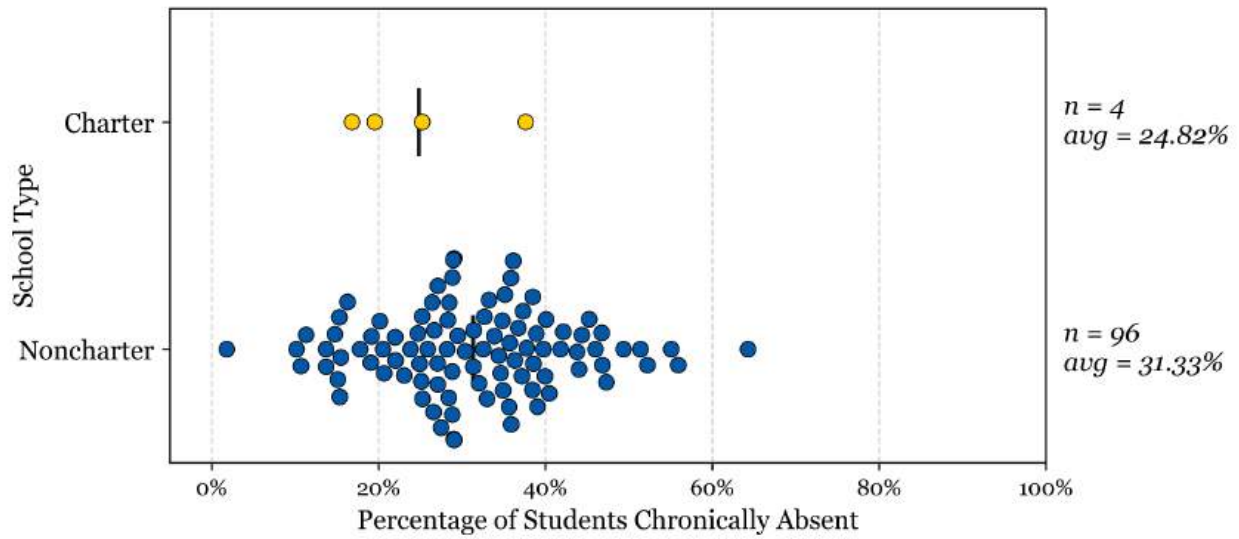


Figure D-6 portrays the chronic absenteeism rate of charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. Baxter Academy, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and the Maine Arts Academy School were the four charter schools represented. They had a mean percentage of students chronically absent of 24.82% and a median of 22.40%. Noncharter public schools serving these grades performed worse. They had a greater mean chronic absenteeism rate of 31.33% and a greater median of 30.88%.

Charter schools had lower chronic absenteeism rates in grade levels of pK-6, 7-12, and 9-12 while noncharter public schools had lower chronic absenteeism rates at the grade levels of pK-8, K-8, and 6-12. Based on the data for the various grade levels, charter schools and noncharter public schools appear to be on par in terms of chronic absenteeism rates.

Figure D-7: Percentage of Students Chronically Absent (All Schools)

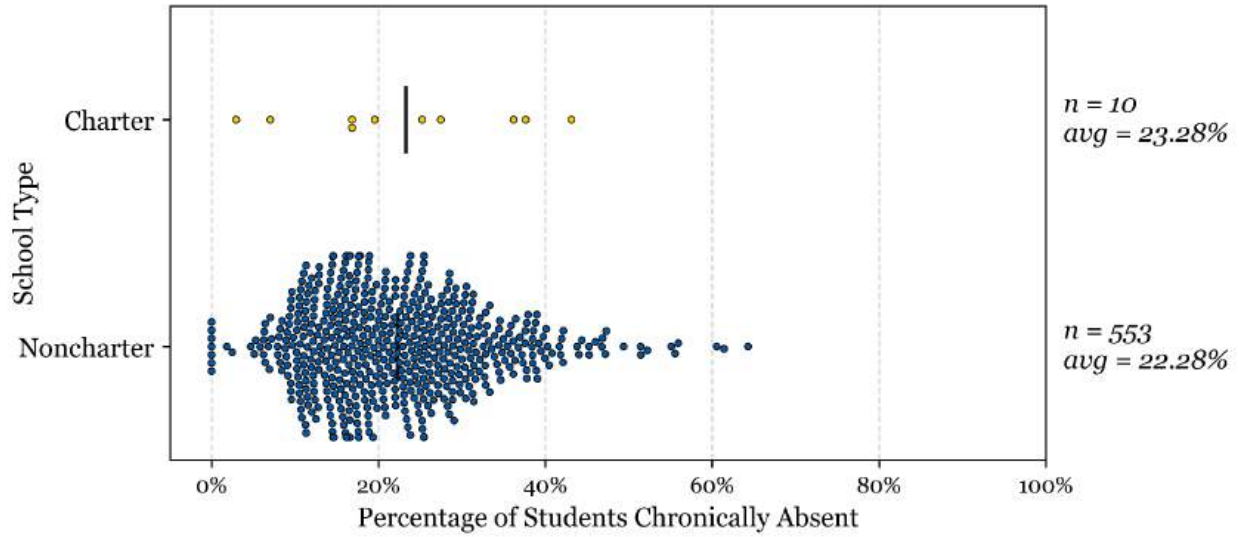


Figure D-7 displays the chronic absenteeism rate for every charter and noncharter public school in Maine. The median for charter schools is only slightly higher than that of noncharter public schools (22.4% compared to 20.86%). The mean chronic absenteeism rate across charter schools is 23.28%, one percent more than the 22.28% mean of noncharter public schools.

Although noncharter public schools seem to outperform charter schools in chronic absenteeism, it isn't by much. Fifty percent of the current charter schools are failing expectations (five out of ten). On the contrary, 203 of the 553 noncharter public schools would be failing expectations, or 36.71%. Moreover, only one charter school falls under the "approaching expectations" standard. Meanwhile, 130 noncharter public schools, or 23.51%, would be defined as approaching expectations under the chronic absenteeism standard set for charter schools.

In total, 60.22% of noncharter public schools would be considered as not "meeting expectations" for absenteeism, close to the three-fifths of charter schools which do not meet the expectation, either. Furthermore, Harpswell Coastal Academy was shut down in part due to high chronic absenteeism rates. The most recent absenteeism rate of Harpswell before their closure was 46.8%. Fourteen noncharter public schools had an equal or greater rate of chronic absenteeism, or roughly 2.53% of noncharter public schools.

Even though charter schools are slightly worse than noncharter public schools in chronic absenteeism rates, their distributions under this standard are quite similar. While no charter school has been shut down solely due to chronic absenteeism, it is a standard that can be considered in school shutdowns, and it was one of the three factors that led to the closure of Harpswell Coastal Academy.

E. Campus Safety

For charter schools in Maine, school safety is assessed in a few different ways. The primary method (the one that is reported in each school's annual monitoring report) is exit surveys given to families and students.[32] [33] Noncharter public schools are not required to take these surveys, however, and so for the purposes of this analysis, we relied on a different standard: the rate of behavioral incidents relative to the size of the student body.

Behavioral incidents fall under the following categories in the Maine school system: alcohol related, illicit drug-related, violent incident (with physical injury), violent incident (without physical injury), weapons possession, and other reasons for removal not related to drug use.[34] This is not the same as an exit survey-based standard, but since it is based on actual incidents rather than mere feelings of safety, it is in many ways more objective.

A total of 486 charter and noncharter public schools reported behavioral incident data, including four of the 10 charter schools. However, in this section we again try only to compare noncharter schools to similar charters schools, especially in relation to grade ranges. We expect kindergarteners, for example, to have much lower rates of behavioral incidents than high schoolers, and indeed they do. Each of the four charter schools that reported behavioral incidents data was a high school, and when we compare their average incidence rate with noncharter public high schools, we find that charter schools perform better.

In our analysis, we analyzed the incident rates at the four reporting charter schools and labelled any noncharter program with a higher incident rate than that of the most incident prone charter school as failing our campus safety standard. In 2024, the charter school with the highest incident rate was the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, at 0.2113 incidents per student.

Of all noncharter public high schools which reported data (the more comparable group, as highlighted above), 20.73% (17 schools) had an incident rate higher than the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences. If noncharter public schools serving grades outside of grades 9-12 and were accounted for in this analysis, 8.92%, an additional 26 schools, would have a total incident rate higher than 0.2113 incidents per student.

We should note that while a survey is likely a worthwhile way of assessing students' general sense of safety at school, this kind of qualitative variable is only one part of the picture. Safety at school is a phenomenon that bears a strong relationship to hard, quantitative variables like

[32] https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/2023-03/Monitoring%20Example_Comprehensive%20Needs%20Assessment%202022_0.pdf

[33] https://www.maine.gov/csc/sites/maine.gov.csc/files/inline-files/Annual%20Report%20to%20the%20Commissioner%202022-23.pdf

[34] https://www.maine.gov/doe/dashboard

behavioral incidents. While this kind of data is not perfect, it does serve to fill out the picture and is less subjective than the standard actually used by the charter commission.[35]

