



Road to Nowhere:

NACSA's Road to "Better" Accessibility Did Not Lead to Better Charter School Access

by
By Matthew H. Lee

Matthew H. Lee is clinical assistant professor of economics at Kennesaw State University, where he conducts research for the Education Economics Center.

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Introduction

Charter school authorization laws are an important part of the “charter school ecosystem”—a system composed of charter school leaders, families, and laws that allow new charter schools to be created and families to access them. Laws and regulations with respect to charter school authorizations may stimulate the creation of new charter schools, incentivize them to achieve high learning growth for their students, or hold charter schools accountable with the threat of closure.

Laws and regulations, of course, vary in quality and effectiveness. Even if they intend to create greater access to high-quality charter schools, different states may achieve these goals to varying degrees. Expert perception of them may vary as well. Subjective perceptions of the importance of different charter school laws and regulations will vary across ideology and likely across roles in the charter school ecosystem as well.

In developing the Education Freedom Institute’s Charter School Ecosystem Rankings (ECER, or “eck-er”), Benjamin Scafidi and Eric Wearne observed that their methodology asked two straightforward questions:



1. How much access do students have to charter schools? and,



2. What evidence do we have that the education students are getting at those charter schools is any good?



Their methodology has the advantages of using objective (rather than subjective) and accessible measures of charter schools to evaluate the charter ecosystems created by each state; measures that are not incorporated into the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) evaluations and rankings of state charter school authorization laws.

The present report looks back at the first NACSA rankings, which were released in 2015.

Did “high-quality” charter states (as measured by NACSA) provide greater access to charter schools over the 7 years that followed? I begin by analyzing this question in the next section.

(Note: Descriptive statistics for this analytic sample of states are presented in the Appendix Table A1.)

4. Cheng & Peterson, 2017, 25.
5. DeAngelis et al. (2020), 4.

II. NACSA Quality and Access to Charter Schools

In 2015, NACSA released a report evaluating and ranking states by charter school authorization laws. Their methodology for evaluating these laws was based on the three principles of autonomy, accountability, and, notably, accessibility. Applying these principles, they evaluated each law on four authorizer quality policy measures and four school accountability policy measures (see Table 1).

Table 1. Policies evaluated by NACSA measure

Authorizer Quality Policies	School Accountability Policies
<p>1. Who Authorizes (alternative authorizer): every charter school can be authorized by at least one body other than the local school district</p>	<p>5. Reports on Performance: every authorizer publishes an annual report of the academic performance of the charter schools it oversees</p>
<p>2. Authorizer Standards: the state endorses national professional standards for quality charter school authorizing</p>	<p>6. Performance Management and Replication: every charter school is bound by a charter contract and a set of performance expectations: high-performing charter schools are encouraged to replicate</p>
<p>3. Authorizer Evaluations: a state entity can evaluate authorizers on their practices or the performance of their charter schools—regularly or as needed</p>	<p>7. Renewal Standard: authorizers can close charter schools that don't meet their academic performance expectations</p>
<p>4. Authorizer Sanctions: authorizers face consequences if they have poor practices or a high proportion of persistently failing schools</p>	<p>8. Default Closure: charter schools that perform below a certain minimum threshold are closed</p>

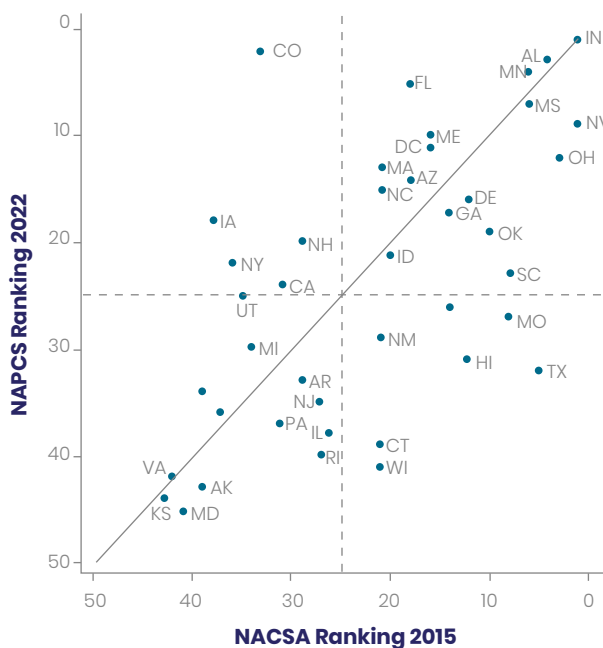
Source: National Association of Charter School Authorizers. (2015). On the Road to Better Accessibility, Autonomy, & Accountability: State Policy Analysis. Available at: https://qualitycharters.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/NACSA_State_Policy_Analysis_2015.pdf

Other charter school organizations have released similar evaluation methodologies. The National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS) released a report in 2022 ranking the various states for their charter school laws. Similar to the NACSA ratings (2015), the NAPCS ratings (2022) consider authorizer quality, data reporting and transparency, and accountability. In Figure 1 below, I plot NACSA ratings (2015) on the horizontal axis against NAPCS ratings (2022) on the vertical axis. In Panel A, I consider rankings, and in Panel B, I consider scores, with consensus “high-quality” states in the top right quadrant and consensus “low-quality” states in the bottom left quadrant. Since scores are used to determine rankings, the two panels look similar. However, scores vary more freely than rankings across states. For example, two states may be separated by a relatively small number of points in score, but the difference may result in a greater ranking gap. Considering both panels together gives us a more comprehensive sense of the similarities between the two systems.

