



**EPSL** | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**  
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**Further Commentary on  
“Review of ‘Trends in Charter School Authorizing’”**

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**Commentary**

Chester E. Finn, Jr., the president of the Fordham Foundation, wrote a May 31<sup>st</sup> commentary called, “[Who’s Watching the Watchdog?](#)” which responds to a review I wrote of a Fordham report, “[Trends in Charter School Authorizing](#),” authored by Rebecca Gau. It is somewhat unusual when the sponsor of a study rather than the researcher who conducted the study responds to a critique. It raises questions about how much influence the sponsor exercised over the findings of the study, which was already an issue with this report.

I agree with the sponsor (and researcher) that the study explores an important issue—how charters might be authorized—and that the study could serve as a basis for further studies that might be more definitive. As it stands, the Fordham study is not solid enough to base policy on. According to Finn, that is also the view of the sponsor (and – researcher). However, in the study prose, and especially the Fordham Foreword, that message is by no means clear. For example, Gau says in the Executive Summary, “Some types seem more able to practice quality authorizing than others—the nonprofit organizations and the independent chartering boards...tend to do well on both counts...” (p. v). Petrilli and Finn say in the Foreword, “...nonprofit organizations and Independent Chartering Boards (ICBs) show the greatest promise” (p. ix). Those look a lot like

conclusions and are not simply “descriptive” statements, as Finn asserts. They are evaluative, and those conclusions are not justified.

Two weaknesses diminish the study’s usefulness: the survey’s low-response rate and the report’s subjective data summaries. In drawing conclusions across categories of charter school authorizers, Gau’s survey results have non-representative samples from major comparison categories. In the largest category, only 118 of 492 local education agencies (24%) responded, making that category non-representative. This lack of response cannot be compensated for by having responses from other, smaller groups: three of four independent chartering boards, two of two municipal offices, six of eight nonprofit agencies, and 21 of 21 state education agencies. The total response rate is 33 percent, low indeed. Nor is this low response rate compensated for by the fact that local districts account for 64 percent of total respondents, as Finn seems to think. Gau attempted to survey the full population of local education agencies. She received back less than a quarter of those surveys. She treated those responses as if they were representative of the population. The issue here is one of bias, addressed in basic statistics courses. In this case, the researcher must consider the distinct possibility that the relevant characteristics of responders are different than those of non-responders. For example, might they have more resources and more time to respond to a survey?

Finn asks, did I not understand the report’s survey response table?, Yes, I did understand it, unlike Finn. Next go-round, Fordham should solicit the help of an expert on sampling. Does the low response invalid the study? No, but it weakens it.

The second problem is that the final data summaries are handled in a subjective fashion, and this subjectivity strongly favors the independent chartering boards and nonprofits (e.g., Fordham, the study sponsor). Major conclusions, such as quoted above, contradict the one rigorous quantitative data analysis in the study, shown in the quality/compliance chart (Figure 2, p. 11). In Finn’s commentary, Gau says that she drew final conclusions by using several criteria and several items. Fair enough. However, she fails to detail in the report or in the Finn commentary how she combined multiple items, multiple criteria, analyzed them, combined them, and arrived at the conclusions. In addition, she does not reconcile her conclusions with the contradictory quantitative analysis.

What she does instead is state in a sentence or two her judgment about how various authorizer types did on each item in the questionnaire keyed to a particular criterion. Then she summarily judges the overall success on the total criterion. Unfortunately, her judgments are highly subjective and sometimes contrary to the data. For example, on the data-driven criterion, she says of one key item that universities “use the least sophisticated model to analyze student achievement data” (p. 21). Her “verdict” is, “They get data directly from schools but don’t use it in a sophisticated way.” Accordingly, in the final summary, universities are rated only “moderate” on this criterion.

However, the “data models” table below shows that public universities ranked comparably to nonprofits in the highest category, better than independent chartering boards in the top two combined, and better than nonprofits on the three combined. (Gau considers the top two models to be superior to the third, with the top one being the best.)

**Table 1: Data Models from Fordham Foundation Report**

	Public universities	Independent Chartering Boards	Nonprofits
<b>Fixed/mixed effects</b>	21%	33%	20%
<b>Value added</b>	29	0	40
<b>Longitudinal</b>	29	67	0
<b>None</b>	0	0	20
<b>Don't know</b>	21	0	20

Source: Gau, R. (2006). *Trends in charter school authorizing*. Washington, DC: Fordham Foundation.

How does Gau rate the independent chartering boards on the same item? She says, “They use a sophisticated model for data analysis,” and her verdict is, “They put a strong emphasis on the importance of data and data collection. They could update their models for data analysis” (p. 27). Note the subjective treatment of perceived weaknesses: universities were judged unsophisticated, whereas independent boards need simply “update” their data analysis. In the final report summary, independent chartering boards are judged “strong” on this criterion while universities are “moderate.” However, on the item she is using as one main basis for her rating, public universities are superior to the independent chartering boards on the two best methods, 50 percent to 33 percent.

What about nonprofits? Gau gives them the same deference accorded ICBs, concluding that the “Majority use a sophisticated data analysis model.” Her summary verdict is, “They collect a lot of data from their schools and appear to use it well.” Nonprofits are awarded a “strong” label on this criterion in the final summary. However, 20 percent of nonprofits state that they have no method of data analysis at all. If the means were calculated across categories (treating “don’t know” as the lowest category), the nonprofits would be the worst authorizer of the three. How can they be judged stronger? Only by highly selective judgment.

Finn notes that this summary was based on seven items. Yes, it is, but Gau has analyzed and summarized each item by subjectively judging what each item means. She failed to construct transparent indices that explain how she calculates her judgments, offering instead subjective syntheses that her readers must trust. The quality/compliance analysis is indeed a quantitative index analysis, but those results were pushed aside in favor of the subjective results. The number of items included makes no difference if each item is interpreted in such a subjective fashion.

For pointing out these weaknesses and contradictions in the study, Finn says that I have “blatantly” misread the report. However, his commentary does nothing to fix the lack of connection between the data and the conclusions.

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