Figure E-1: Behavioral Incident Rate per Student in Schools Serving Grades 09–12

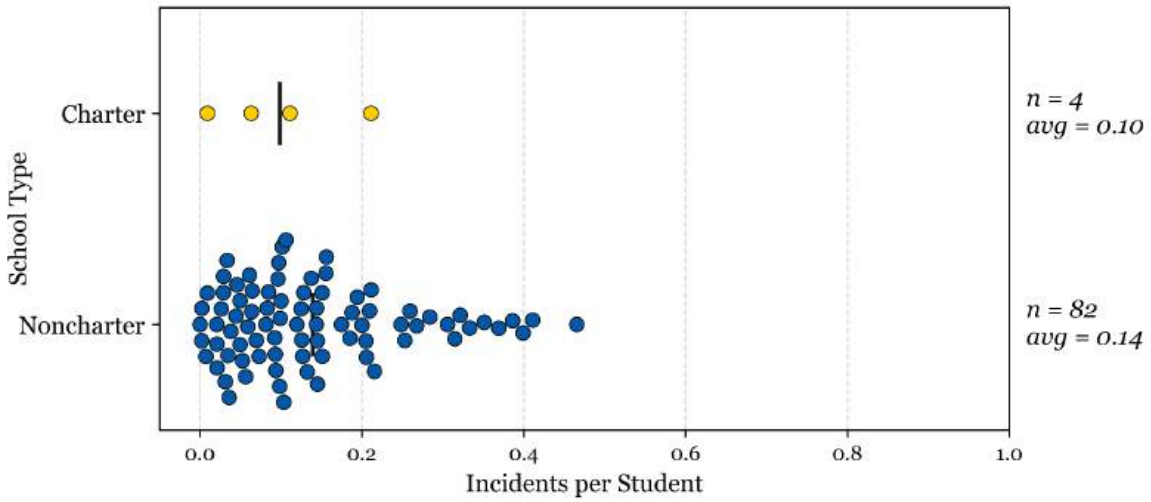


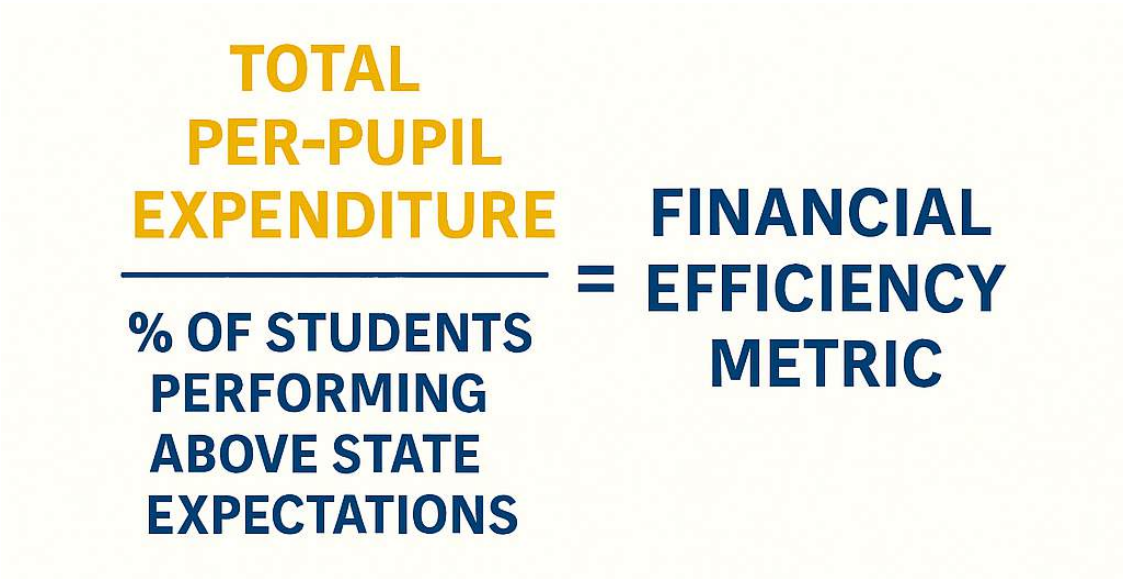
Figure E-1 illustrates the comparison in behavioral incident rates between charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. The general trend between charters and noncharter public high schools is that charter schools seem to perform better, but noncharter public high schools are still comparable. Charter schools averaged 0.10 incidents per student and noncharter public high schools averaged 0.14 incidents per student. Moreover, charter schools had a lower median of 0.087 incidents per student in comparison to the median of 0.105 incidents per student for noncharter public high schools. In summary, charter high schools seem to be safer than noncharters, though this difference is slight to moderate.

F. Financial Efficiency

As previously noted, the data required to assess and compare charters and noncharter public high schools on financial efficiency requires data on noncharter schools that is not publicly available. To overcome this, we analyzed schools on the following standard: total per-pupil spending divided by the percent of students above expectations on a given state examination. Total per-pupil spending was calculated by taking the total expenditures of a given school and dividing it by the number of students enrolled in the school. Put simply, this standard assesses the amount of spending it took to get a student above achievement level.

[35] Interestingly, the survey data can differ quite widely when the surveyed group is the parents versus the students. At Fiddlehead, for example, the parents' safety survey responses rank in the 90th percentile nationwide in the school year 2023-2024 when compared to like schools, whereas the responses for grades 3-5 and 6-8 rank in the 10th and 20th percentiles respectively. This highlights the ultimate subjectivity of this measuring method as well as the need to include harder standards of safety evaluation.

For example, if a school spent $15,000 total per pupil and 50% of their student body was above achievement level on the Math test, their score on the standard would be $15,000 divided by 0.50, or $30,000. That is, the school on average had to spend $30,000 in order to successfully get one student above the expectations for math performance. While simple, this standard succeeds at portraying how efficiently a school is using its resources to achieve positive student learning outcomes. This standard is designed to avoid equating a school that spends little to get poor outcomes with a school that spends more to get better outcomes.



It is worth noting that the Maine Department of Education total per-pupil spending data needed to establish this standard were poorly recorded and formatted. First, the school names were not drawn from the 2023-2024 list of Maine schools. Rather, they seemed to match up best with the list provided for the 2022-2023 school year. There were a few schools which had changed their names, but the bulk of discrepancies between the two lists were due to lazy shorthand in the 2022-2023 list (e.g. “Sch” for “School”).

Second, we identified 30 duplicate rows in the data set. Finally, some schools reported zero dollars in total per-pupil spending. To the best of our knowledge, this is due to the minutiae of how funding is distributed to schools in unorganized territories (otherwise these schools would be phenomenal examples of financial efficiency). Regardless, those schools were excluded from this analysis.

We were able to generate a score on at least one of the testing subjects for 505 Maine schools, with 10 of those being charter schools (both measured Community Charter School programs being counted separately as done previously).

Four-hundred ninety-nine of the schools that reported total per-pupil spending also had published and unredacted Math test outcomes. For English Language Arts outcomes, the

number of schools was 500, and for Science outcomes, it was 353. Figures F-1 through F-18 show the scores on our financial efficiency standard by school type and grade level.

As with our academic performance standard, schools were grouped by the grades which are assessed on the statewide tests. For example, since assessment begins in third grade, schools which serve kindergarten through sixth grade were grouped in with schools that serve grades three through six. Grade levels that didn't include a charter school were only included in the overall analysis for each subject area assessed.

Schools were considered to be failing this standard if they had a higher cost per successful student outcome than the worst performing charter school in a given subject in two or more academic subjects. Schools were only included in the total number the financial efficiency standard if they had data on two or more subjects and total per-pupil spending.

In total, 232 noncharter public schools failed under this standard out of 485 total schools (47.84% of measured schools). This was by far the category where the most noncharter public schools failed, which is ironic given that financial efficiency was one of the three main reasons Harpswell Coastal Academy was closed down.

Math

Figure F-1: Financial Efficiency of Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

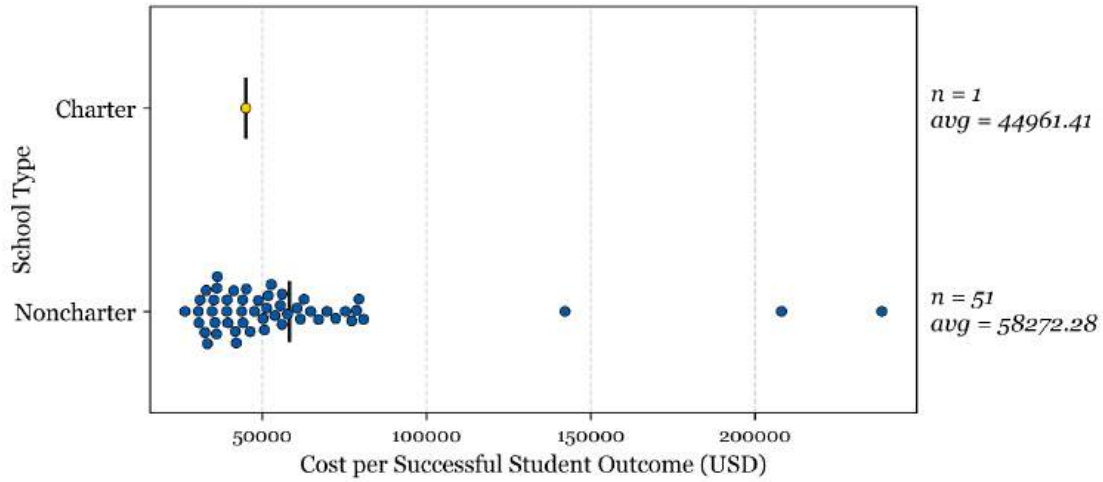


Figure F-1 depicts the cost per successful student outcome in Math among charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 3-6. Acadia Academy was the sole charter school represented, which had a cost per successful student outcome in Math of $44,961.41. Noncharter public schools performed far worse, with a mean cost per successful student outcome in Math of $58,272.28 and a median of $48,812.71.

Figure F-2: Financial Efficiency of Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

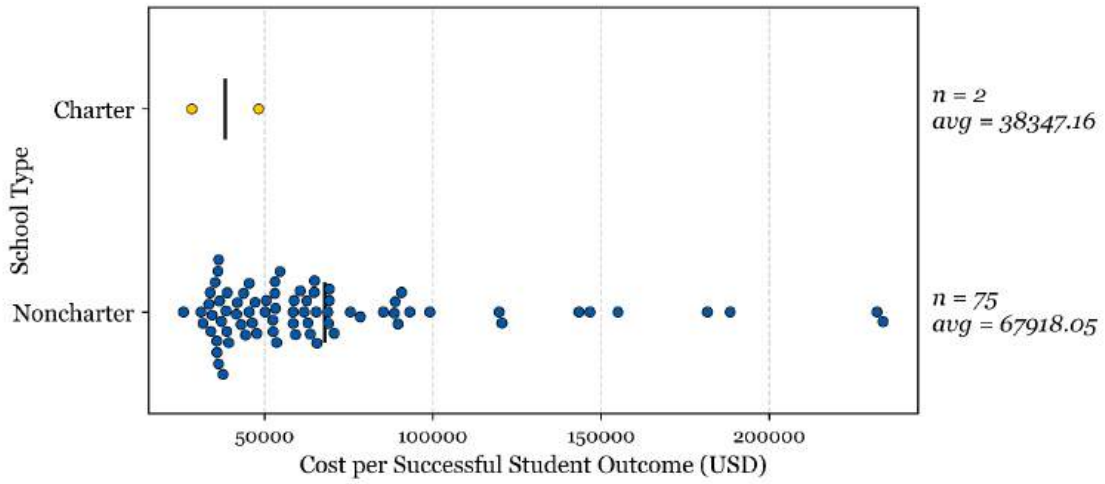


Figure F-2 illustrates the cost per successful student outcome in Math for charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 3-8. Dimensions Academy of Community Regional Charter School and Fiddlehead School of Arts & Science were the two charter schools included in this analysis, which had a mean and median cost per successful student outcome in Math of $38,347.16. Noncharter public schools in the 03-08 grade span clearly performed worse, with a mean cost per successful student outcome in Math of $67,918.05 and a median of $53,615.23.