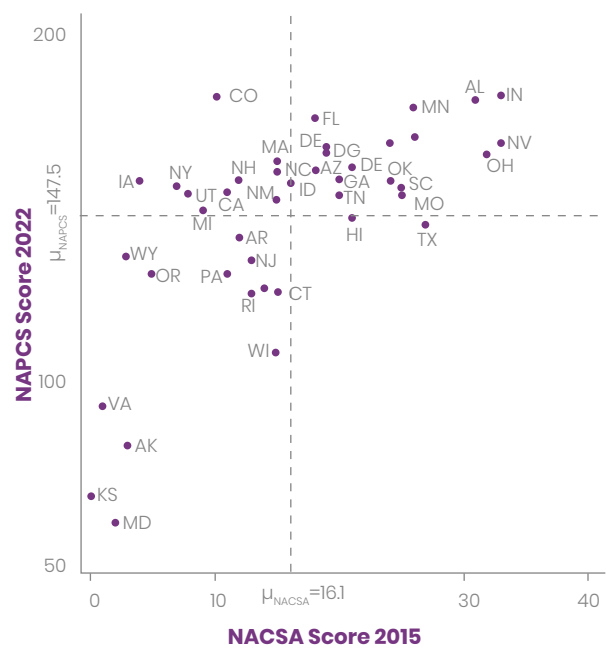
The two measures are modestly correlated (see Figure 1 below). For example, both measures view laws in Indiana, Alabama, and Minnesota favorably and Virginia, Alaska, Kansas, and Maryland critically. There are some discrepancies, of course: Texas, Hawaii, and Missouri are rated favorably by NACSA and critically by NAPCS, while Colorado, Iowa, and New York are rated favorably by NAPCS and critically by NACSA.

Figure 1. NACSA (2015) vs NAPCS (2022)

Panel A. Rankings



Panel B. Scores



According to NACSA, their ratings are based on the foundational belief that “all kids deserve a quality public education” in order to encourage a policy environment in which more kids have “the chance to attend a quality public school.” But have “high-quality” charter authorization laws (as measured by NACSA scores) yielded greater access to charter schools?

Despite their claimed commitment to accessibility, NACSA does not seem to have considered access to charter schools strongly in evaluating charter school authorization laws.

Figure 2 below plots NACSA scores against the proportion of public school students enrolled in charter schools (Panel A) and the proportion of students who live in a ZIP code with a charter school (Panel B). The entities that have provided the most access to charter schools by both metrics (Arizona and Washington, DC) are only slightly above average in terms of NACSA score.

In addition, access to charter schools has not improved over time in highly-ranked NACSA states.

Figure 3 plots the growth in student access to charter schools between 2014-15 and 2021-22. States with average NACSA scores (ranging from 11-20) have provided the greatest access to charter schools, growing from 7.7 percent in 2014-15 to 9.8 percent in 2021-22. NACSA’s top scorers fared no better than their worst scorers, growing from around 5 percent in 2014-15 to roughly 6.5 percent in 2021-22 (see Figure 3, Panel A).

Again, states with supposedly “mediocre” charter school laws (as rated by NACSA) produced the greatest growth in charter school access, despite starting with the highest levels of charter school access.

Over this 8-year period, middle-of-the-road NACSA states grew in charter school access by about 2.1 percentage points. Similarly, NACSA’s top scorers fared no better than their worst scorers, with both the low- and high-rated states growing about 1.5 points in charter school access (see

Figure 3, Panel B). Overall, the NACSA ranking of states is not correlated with growth in access to charter schools. (Regression analysis concurred that there was no meaningful association between NACSA scores and charter school access; see Appendix Table A2.)

As Scafidi and Wearne have previously commented, NACSA’s judgments are based not on outcomes for students, but “on each state’s fidelity to arrays of charter policies created by experts.” On the assumption that these rankings have been supportive of these goals, these “arrays of charter policies” are evidently not increasing access to charter schools for American students and families. As NACSA stated in their 2015 report, these rankings reflect the “policies NACSA believes would strengthen every state charter school law.”

Either NACSA believes increasing access is not important to strengthening charter schools or NACSA was very wrong about the nature of policies that would strengthen charter school laws.