Figure F-3: Financial Efficiency of Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

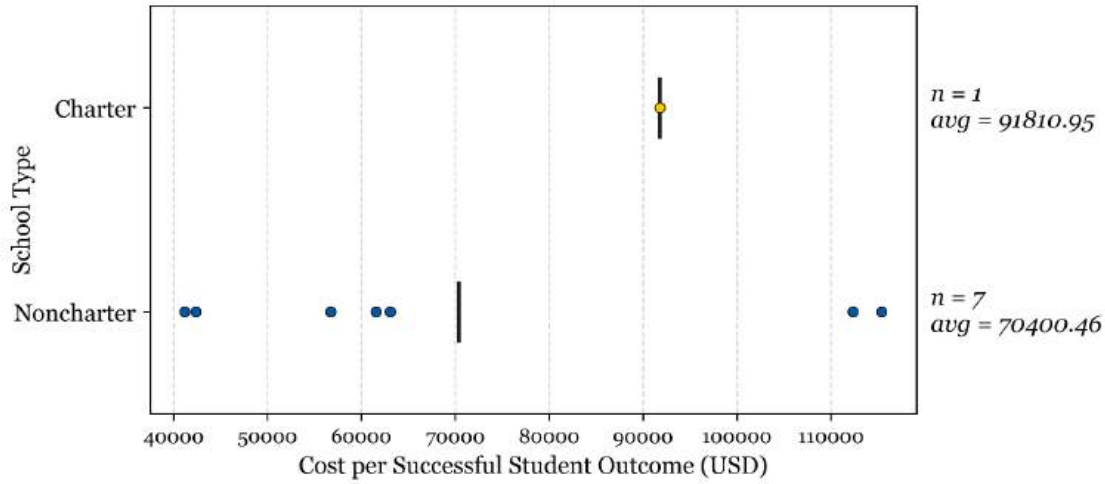


Figure F-3 portrays the cost per successful student outcome in Math for charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 6-12. Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School was the only charter school included, which had a cost per successful student outcome in Math of $91,810.85. Noncharter public schools serving grades 6-12 had a lower mean cost per successful student outcome in Math of $70,400.46 and a lower median of $61,574.97. The size

of these scores is due to the relatively small percentage of students scoring above achievement level at these schools.

Figure F-4: Financial Efficiency of Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

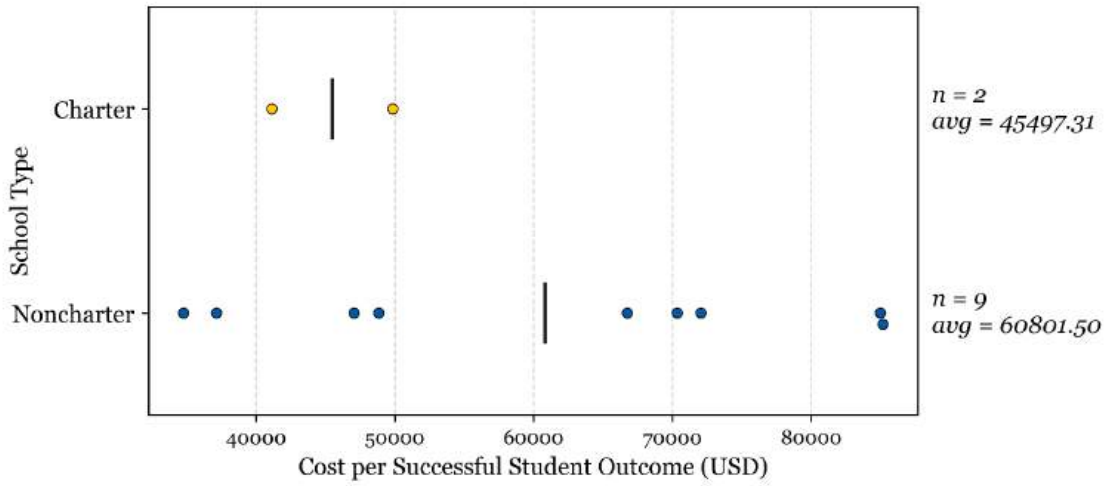


Figure F-4 reflects the cost per successful student outcome in Math for charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12. The two charter schools represented were Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy, which had a mean and median cost per successful student outcome in Math of $45,497.31. Noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12 had a median cost per successful student outcome in Math of $66,760.06 and a mean of $60,801.50.

Figure F-5: Financial Efficiency of Math Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

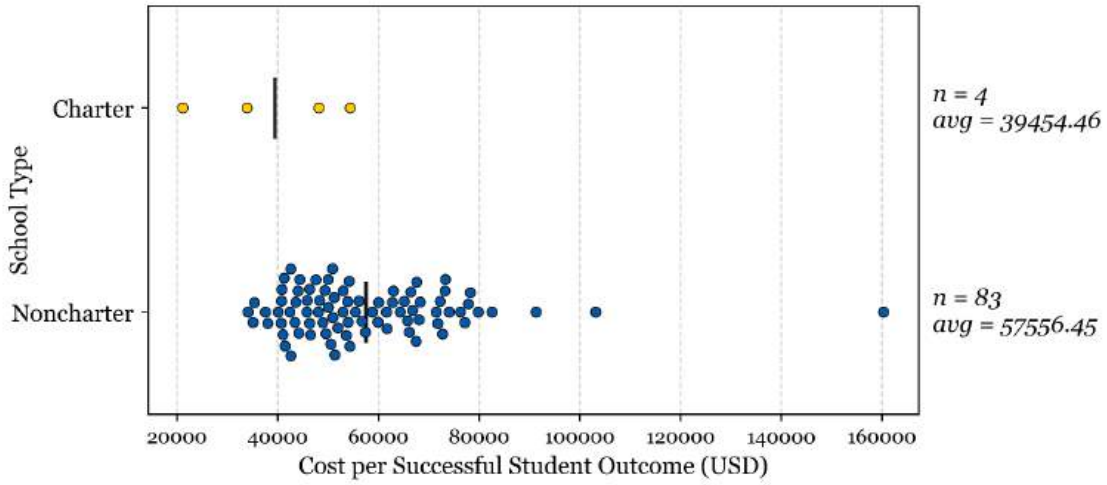


Figure F-5 represents the cost per successful student outcome in Math for charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. The four charter schools represented were Baxter Academy, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and Maine Arts

Academy School. They had a mean cost per successful student outcome in Math of $39,454.46 and a median of $41,083.61. Noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12 performed worse, having a median cost per successful student outcome in Math of $53,649.96 and a mean of $57,556.45.

Figure F-6: Financial Efficiency of Math Achievement (All Schools)

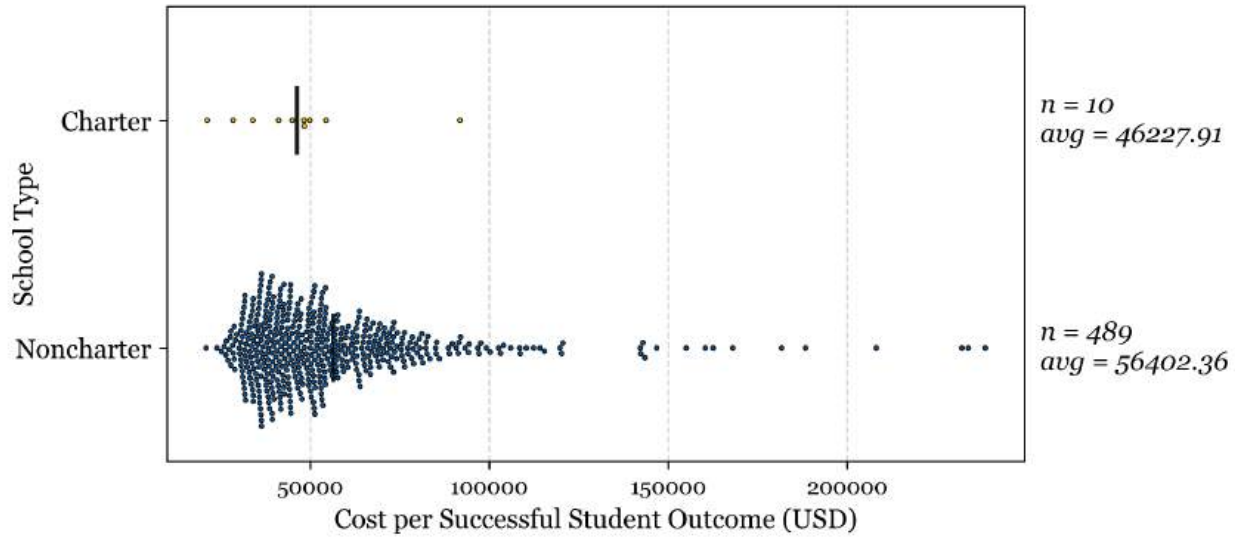


Figure F-6 shows the cost per successful student outcome in Math for all schools. The 10 charter schools with data had a median cost per successful student outcome in Math of $46,581.50 and a mean of $46,227.91. Noncharter public schools did notably worse on average, where they had a median cost per successful student outcome in Math of $49,408.35 and a mean of $56,402.36.

English Language Arts

Figure F-7: Financial Efficiency of ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

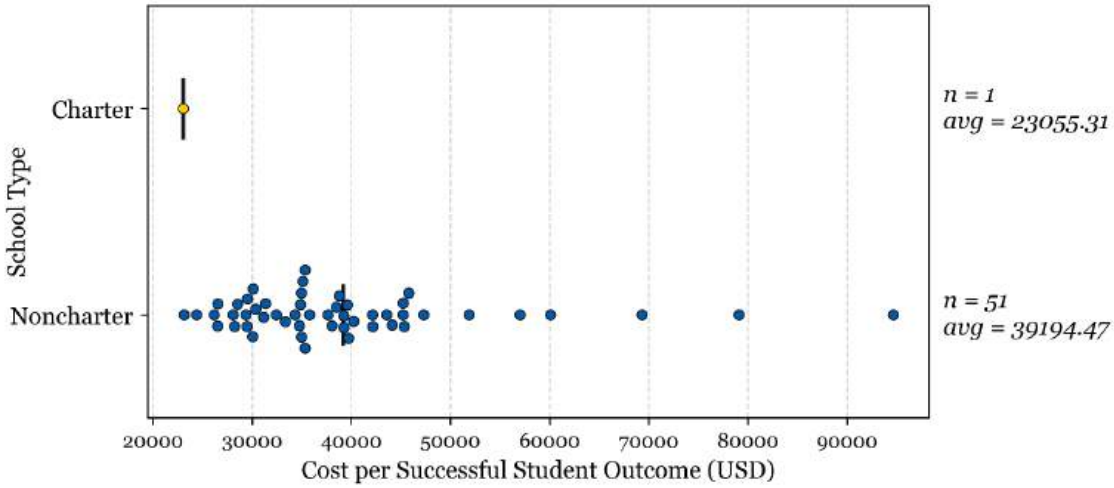


Figure F-7 demonstrates the cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts for charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 3-6. Acadia Academy was the sole charter school represented, which had a cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $23,055.31. Noncharter public schools performed worse, with a mean cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $39,194.47 and a median of $35,354.71.

Figure F-8: Financial Efficiency of ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

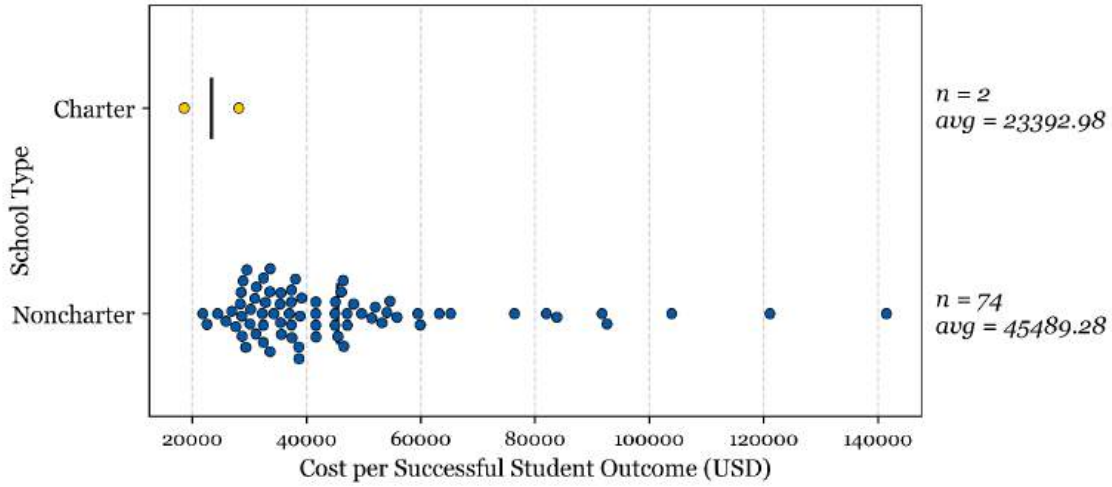


Figure F-8 displays the cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts for charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 3-8. Dimensions Academy of Community Regional Charter School and Fiddlehead School of Arts & Science were the two charter schools represented, which had a mean and median cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $23,392.98. Noncharter public schools did not fare as well, with a mean cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $45,489.28 and a median of $38,375.97.

Figure F-9: Financial Efficiency of ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

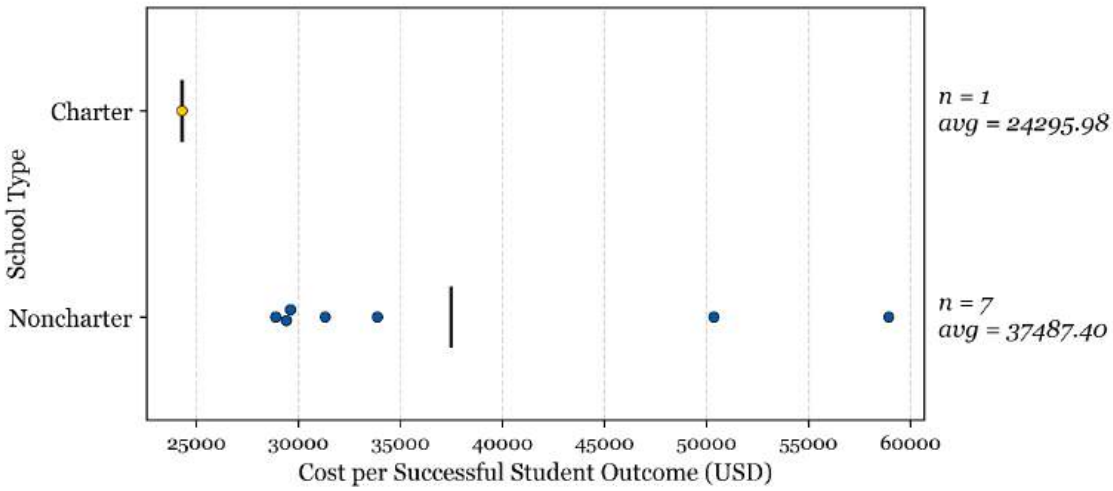


Figure F-9 depicts the cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts for charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 6-12. Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School was the only charter school included, which had a cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $24,295.98. Noncharter public schools had a mean cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $37,487.40 and a median of $31,314.95.

Figure F-10: Financial Efficiency of ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

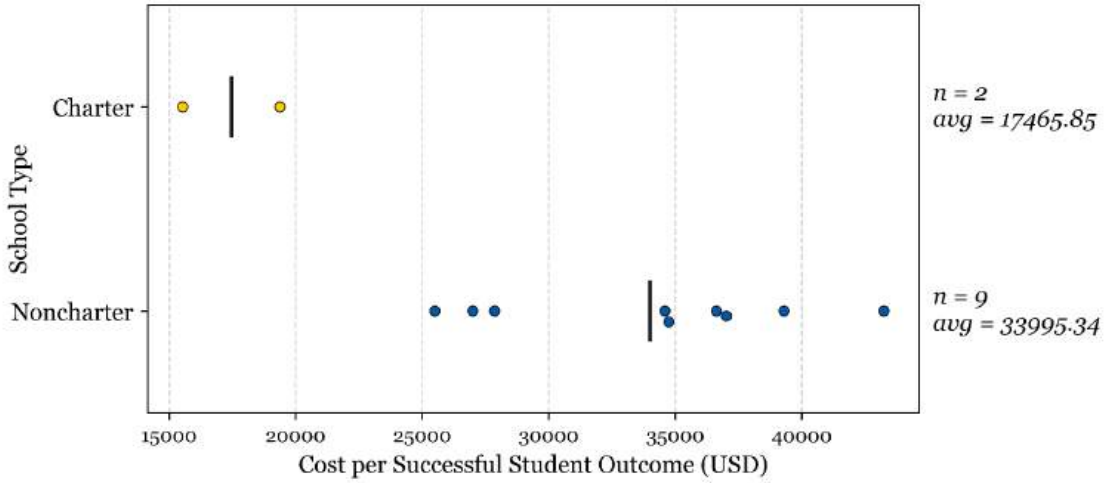


Figure F-10 illustrates the cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts for schools serving grades 7-12. The two charter schools represented were Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy, which had a mean and median cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $17,465.85. Noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12 had a median cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $34,752.52 and a mean of $33,995.34. The charter school mean was just over half of the mean for noncharter public schools, and the median was also slightly more than half of the noncharter public school median.

Figure F-11: Financial Efficiency of ELA Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

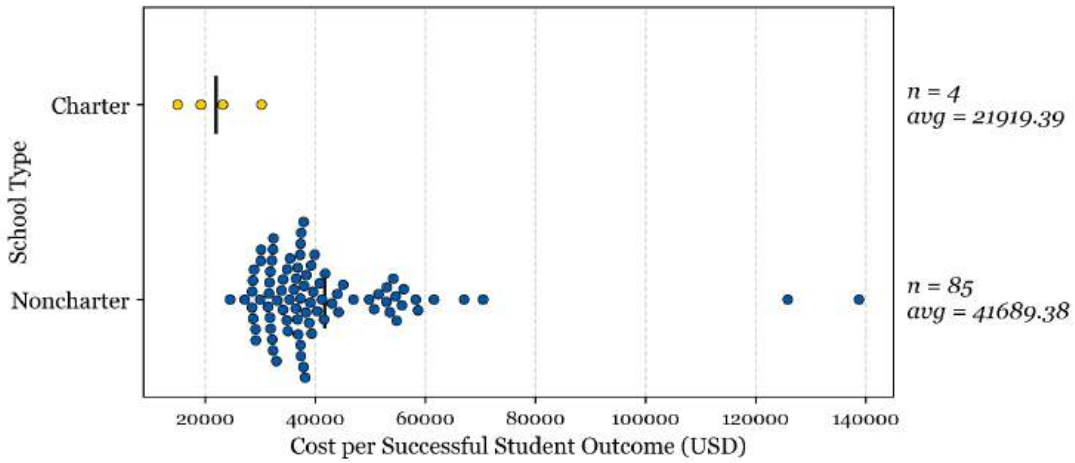


Figure F-11 portrays the cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. The four charter schools represented were Baxter Academy, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and Maine Arts Academy School. They had a median cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $21,220.83 and a mean of $21,919.39. Noncharter public schools performed worse, having a median cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $37,638.33 and a mean of $41,689.38.

Figure F-12: Financial Efficiency of ELA Achievement (All Schools)

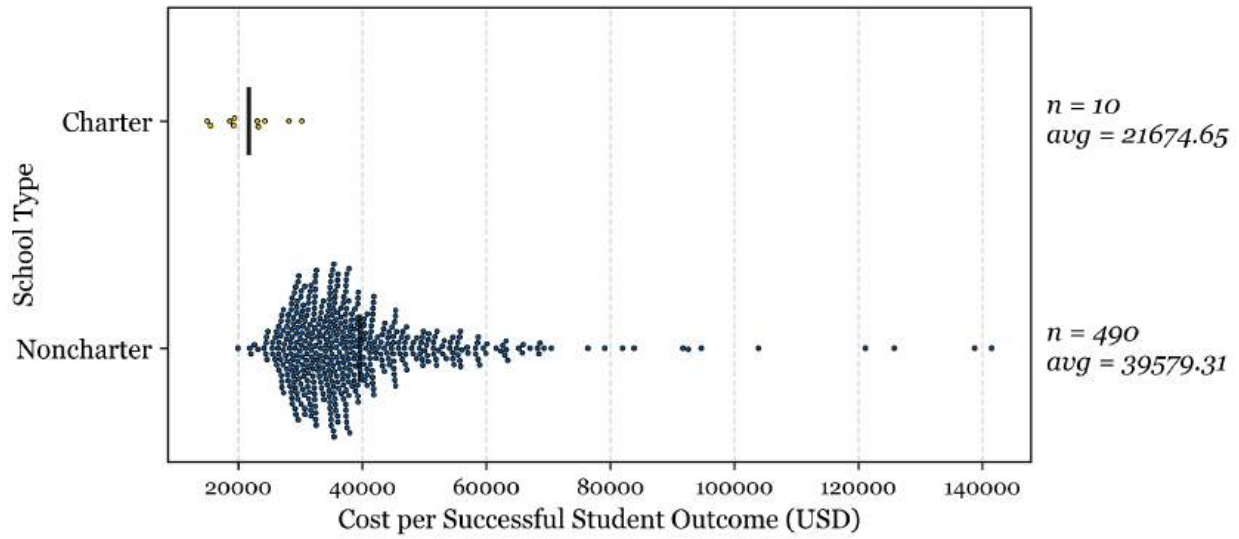


Figure F-12 reflects the cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts for all charter and noncharter public schools. The 10 charter schools with data had a mean cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $21,674.65 and a median of $22,807.25. Noncharter public schools did considerably worse, having a median cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts of $36,016.46. Furthermore, the mean cost per successful student outcome in English Language Arts for noncharter public schools was $39,579.31, $17,904.66 more than the charter school mean.