Figure 2. Highly ranked NACSA states do not provide greater access to charter schools

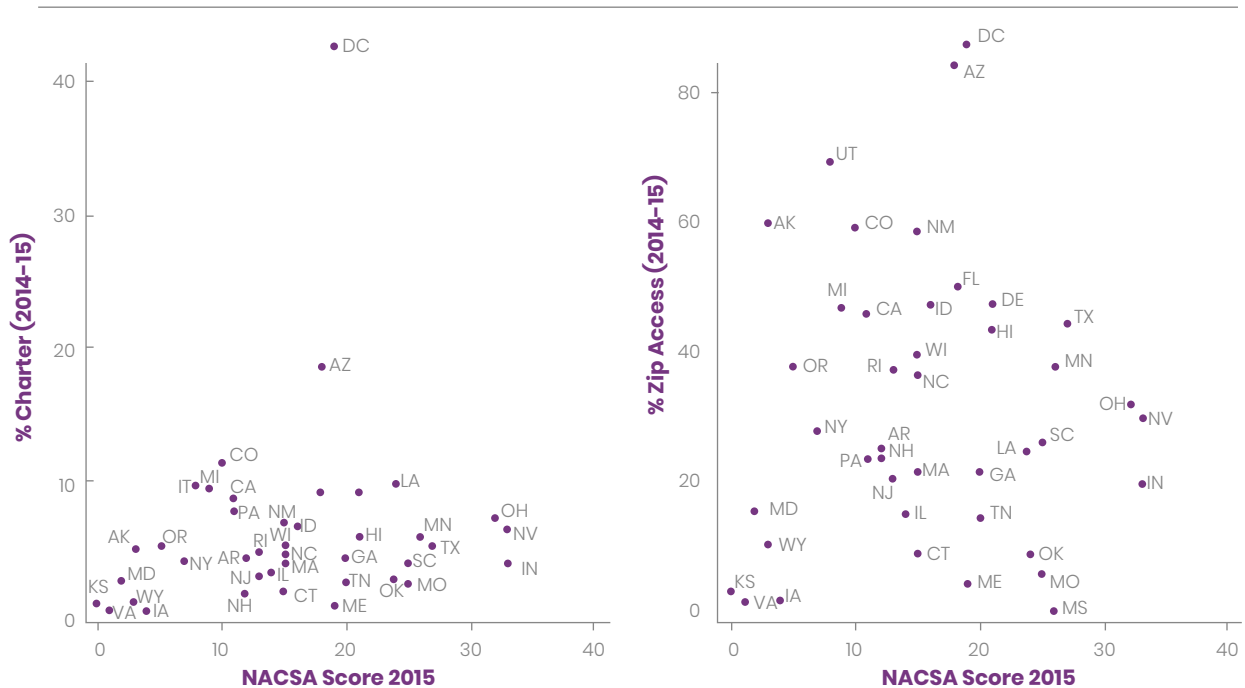
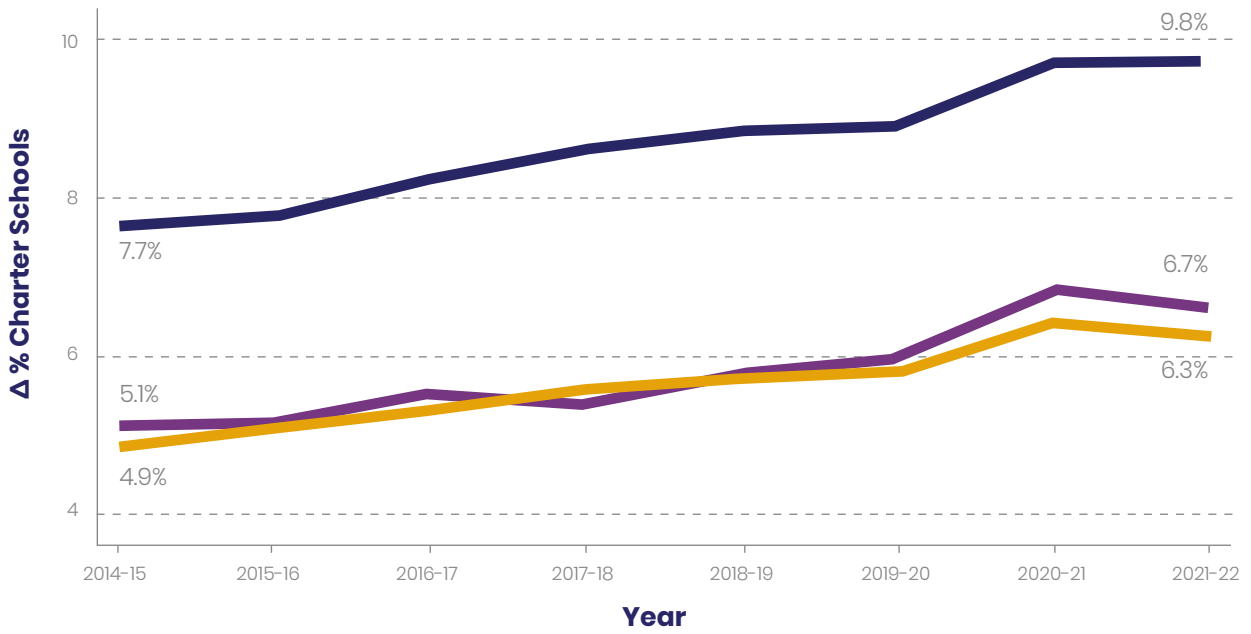


Figure 3. NACSA Scores and Access to Charters Schools

— Top Scores (>20)
 — Middle Scores (11-20)
 — Bottom Scores (<11)

Panel A. Access to charter schools



Panel B. Growth in charter access by NACSA score



III. Politics and NACSA Scores

The two major political parties in the United States offer different visions for education, particularly as it relates to charter schools. The Republican Party generally favors reducing regulatory burdens. The GOP expressed support for charter schools in their 2012 and 2016 party platforms within the broader context of school choice and with no mention of any particular regulations to hold these schools accountable. The Democratic Party expressed similar support for expanding educational options particularly for low-income youth, including charter schools, in their 2012 party platform. However, in both their 2016 and 2020 platforms, the DNC's unqualified support for charter schools took a turn for a more stringent regulatory framework, including banning for-profit charters, increasing accountability and transparency measures, and conditioning federal funding for new charters.