Science

Figure F-13: Financial Efficiency of Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-06

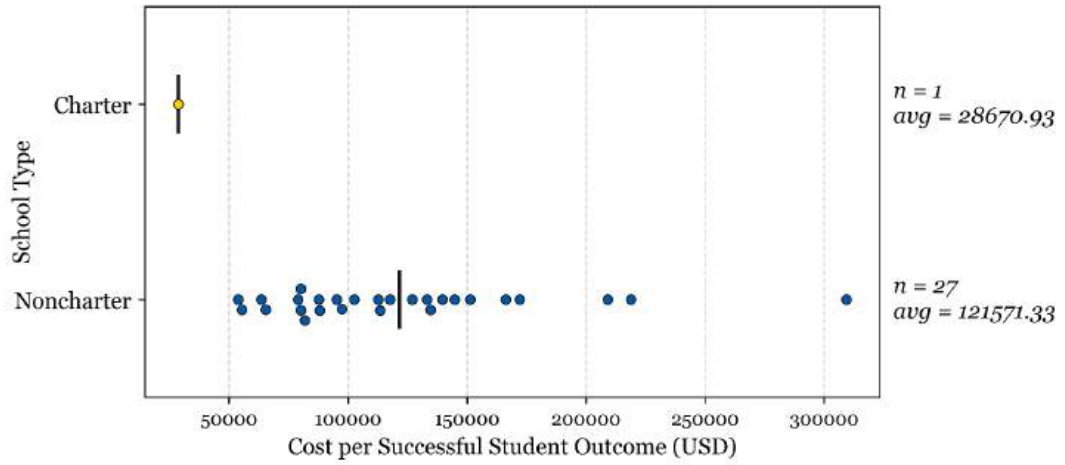


Figure F-13 represents the cost per successful student outcome in Science for schools serving grades 3-6. Acadia Academy was the sole charter school represented, which had a cost per successful student outcome in Science of $28,670.93. Noncharter public schools by far performed worse, with a mean cost per successful student outcome in Science of $121,571.33 and a median of $112,795.20. The mean was over four times higher for noncharter public schools while the median was well over three times the median of charter schools.

Figure F-14: Financial Efficiency of Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 03-08

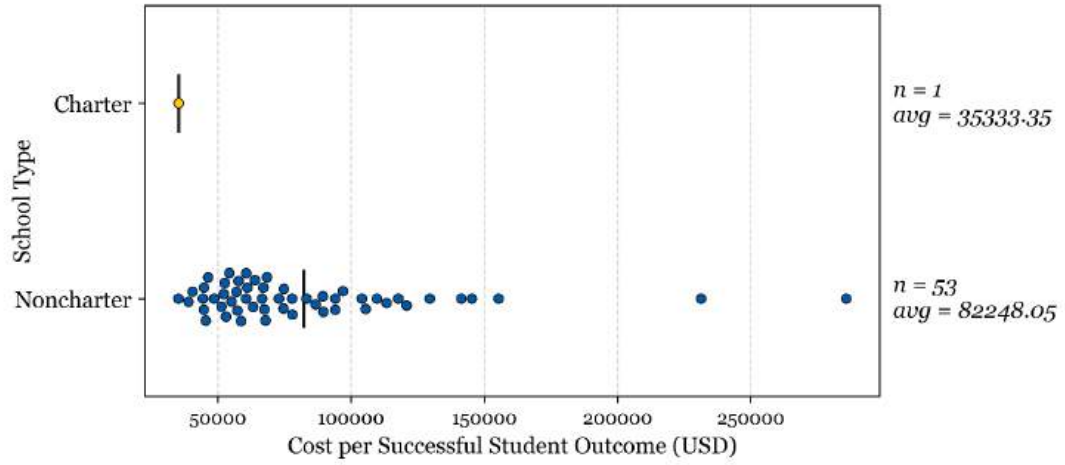


Figure F-14 shows the cost per successful student outcome in Science for charters and noncharter public schools serving grades 3-8. Fiddlehead School of Arts & Science was the only charter school represented, which had a cost per successful student outcome in Science of $35,333.35. Noncharter public schools performed worse, with a mean cost per successful student outcome in Science of $82,248.05 and a median of $67,506.65. Both the mean and median for noncharter public schools were more than $30,000 higher for success in Science

than the lone charter school serving students at these grade levels.

Figure F-15: Financial Efficiency of Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 06-12

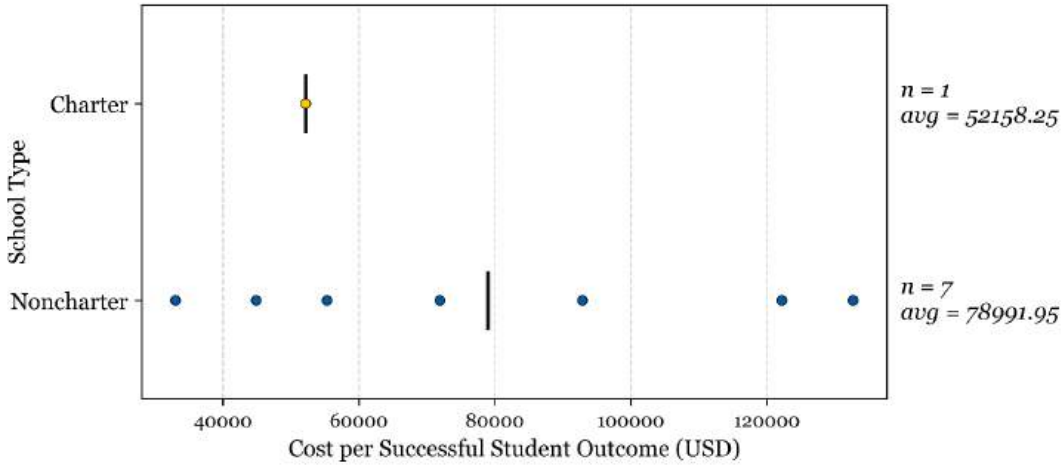


Figure F-15 displays the cost per successful student outcome in Science for schools serving grades 6-12. Overman Academy of Community Regional Charter School was the only charter school represented, which had a cost per successful student outcome in Science of $52,158.25. Noncharter public schools had a mean cost per successful student outcome in Science of $78,991.95 and a median of $71,911.59, both worse in comparison to Overman Academy.

Figure F-16: Financial Efficiency of Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 07-12

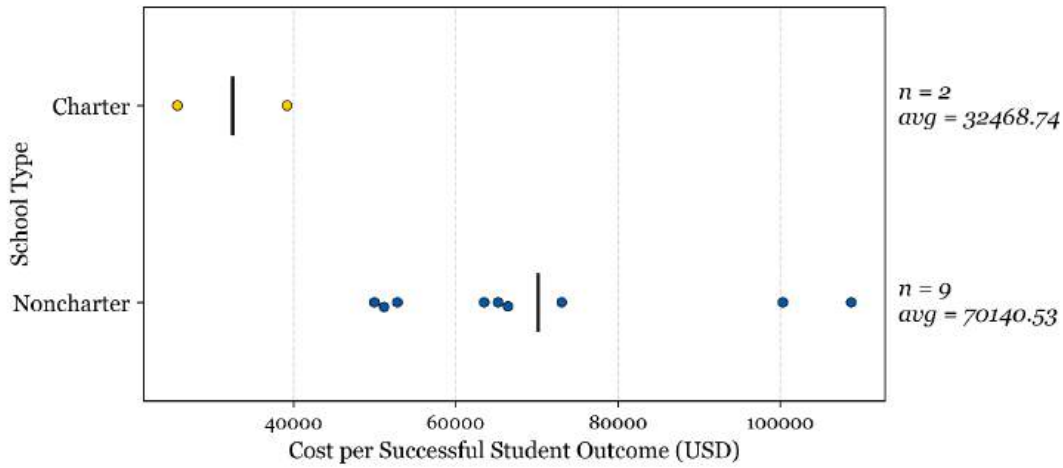


Figure F-16 depicts the cost per successful student outcome in Science for charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12. The two charter schools represented were Maine Connections Academy and Maine Virtual Academy, which had a mean and median cost per successful student outcome in Science of $32,468.74. Noncharter public schools serving grades 7-12 had a median cost per successful student outcome in Science of $65,218.60 and a mean of $70,140.53, more than double the mean for charter schools.

Figure F-17: Financial Efficiency of Science Achievement for Schools Serving Grades 09-12

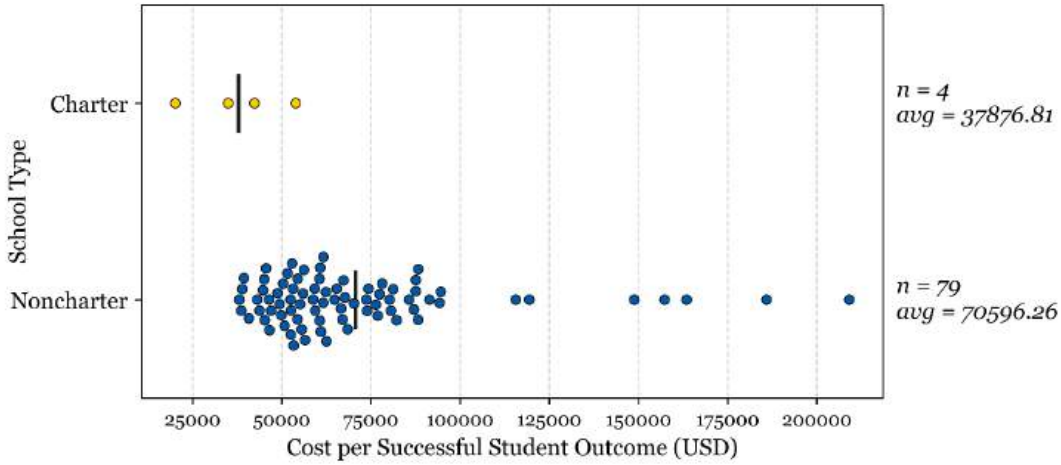


Figure F-17 illustrates the cost per successful student outcome in Science for the charter and noncharter public schools serving grades 9-12. The four charter schools represented were Baxter Academy, Ecology Learning Center, Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, and Maine Arts Academy School. They had a median cost per successful student outcome in Science of $38,687.69 and a mean of $37,876.81. Noncharter public schools performed worse, where they had a median cost per successful student outcome in Science of $61,000.70 and a mean of $70,596.26.

Figure F-18: Financial Efficiency of Science Achievement (All Schools)

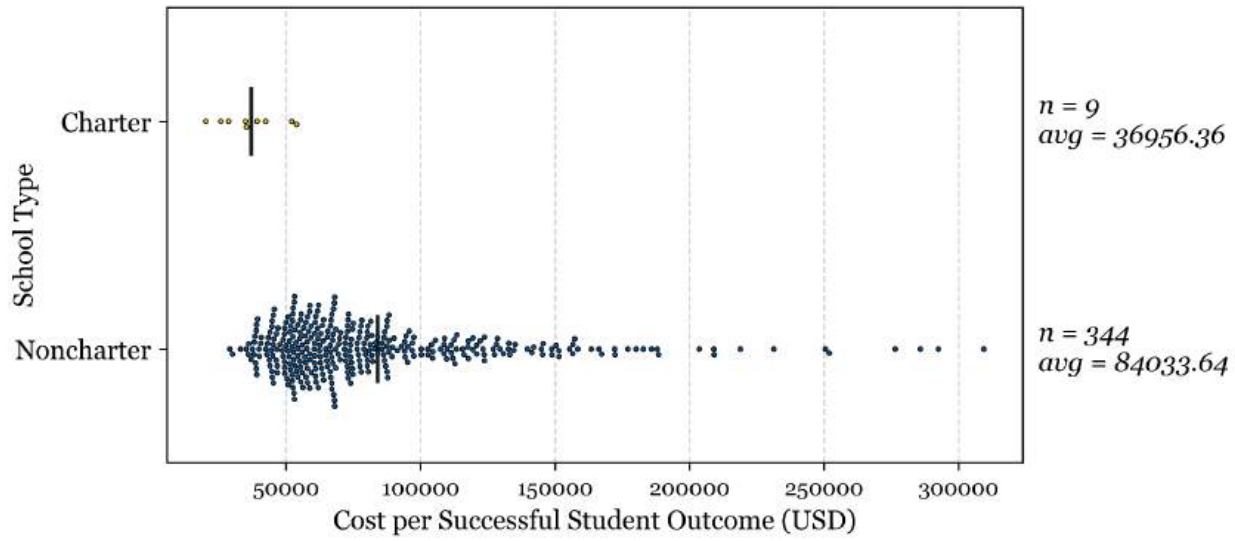


Figure F-18 portrays the cost per successful student outcome in Science for all schools. The nine charter schools with data had a median cost per successful student outcome in Science of $35,333.35 and a mean of $36,956.36. Noncharter public schools performed considerably worse, where they had a median cost per successful student outcome in Science of $68,506.85, $33,173.50 more than the median for charter schools. Moreover, the mean for noncharter public schools of $84,033.64 was also more than double the mean for charter schools.

Charter schools excel in this standard. As can be seen in the graphs, the most efficient school is almost always a charter school. In addition, the worst charter school in English Language Arts and Science performs better than the average non charter public school. Both the mean and median charter schools outperformed the mean and median noncharter public schools, highlighting the stronger performance of charter schools in every single comparison except in Math performance for schools serving grades 6-12. the 06-12 grade span in Math.

Charter schools perform worse academically in math, however they do much more per dollar than most Maine noncharter schools. If Maine was looking to most effectively improve education outcomes with education spending, they would be better off giving state dollars to charters than noncharter schools.

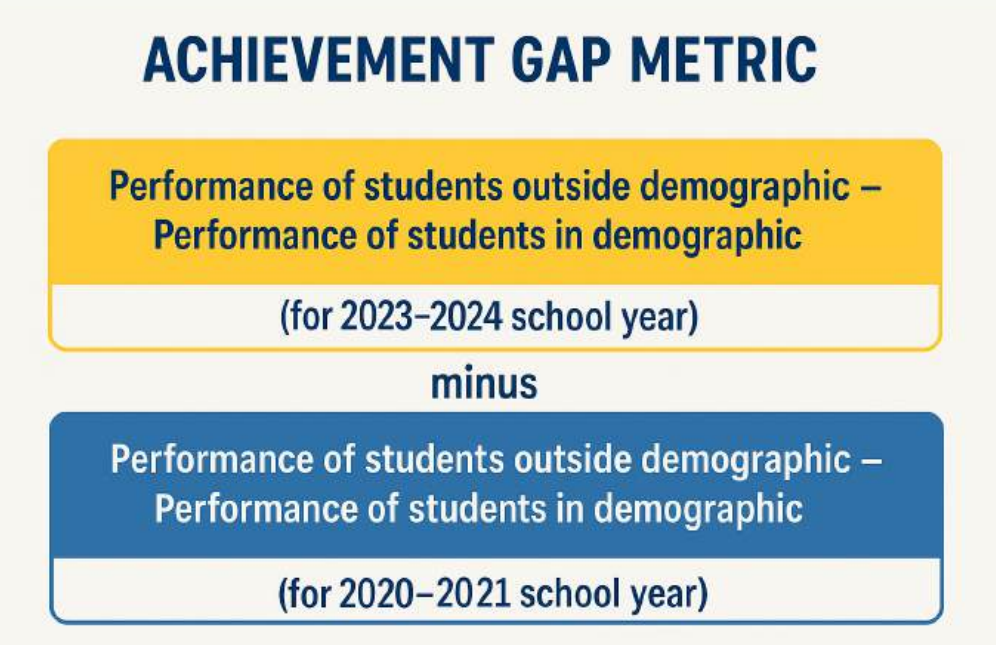
G. Achievement Gaps

Achievement gaps are one of the more obscure standards under which the Commission evaluates charter schools. Although it sometimes isn't listed as a requirement in the overall annual report, or in the individual annual reports from the Commission, it was one of the standards used to evaluate Harpswell Coastal Academy before it was shut down. In addition, the part of the Maine Regulatory Code where the Charter School Commission establishes its performance indicators for charter review frameworks explicitly requires these frameworks to be based on, in part, achievement gaps.[36]

Before it was closed, Harpswell had to provide evidence of closing or keeping closed identified achievement gaps of major demographic subgroups. However, it's worth noting that failure to close achievement gaps was not one of the reasons used to close the school–it was simply a metric used to evaluate the school prior to its closure. The demographics measured include English language learners, special education, gender, economically disadvantaged, ethnic minorities, and racial minority students.

The standard we used to measure achievement gaps of different demographics began with taking the performance difference of students at or above achievement level within a given demographic group and the students not in the group, and then analyzing the differences between these gaps for the 2020-21 and 2023-24 school years. If the gap increases over this period, then one specific subgroup of students are doing worse than the others over time, indicating a growing achievement gap.

[36] This is in 90-668 CMR ch. 2, §10(1), found at:
https://www.maine.gov/sos/rulemaking/agency-rules/independent-agencies-rules#668



Although a variety of demographics should be examined for demographic achievement gaps, only three had enough data for accurate conclusions. For this reason, we examine only economically disadvantaged vs. non-economically disadvantaged, female vs. male, and students with disabilities vs. students without disabilities. Additionally, there is not enough data on all charters to perform this analysis, meaning we only examine noncharter public schools in this section.

According to our analysis of the data, the achievement gaps in noncharter public schools generally worsened. In the data below, positive percentages mean that, since the 2020-2021 school year, the gap between the two demographics has increased by that percentile. Negative numbers represent a narrowing of the gap, while schools that reversed their gap were ignored.

The median percentage difference for economically disadvantaged vs. non-economically disadvantaged students was 4.28% for English Language Arts and 3.88% for Math, indicating a growing achievement gap. In the female vs. male standard, the median percentage difference was -2.12% for English Language Arts and 4.29% for Math. Among students with disabilities vs. students without disabilities standard, the median percentage difference was 1.96% for English Language Arts and -1.22% for Math. These data suggests that achievement gaps generally grew over the period between the school years 2020-2021 and 2023-2024.

Since there is no set criteria in the standard to measure what the Commission considers to be poor achievement gaps, we used the 1.5 IQR (interquartile range) potential outliers test to evaluate if a noncharter public school would fail under this requirement. This test uses the interquartile range(IQR), or the middle 50% of the data. The IQR is multiplied by 1.5 and added to the third quartile and subtracted from the first, giving a range. Any data points which lie

outside of this range are considered outliers.[37] For the purposes of this standard, we only examined the schools which were upper outliers, i.e. whose gaps had grown over that period, except for male vs. female comparisons, since both sexes were considered relevant demographics.

In the economically disadvantaged vs. non economically disadvantaged substandard, three schools failed on English Language Arts and two schools failed on Math, with no school failing both. In the female vs. male substandard, 11 schools failed on English Language Arts and 10 schools failed on Math. In the subgroup of students with disabilities vs. students without disabilities, zero schools failed on English Language Arts and one school failed on Math.

In total, 24 unique schools failed at least English Language Arts or Math in one of the subgroups. Additionally, three of the 24 schools failed both English Language Arts and Math in the female vs. male subgroup. Broken down by subject, 14 schools failed on English Language Arts out of 285 with data (4.91%), and 13 schools failed on Math out of 300 with data (4.33%). Overall, 24 unique schools out of the 326 unique schools that listed some data failed at least once (7.36%).

Based on these data, it's also likely that more schools would fail if there were sufficient data on the other demographics, such as English language learners, ethnicity, or race. Even without this, 24 schools were considered to be failing using a high standard for achievement gaps. This highlights just how overbearing some of these requirements are for charter schools–many noncharter public schools would be unable to meet the same standard expectations even with much greater levels of funding.

[37] https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-interquartile-range-rule-3126244#:~:text=Calculate%20the%20interquartile%20range%20for,the%20entire%20set%20of%20data.

IV. Comparative Findings for Noncharter Schools

Standard of Measurement	Schools Failing	Percent of Measured Schools Failing
A: Graduation Rates	29 Schools	29.29% (99 Total Noncharter Schools)
B: Academic Performance (Math)	72 Schools	14.34% (502 Total Noncharter Schools)
B: Academic Performance (English Language Arts)	55 Schools	10.96% (502 Total Noncharter Schools)
C: Postsecondary Enrollment	0 Schools[38]	0% (120 Total Noncharter Schools)
D: Chronic Absenteeism Rates	203 Schools	36.71% (553 Total Noncharter Schools)
E. Campus Safety	17 Schools[39]	20.73% (82 Total Noncharter Schools)
F: Financial Efficiency	232 Schools	47.84% (485 Total Noncharter Schools)
G. Achievement Gaps (Math)	13 Schools	4.33% (300 Total Noncharter Schools)
G. Achievement Gaps (English Language Arts)	14 Schools	4.91% (285 Total Noncharter Schools)
Schools failing three or more standards	71 Schools	14% (507 Total Noncharter Schools)
Schools failing at least two standards	173 Schools	31.23% (554 Total Noncharter Schools)
Schools failing at least one standard	364 Schools	61.28% (594 Total Noncharter Schools)

[38] Because no noncharter public schools had postsecondary enrollment rates lower than the lowest charter, none were considered to be failing this standard.
[39] Measured as schools that have a higher incident rate than the Maine Academy of Natural Sciences, the charter with the highest incident rate. Because only charters serving grades 9-12 reported the statistics included in incident rates, we excluded another 26 non-9-12 noncharters that also had failing incident rates from this standard, the included 17 are only the 9-12 noncharter that failed this standard.

It should be noted that in the above table, the total schools measured varies heavily due to many schools not being eligible for certain standard reviews. Only high schools were considered in graduation rate requirements, only schools with reported scores were considered for academic performance, and only schools with reported incidence rate numbers were considered for incident rates concerning campus safety. Lastly, some schools did not report enough data to be able to fail three or even two standards, which is why the last three rows have different total school numbers.

According to our measures for each standard under which charter schools are assessed, nearly two-thirds of noncharter public schools in the state are failing at least one standard, more than one-third are failing two standards, and nearly one-in-seven schools are failing three or more standards. This is concerning, as it indicates that many would be at risk of closure if held to the same standards as charter schools. The good news is that Commission decisions are highly subjective, and there is no clear line on how many failed standards it takes to shut down a charter school.

However, we have a clear example of a charter school that was shut down: Harpswell Coastal Academy. The Maine Charter Commission refused to approve its renewal due to three separate standard failures: a high chronic absenteeism rate, poor organizational fiscal outlook, and poor student improvement rates. Still, the important conclusion we can draw based on history and evidence is this: Failing to meet expectations in three separate standards of assessment is a sign that a charter school is at high risk of being closed by the Commission.