In Section III, I show that more Republican-leaning states have higher NACSA rankings than more Democratic-leaning states, perhaps signaling a desire to pass what NACSA would consider high-quality charter school laws. However, these Republican states offer no better access to charter schools and have fallen behind Democratic states in more recent years.



I began by considering whether a state's political partisanship, measured by presidential election results in 2012, 2016, or 2020, are correlated with NACSA scores or access to charter schools, and found no evidence of a discernible relationship.

I also plotted NACSA scores by partisanship of the state's Governor, House, and Senate in 2014 in Figure 4. Generally speaking, Republican-controlled states fared favorably on NACSA rankings. States with a Republican Governor on average scored 17.8 NACSA score (compared to 13.1 with a Democratic Governor). Similarly, states with Republican House (16.8) and Senate (17.4) control fared favorably to states with Democratic house (14.8) or Senate (14.0) control. States with a Republican trifecta (party control of Governorship, House, and Senate) also scored favorably relative to states with a Democratic trifecta or divided government (see Figure 4). Yet Republican-led states have similar levels of access to charter schools (see Figure 5) and have actually fallen behind Democratic-led states since that time (see Figure 6).

It is worth noting that these differences do not necessarily indicate that charter school policies preferred by Republicans score better on NACSA measures than those preferred by Democrats. Republican-leaning states outnumber Democratic-leaning states in this analysis, and it is impossible to know how Democratic-leaning states that did not pass charter school legislation would have fared in terms of charter school access.

However, the GOP party platforms, charter school legislation passed in Republican-leaning states, and NACSA scores seem to indicate that the Republican party wants to pass high-quality charter school laws and have turned to the national charter school experts at NACSA for insight into what makes a good charter school law. Unfortunately, the years since NACSA's evaluation have revealed that their measures of quality fail to deliver higher levels of access to charter schools, resulting in similar levels of access in Republican- and Democratic-leaning states. Legislators, regardless of partisanship, seeking to increase access to charter schools may find more success by ignoring policy directions from NACSA.

Figure 4. Republican-controlled states tend to have higher NACSA scores

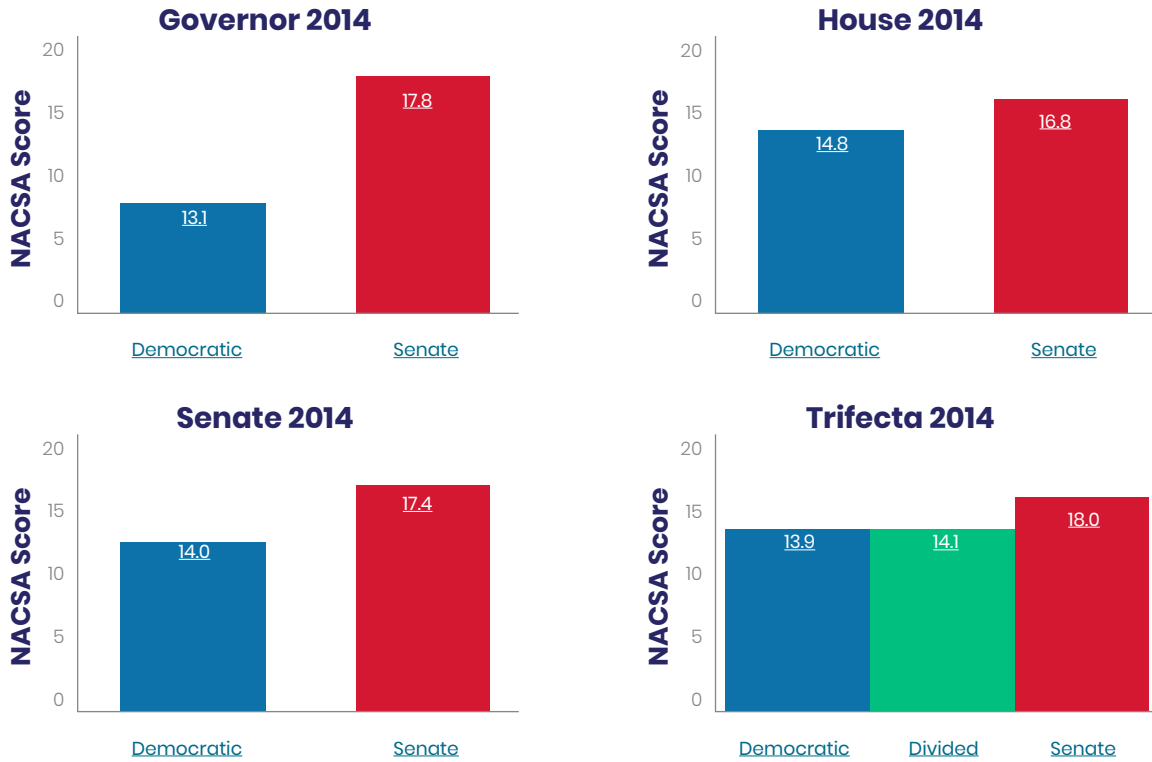
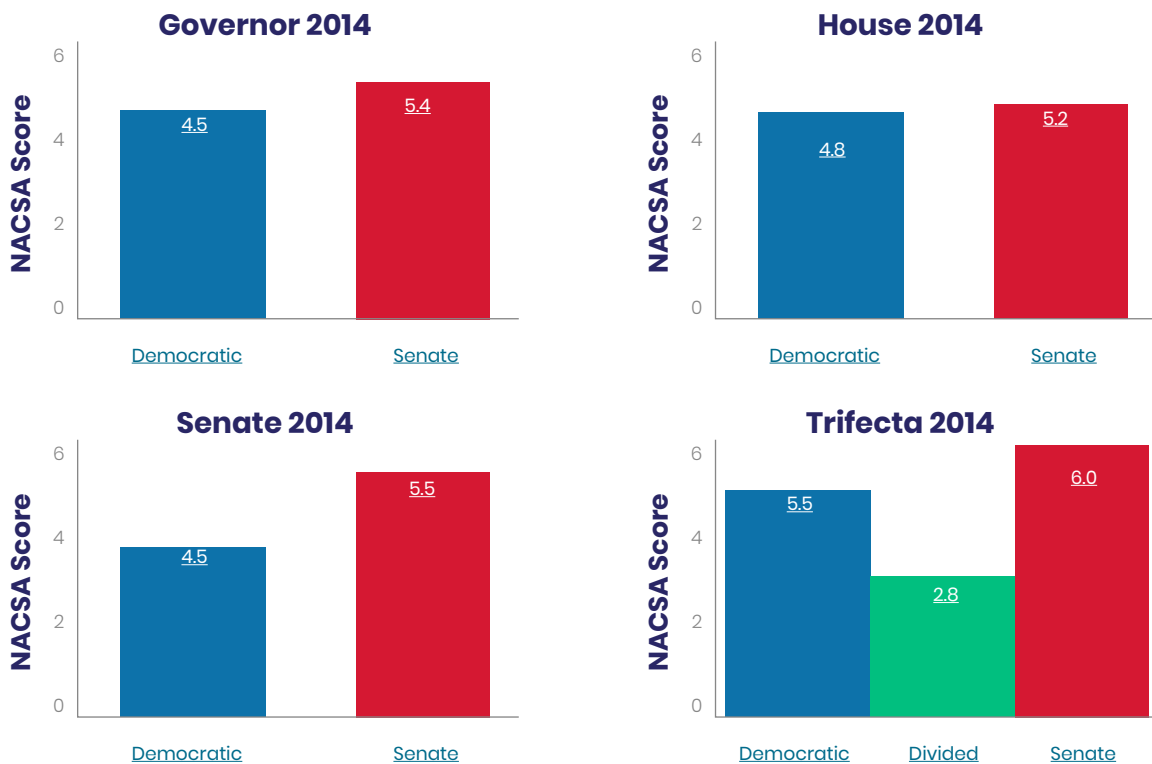


Figure 5. ...but similar access to charters



IV. Politics and Access to Charter Schools

Have Democrat- or Republican-led states provided greater access to charter schools over time? Between 2014-15 and 2021-22, the proportion of public school students attending a charter school has risen from 6.0 percent to 7.5 percent. Over that time, access to charter schools increased, regardless of the partisanship of the state government. If anything, Republican-leaning states fell behind Democratic-leaning states with respect to access to charter schools, despite having stronger NACSA scores.