Based on our analysis, 14% of noncharter public schools (71) throughout the state, or approximately one-in-seven schools, would be at risk of closure if held to the same standards as charters. Still, if the purpose of imposing these standards on charters is to benefit the institutions themselves and the outcomes of students, it stands to reason the same standards would improve noncharter public schools if applied to them, too.

On the other hand, if applying these standards to noncharter public schools is unfair, then it is also unfair to apply them to charter schools. Charter schools in Maine outperform noncharter schools in most of our fiscal efficiency standards, as well as overall English Language Arts and Science performance. If charter schools were treated equally to noncharter public schools–particularly in funding–the data suggest that they're capable of outperforming noncharters in most, if not all, standards. Unfortunately, Maine's charter system regulations are designed to limit the number and efficiency of these schools, all but ensuring they don't create competition for Maine's declining traditional public school system.[40]

[40] https://mainepolicy.org/research/the-decline-of-maine-k-12-education/

V. Policy Implications

Based on our analysis, several key policy implications emerge. While this report does not argue for the closure of any public school, it highlights substantial inequities and inefficiencies in Maine's education model, particularly when comparing noncharter public schools and charter schools. The following recommendations address these issues:

1. Equalize Standards and Accountability

Maine should hold noncharter public and charter schools to the same standards and consequences. Currently, noncharter public schools benefit from emergency funding mechanisms and consolidation options when financially unstable, while charter schools face the constant threat of closure for similar or lesser fiscal issues.

Other states offer more balanced approaches:

- Florida: Grants charter schools access to capital outlay funds and local millage rates[41] [42]
- Arizona: Provides equalized funding and Charter Additional Assistance (CAA)[43]
- Colorado: Requires districts to share local revenues under certain conditions[44]

Recommendation: Adopt similar reforms to create equal footing for Maine charter schools, particularly regarding access to local funding and financial stability protections.

2. Recognize and Reward Fiscal Efficiency

Charter schools consistently outperform noncharter public schools in student outcomes per dollar spent, despite often serving higher-need populations with fewer resources. In our analysis of English Language Arts, Math, and Science across the 10 (only nine for Science) measured schools, we created a total of 18 subject based fiscal performance comparisons, considering per-pupil spending and academic outcomes. Out of all of these comparisons, only one charter school was below the mean noncharter public school cost per successful student outcome for any comparison.

Recommendation: Focus on efficiency-adjusted outcomes, not just raw test scores or funding levels. Reward schools that produce better results per dollar, regardless of type.

3. Expand Charter School Capacity

Maine currently limits the number of charter schools to 10—a cap that restricts innovation and competition, especially given the success charters have shown in serving disadvantaged populations.

[41] https://www.flsenate.gov/laws/statutes/2021/1013.62
[42] https://flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2025/1115/Analyses/h1115e.EEC.PDF
[43] https://codes.findlaw.com/az/title-15-education/az-rev-st-sect-15-185/
[44] https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb17-061

Recommendations:

- Lift the cap on the number of charter schools
- Lift the cap on enrollment in virtual charter schools
- Restore the ability for universities to approve charters
- Encourage charter growth, especially in underserved and underperforming regions
- Increase the weight of per-pupil funding based on student needs, especially for nontraditional education models (e.g., special education status, behavioral challenges, or economic disadvantage)

4. Reform Charter Oversight Practices

Charter schools are evaluated using several standards that are either irrelevant to educational outcomes or not applied to noncharter public schools, such as:

- “Mission implementation”
- “Student persistence”
- “School climate” exit surveys
- Board meeting transparency and frequency, which has actual enforcement and consequences, like at noncharters’ public board meetings

Noncharter public schools are not held to many of these standards, and many standards do not reliably indicate quality.

Recommendations:

- Remove or revise non-academic performance standards that do not meaningfully relate to student success
- Use limited growth-based standards fully tailored to charter school students' demographics and prior performance
- Shift fiscal viability decisions to charter school boards unless there is clear evidence of harm to student performance. If the board thinks they can financially remain operational, then they should be allowed to.

5. Improve Transportation Access

Transportation remains a major barrier to charter school access, particularly for rural and low-income families.

Other states address this by:

- Requiring districts to provide transportation to local charters
- Paying charters directly to offer transportation
- Reimbursing parents in rural areas

Recommendation: Maine should implement transportation support policies to ensure all families can access charter options regardless of income or geography.

6. Embrace Educational Pluralism

Charter schools are public schools that operate under different rules and models. Their purpose is not to replace traditional schools, but to supplement and improve the public education system as a whole. If some public schools close because students choose better-performing charters or noncharters and overall student outcomes improve, that result represents a policy success, not a failure.

Bottom line: Maine's education system should prioritize student outcomes and fiscal responsibility, not system preservation for its own sake.

While we do not have data on prospective programs, below we provide short profiles describing all 10 programs we analyzed, as well as the prospective "Moxie Community School," which has been approved to fill Harpswell's empty slot, officially opening Fall 2026. Since Moxie Community School has not yet opened, it cannot be analyzed alongside the 10 existing or former charters.

7. Improving Transparency and Accountability in Maine's Education Data

To strengthen transparency and accountability in Maine's public education system, the state must significantly improve how it collects, reports, and publishes data through the Maine Department of Education (DOE). Our analysis of publicly available DOE datasets revealed a series of inconsistencies, omissions, formatting flaws, and system design issues that collectively hinder meaningful evaluation and public oversight.

Excessive Redaction Limits Public Insight

The DOE's data redaction practices are overly broad, particularly in a rural state like Maine where small class sizes are common. While protecting student privacy is important, blanket redactions based on small sample sizes result in a severe lack of reliable public information on educational outcomes. This undermines the public's ability to assess school performance, particularly in underserved or geographically isolated communities, and in turn reduces accountability, efficiency, and public trust in the education system.

More troubling is the pattern of redacting performance data from schools or subgroups that underperform. If redactions disproportionately obscure poor subdemographic outcomes, intentionally or not, they prevent policymakers, parents, and taxpayers from identifying areas in need of support or intervention. Transparency must be prioritized to enable informed decision-making and to uphold the public's right to evaluate the effectiveness of their education system.

Data Gaps and Inconsistencies Undermine Trust

The DOE has not established clear standards for what data must be reported or why certain standards are missing. In multiple instances, schools lacked entries for key indicators such as chronic absenteeism and per-pupil expenditures—without clear explanation. In the data that was provided, we identified errors including duplicate entries and, in some cases, reported total per-pupil expenditures of zero dollars, which is patently impossible.

These issues raise questions about the integrity of the data and the DOE's internal review processes. If basic data validation is not being performed, the reliability of any subsequent analysis may be seriously compromised.

Poor Formatting Obstructs Analysis

The formatting of DOE spreadsheets further complicates independent review. Rather than consolidating multiple data points into additional columns for a single school entry, the same school may appear on multiple rows, making aggregation and comparison unnecessarily complex. Moreover, the spreadsheets fail to indicate that enrollment figures used for per-pupil spending calculations are based on October counts, while other datasets use May enrollment. This discrepancy is noted in a dashboard footnote, but not reflected in the downloadable files themselves, leading to potential misinterpretation.

Science Performance Data Is a Major Blind Spot

Science achievement data is heavily redacted across the state due to its limited testing in only grades 5, 8, and 11, resulting in smaller sample sizes. Unlike English Language Arts and Math, where data is more readily available, the redaction of science scores creates a major blind spot in evaluating subject-specific academic outcomes. As a result, policymakers and educators lack critical insight into how Maine students are performing in an increasingly important field.

Recommendation: Maine policymakers and the Department of Education must prioritize improvements in the consistency, clarity, and accessibility of public education data. This includes revising redaction policies to balance transparency with privacy, establishing clear data reporting standards, improving formatting practices, and ensuring completeness and accuracy across all standards. A robust and transparent data system is essential for evaluating performance, identifying areas for improvement, and ultimately delivering better outcomes for Maine students.

VI. Charter School Profiles

In-Person Programs

ACADIA Academy[45]

ACADIA, also known as "**A** **C**harter **A**cademy for **D**eveloping **I**ndependence and **A**chievement," is a pre-k through sixth-grade charter school. The school heavily emphasizes experiential learning and real-world projects. Established in 2014, it is also one of the state's newer charter schools.

Acadia's students score substantially better than the average public school, with 4% more students passing the most recent state-level English Language Arts assessments, 2% more in Science, and a staggering 10% more passing state Math assessments than the average Maine public school. Despite this, the average public school in Maine spends approximately $24,600 per student, while Acadia Academy spends roughly $16,000 per student.[46] Not only do Acadia's students score substantially better than the average Maine public school, they also spend less, making Acadia an incredibly cost-effective model for Maine education.

Baxter Academy for Technology and Science[47]

The Baxter Academy for Technology and Science is a STEM-focused college-preparatory high school and the only self-identified college-preparatory charter school in the state. The school is heavily focused on projects addressing "real-world problems," and students dedicate every Friday to independent multi-year passion projects, such as underwater robots, radio shows, wind turbines, or VR-compatible footwear.

Baxter provides a wide array of electives outside of STEM programs as well, such as Mandarin, photography, creative writing, or journalism. With all these programs, it's no wonder that Baxter is regularly ranked as one of the best high schools in the state.

Community Regional Charter School[48]

Community Regional Charter School (CRCS), formerly Cornville Regional Charter School, is Maine's first tuition-free, public Pre–K–12 charter school. With three campuses in Skowhegan and Cornville (Overman Academy, Dimensions Academy, Creative Children's Academy), CRCS offers a learner-centered environment built on personalized learning plans and a proficiency-based model. Students advance when they demonstrate mastery, not just based on age or grade level.

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[45] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/acadia-academy

[46] https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/inline-files/Accountability%20-%20Per%20Pupil%20Spending%20-%201.21.2025.csv

[47] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/baxter-academy-for-technology-science

[48] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/cornville-regional-charter-school

CRCS also stands out for its deep integration with the local community. Electives are often taught by community members, giving students access to real-world skills and diverse learning opportunities that go far beyond the traditional classroom. This approach fosters student agency, engagement, and customization—empowering learners to pursue their interests and take ownership of their education.

Ecology Learning Center[49]

The Ecology Learning Center is a public charter school in Unity that teaches grades 09-12 and integrates academic rigor and real-world fieldwork into its educational plans. Its education heavily includes ecology, with students studying various biological, ecological, and scientific subjects. It also integrates partnerships and apprenticeship programs involving Unity College, Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners' Association, Kennebec Valley Community College, and UMaine's Hutchinson Center.

The ELC integrates local communities and resources, and heavily utilizes hands-on and project-based learning.

"In my class students learned architectural drafting, built scale models of the unique homes they each designed, and then as a team built an actual full-sized building [...] While the skills acquired are indeed useful, the deeper value lies in the growing self-confidence I saw in these students: they came to believe in themselves as competent, creative, productive." — Paul Cartwright, Educator.