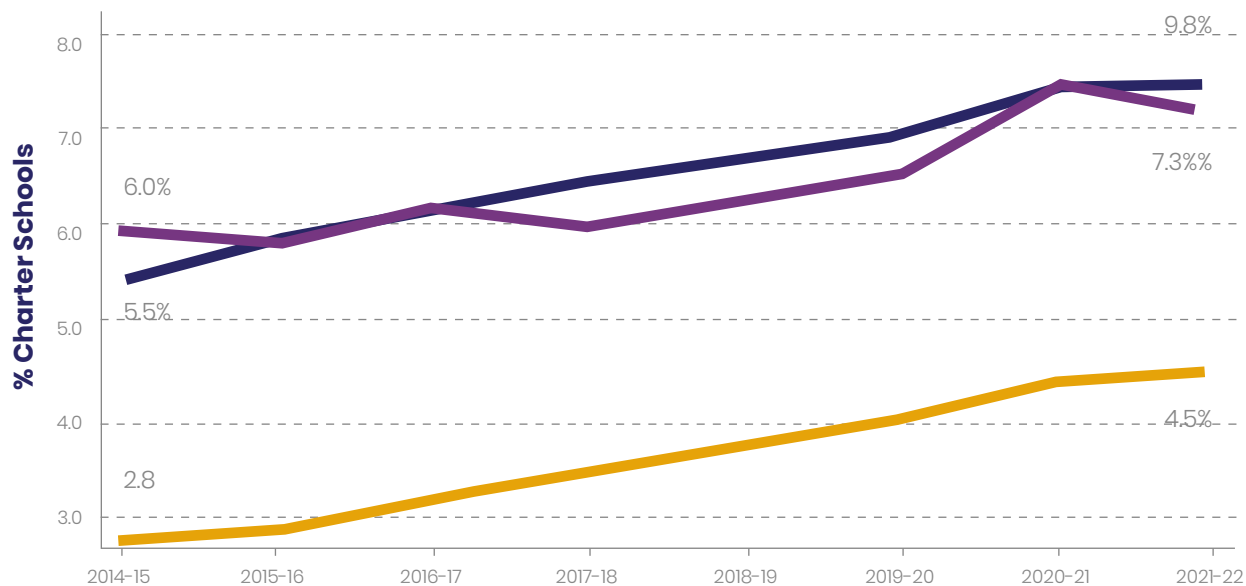
In Figure 6 below, I plot access to charter schools over that period, by Democratic trifecta, Republican trifecta, or divided government. Broadly speaking, access to charter schools grew similarly (about a point and a half), regardless of party control.

Although charter access changed at similar rates, not all states had similar levels of access to charter schools. States in which a single party controlled the trifecta (Governor, House, and Senate) on average had higher levels of access to charter schools than states with divided control. Interestingly, states with a Democratic trifecta had slightly larger charter school growth (Figure 6) than states with a Republican trifecta—despite the fact that the Republican trifecta states had higher NACSA scores (Figure 4). By 2021-22, states with a Democratic trifecta had slightly higher charter school access than states with a Republican trifecta (Figure 6). (Regression analysis failed to identify any statistically significant relationship between partisanship and charter school access. Results were similar using election results from 2012, 2016, and 2020. See Appendix Table A4.)

Figure 6. Charter school access over time by political partisanship

— Republican
 — Democratic
 — Divided

Panel A. Access to charter schools



V. State Demographic Characteristics as a Mediating Factor

Black students are more likely to enroll in public charter schools as compared to other students. However, over the past few years, other groups of students are starting to migrate to charter schools as well. According to data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, Black students composed 31.6 percent of all charter school students in 2005–06, and 24.4 percent in 2021–22. Over the same period, the Black student population in district public schools declined from 16.6 percent to 14.1 percent.

Given these demographic and enrollment trends, it is possible that states with a greater proportion of Black citizens may make a greater effort at increasing access to charter schools, and this relationship may be related to NACSA scores. In Figure 7, I plot access to charter schools by the proportion of Blacks living in each state, delineating by Democratic state government control (Panel A), Republican state government control (Panel B), and divided state government (Panel C).

Against these expectations, I find an inverse relationship between state demographic factors and charter school access. States with greater Black populations like Maryland, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi tended to provide less access to charter schools than states with smaller Black populations like Colorado, Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico. (Regression analyses failed to identify any statistically significant relationship between state demographic characteristics and charter school access; see Appendix Table A5.)

It is surprising that the that group of students who access charter schools the most, Black students, do not have greater access to charter schools. Regardless of partisanship of state officials, states with a greater proportion of Black residents actually provide less access to charter schools. This finding once again calls into question of who benefits from NACSA's quality measures and the viability of those measures to increase access to charter schools over time.

VI. Concluding Thoughts

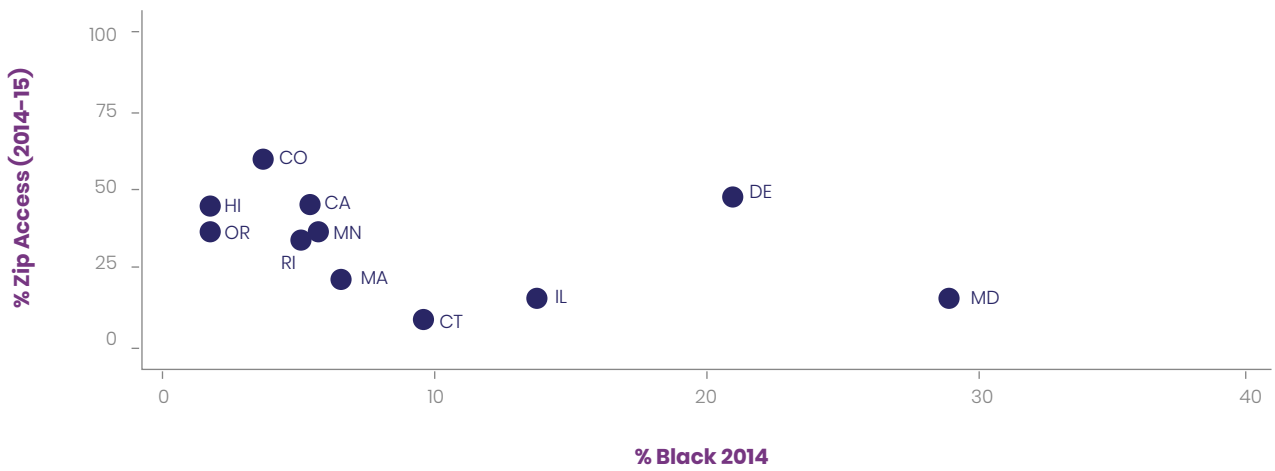
After examining the evidence, it is clear that NACSA’s experts need to rethink how they rate each state’s charter school authorization laws, as their measures of law “quality” have little bearing on any other meaningful indicator of charter school access. Ten years of evidence have failed to demonstrate that “high-quality” NACSA states are capable of delivering any more access to charter schools than “low-quality” NACSA states, despite the fact that their methodology is “informed by years of experience strengthening accessibility, autonomy, and accountability for charter schools.”

The failure of NACSA’s rankings to provide meaningful insights into charter school ecosystems over the past ten years highlights the need for objective and meaningful measures of charter school access and quality to be used when evaluating state policies.

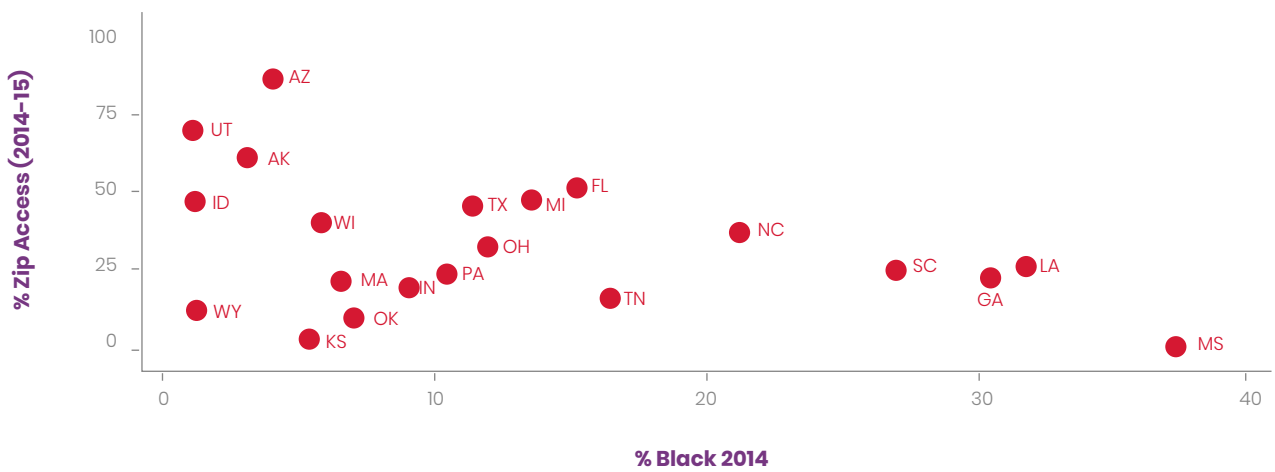
Efi’s Charter School Ecosystem Rankings aims to do exactly that and comes to very different conclusions about the quality of charter school laws across the several states.