Fiddlehead Center of Arts and Sciences[50]

Fiddlehead is a pre-K through eighth-grade school located in Gray. Unlike some other charters, it focuses on both the arts and sciences simultaneously. Fiddlehead does so through a hands-on, project-oriented system and applies the "Reggio Emilia" education model, a student-centered approach from the Italian town of the same name. It emphasizes fostering student creativity and curiosity.

While in a rural area, Fiddlehead keeps an innovative approach to education, and a low teacher-to-student ratio. It attempts to give access to these highly-flexible alternative educational models to families who may not be able to afford private schools.

Maine Academy of Natural Sciences[51]

The Maine Academy of Natural Sciences is the state's first charter school dedicated exclusively to the natural sciences. Located in Hinckley, it offers hands-on education and educates students about nature, ecosystems, and agriculture and forestry. MeANS engages heavily with

[49] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/ecology-learning-center
[50] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/fiddlehead-school-of-arts-sciences
[51] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/maine-academy-of-natural-sciences

project-based learning, including designing gardens, studying trees, or organizing miniature farms.

MeANS applies a student-led individualized model, designed for students who may struggle in a more traditional classroom setting. It hosts a residential program through Good Will-Hinckley, which is a charitable organization that operates the school. It also operates with several greenhouses and a museum on the grounds, providing several different types of resources to its students for hands-on learning.

Maine Arts Academy[52]

Maine Arts Academy (MeAA) is Maine's only public charter school dedicated only to the arts, teaching grades 7–12. Located in Augusta, MeAA offers a full-day, arts-integrated curriculum that blends rigorous academics with daily instruction in dance, film, music, theater, and visual arts. Students follow specialized "pathways," engaging in real-world creative projects—from original film production to cross-disciplinary visual media.

The school follows a college-like Monday through Thursday schedule, with early dismissal on Fridays. This, along with its project-oriented course design, helps students build skills for college. Unlike any other full-time arts-oriented high school in the state, this is free, making it available to families of all income levels.

Virtual Programs

Maine Connections Academy[53]

The Maine Connections Academy (MCA) is the state's first virtual charter school, offering a fully online 7–12 education to students across Maine. Notably, there are no other fully virtual public schools in Maine besides its two virtual charters. MCA is affiliated with Pearson's Connections Education and prioritizes a more structured, teacher-led format when compared to the Maine Virtual Academy. Students attend regular *LiveLesson*® sessions and follow a curriculum that closely mirrors a traditional school schedule, offering more routine and academic scaffolding.

MCA serves a highly diverse student population, with roughly 40% of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and more than one-in-five receiving special education services. Where MCA really distinguishes itself is in academic consistency and student outcomes: it boasts one of the highest four-year graduation rates in the state.

[52] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/maine-arts-academy
[53] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/maine-connections-academy

Maine Virtual Academy[54]

The Maine Virtual Academy is the other of Maine's only two virtual charter schools, serving students from grades 7-12 from across the state. Its curriculum focuses on synchronous (live) remote classes and self-paced coursework. Unlike the MCA, the Maine Virtual Academy (MeVA), operates under the K12 Inc. model and emphasizes a blend of live instruction and independent study. This is a highly in-demand educational model, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the waitlist reached about 350 students. [55]

Like many remote and charter schools, MeVA heavily supports low-income and special education learners, with more than one-in-four students there being in special education, and more than half of their student body being considered economically disadvantaged. Because of the flexibility of this program, it has the highest four-year graduation rate of any charter school and the lowest chronic absenteeism rate. Additionally, its students test above average on English Language Arts and about average for Science. Considering the fact that special education and low-income student populations can often underperform on standardized tests, this is another strong sign of a successful program.

Eliminated Programs

Harpswell Coastal Academy[56]

The Harpswell Coastal Academy operated from 2013 to 2023, and had locations in Harpswell and later Brunswick. It focused heavily on project-based learning and real-world marine and natural sciences. Like many charter schools, it predominantly attracted students who felt distracted or unhappy in traditional public schools.

Despite its cultural strengths, the school struggled with persistent challenges, including chronic absenteeism, inconsistent academic performance, and financial instability. In 2022, the Maine Charter School Commission refused to approve its renewal for these reasons, with only four of the seven commissioners voting in favor of renewal (five out of seven is required).

[54] https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/maine-virtual-academy

[55] https://themainemonitor.org/maines-two-virtual-charter-schools-see-increased-enrollment-longer-wait-lists-during-pandemic/

[56] https://web.archive.org/web/20230605204415/https://www.maine.gov/csc/schools/harpswell-coastal-academy

Prospective Programs

Moxie Community School[57] [58]

Moxie Community School is a yet-to-be-opened charter school in Portland, Maine, approved by the Commission on May 13, 2025, to open for sixth through 12th grades for the 2026-2027 school year. The school is designed to focus on students from low-income families and with learning disabilities, like many other charters, but also English language learners. Portland public schools have a very low success rate in reaching proficiency with English language learner students, making this a crucial niche for cultural and economic integration for new Mainer populations.

Like many charters, Moxie intends to emphasize an innovative education model, including competency-based and project-based education. Its approval makes Moxie the 10th charter school in Maine, which brings the state to the current statutory cap on charter schools.

[57] https://www.moxiepublicschools.me/about

[58] https://www.maine.gov/csc/sites/maine.gov.csc/files/inline-files/Moxie%20Community%20School.pdf

VII. Conclusion

The findings of this report present a clear and unavoidable truth: if Maine's noncharter public schools were held to the same standards as its charter schools, a staggering number would fail to meet compliance—and many would face closure. Our analysis found that most noncharter public schools would be failing at least one standard, and a significant percent would be at risk of being shut down.

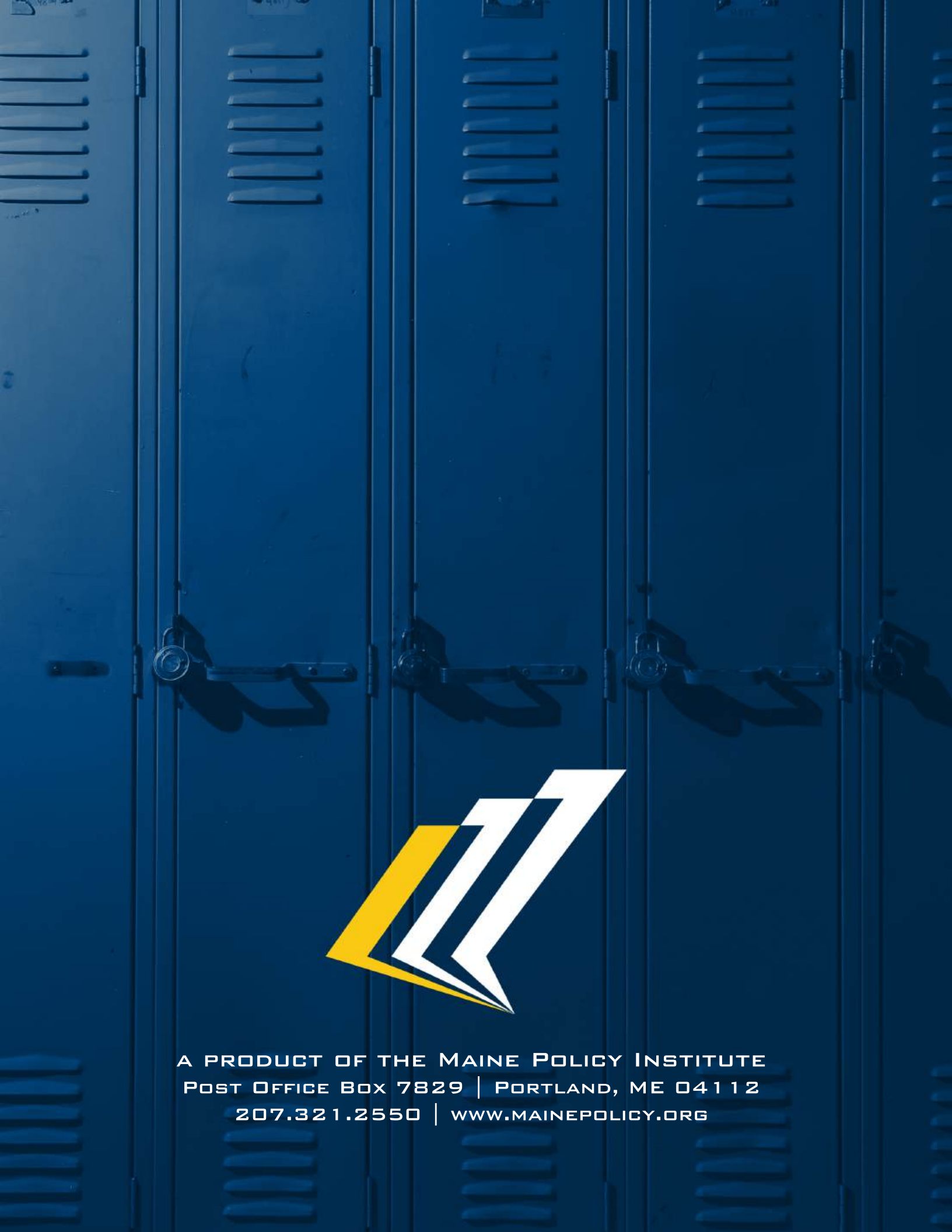
Over one-third fail two standards, and 14%—or nearly one-in-seven schools—fail three or more. These are not minor bureaucratic foot faults. In the case of Harpswell Coastal Academy, it was precisely three standard failures—chronic absenteeism, financial instability, and student academic stagnation—that triggered its nonrenewal and subsequent closure.

This data-driven comparison reveals that the existing regulatory framework is fundamentally imbalanced. Charter schools are routinely penalized for issues that, if measured consistently across all schools, would implicate a massive segment of the traditional public school system. In many cases, charter schools outperform their district counterparts, particularly when adjusted for per-pupil spending. Despite serving disproportionately higher numbers of students with learning disabilities, behavioral issues, and economic hardship, as well as much lower spending, charters demonstrate relatively good outcomes in English Language Arts, Science, campus safety, and fiscal efficiency.

If the state's goal is truly to ensure high educational standards, equitable access, and responsible public spending, then Maine cannot continue applying a double standard. Either the standards being used are unfair and should be revised for all charter schools, or they are valuable tools for measuring school effectiveness regardless of school type and should be applied universally. What Maine cannot justify is punishing charter schools for failing to meet benchmarks on which noncharter public schools are not asked to report and couldn’t meet if held to the same standard.

Furthermore, the arbitrary cap of 10 charter schools is not just outdated—it is actively harmful. Charter schools have proven their value in Maine, especially for high-need populations, and the demand continues to grow. Meanwhile, the state's traditional public school system, still recovering from the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and suffering from persistent declining performance, lacks the dynamism and flexibility that charters offer.

Charter schools in Maine are not perfect, but they are held to a much higher standard—and still outperform their counterparts in many areas. If state policymakers truly value innovation, equity, and student-centered outcomes, they must recalibrate Maine’s charter school policies. The choice is stark: either lift the burden off the shoulders of charter schools or apply it evenly across the board. Maintaining the current system is not only unjust—it is unsustainable.



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