Figure 7. Politics and demographics

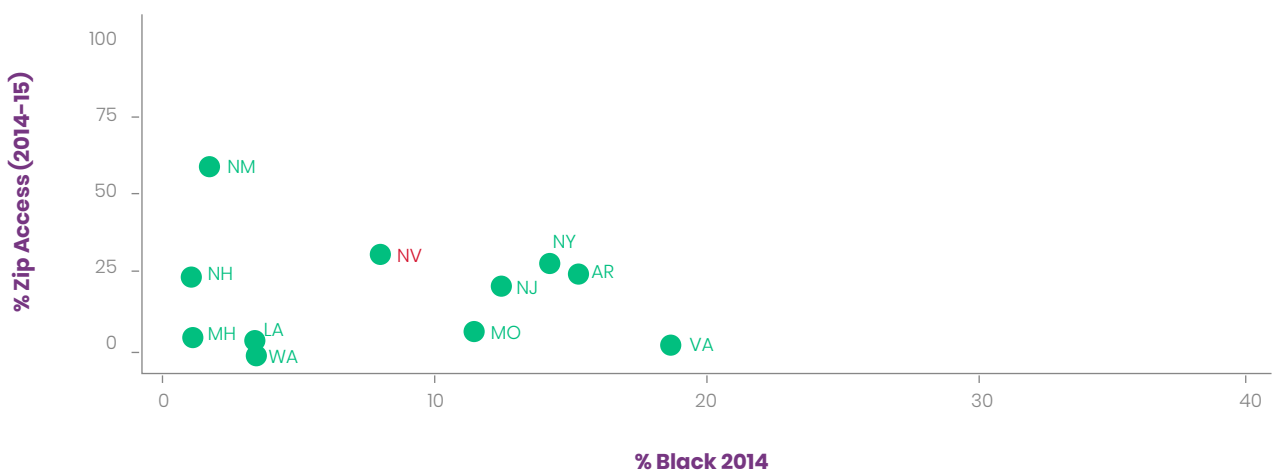
Panel A. Democratic Trifecta



Panel B. Republican Trifecta



Panel C. Dividend



Appendix

Table A1. Analytic sample descriptive statistics

	n (1)	Mean (2)	SD (3)	Min (4)	Max (5)
National Association of Charter School Authorizers (2015)					
State Rank	42	21.9	12.5	1	43
Overall Score	42	15.7	8.8	0	33
National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (2022)					
State Rank	43	23.3	13.1	1	45
Overall Score	43	146.7	27.9	61	181
State Characteristics					
% public school students enrolled in charter schools					
2014-15	41	6.0	7.0	0.1	43.0
2015-16	43	6.0	6.8	0.0	42.5
2016-17	43	6.3	7.0	0.1	43.7
2017-18	43	6.6	7.3	0.1	46.4
2018-19	43	6.8	7.1	0.1	44.2
2019-20	43	7.0	7.0	0.0	42.9
2020-21	43	7.7	7.3	0.0	44.1
2021-22	43	7.6	7.3	0.0	44.4
% students in ZIP code with charter school (2014-15)	43	30.6	22.0	0.0	87.3
% Obama (2012)	43	50.3	11.8	24.7	90.9
Democratic Governor (2014)	42	40.5	49.7	0	100
Democratic House (2014)	42	42.9	50.1	0	100
Democratic Senate (2014)	42	40.5	49.7	0	100
Democratic Trifecta (2014)	42	26.2	44.5	0	100
% Black 2014	43	11.8	11.0	1	48.2

Appendix

Table A2. NACSA scores are not meaningfully associated with access to charter schools

	% Enrolled (2014-15)		% Enrolled (2015-16)		% ZIP Access (2014-15)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Score	0.13 (0.13)		0.11 (0.12)		0.08 (0.39)	
Rank		-0.09 (0.09)		-0.07 (0.09)		-0.04 (0.28)
Constant	3.98 (2.23)	8.00** (2.26)	4.35 (2.17)	7.74*** (2.14)	30.10*** (7.02)	32.25*** (6.93)
n	41	41		42	42	

Note. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. Asterisks indicate level of significance, *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

Table A3. No apparent relationship between political partisanship and NACSA scores

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
% Obama (2012)	-0.03 (0.12)			0.09 (0.22)	-0.05 (0.19)
Democratic Governor (2014)		-0.06 (0.04)		-0.06 (0.04)	
Democratic House (2014)		0.05 (0.05)		0.04 (0.06)	
Democratic Senate (2014)		-0.05 (0.05)		-0.05 (0.05)	
Democratic Trifecta (2014)			-0.03 (0.03)		-0.02 (0.04)
Constant	17.63** (6.06)	17.83*** (1.89)	16.74*** (1.64)	14.01 (9.30)	18.73* (7.98)
n	43	42	42	42	42

Appendix

Table A4. No apparent relationship between Democratic governance and charter school access

PANEL A. % Charter (2014-15)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
% Obama (2012)	-0.01 (0.06)			0.04 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.07)
Democratic Governor (2014)		-0.01 (0.02)		-0.01 (0.02)	
Democratic House (2014)		0.01 (0.02)		0.01 (0.02)	
Democratic Senate (2014)		-0.02 (0.02)		-0.02 (0.02)	
Democratic Trifecta (2014)			0.01 (0.01)		0.01 (0.02)
Constant	5.44 (2.97)	5.51*** (0.84)	4.89*** (0.70)	3.77 (3.96)	6.57 (3.44)
n	40	40	40	40	40
PANEL B. % ZIP Code Access (2014-15)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
% Obama (2012)	-0.08 (0.32)			-0.14 (0.50)	-0.34 (0.39)
Democratic Governor (2014)		-0.09 (0.09)		-0.08 (0.09)	
Democratic House (2014)		0.09 (0.11)		0.11 (0.13)	
Democratic Senate (2014)		-0.04 (0.10)		-0.03 (0.10)	
Democratic Trifecta (2014)			0.06 (0.07)		0.10 (0.09)
Constant	33.07* (16.17)	30.31*** (4.47)	27.73*** (3.68)	36.13 (21.78)	43.44* (18.38)
n	42	42	42	42	42

Note. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. Asterisks indicate level of significance, *** p < 0.001, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

Appendix

Table A5. No apparent relationship between demographic factors and charter school access

PANEL B. % ZIP Code Access (2014-15)	% Charter (2014-15)		% ZIP (2014-15)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
% Obama (2012)	0.03	-0.04	-0.17	-0.33
	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.52)	(0.39)
Democratic Governor (2014)	0.02		0.05	
	(0.03)		(0.19)	
Governor*% Black	0.00		-0.01	
	(0.00)		(0.02)	
Democratic House (2014)	-0.02		-0.07	
	(0.04)		(0.22)	
House*%Black	0.00		0.01	
	(0.00)		(0.02)	
Democratic Senate (2014)	0.00		0.09	
	(0.03)		(0.17)	
Senate*%Black	0.00		-0.01	

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Educational Freedom Institute
20 E. Thomas Rd. Suite 2200
Phoenix, AZ 85012



www.efinstitute.org

