

The Effects of Charter Schools on Early Foreign Language Education in Public Schools

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### Abstract

Education is a notoriously contentious subject in America. Controversy exists and continues to flare up over what content should be taught, how it should be taught, as well as the cost; foreign language is one such subject. The history of foreign language education in the United States (U.S.) reviews current foreign language policies and practices in the U.S. and other countries, as well as the reasons that proponents of foreign language education argue that it must be improved in the U.S. The charter school approach to education was analyzed in the context of market theory to determine if a correlation exists between charter school education and success in a foreign language. The effects of education at a charter school on the success of students in a foreign language may help, hinder, or have no effect at all on students' success.

*Keywords:* foreign language education, charter schools, market theory, bilingualism, Seal of Biliteracy

## **The Effects of Charter Schools on Early Foreign Language Education in Public Schools**

Foreign language education has a long history in the U.S., and today it is significantly lacking in terms of both quality and quantity. Early foreign language education is critical in order to effectively learn the new language (De Bot et al., 2014), but the foreign language education that does occur in the U.S. is often not required—and therefore does not occur—until high school (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011). One potential approach to increasing the quality and quantity of early foreign language education is through charter schools, which have the autonomy and flexibility to innovate and potentially improve early foreign language education.

### **Historical Analysis of Foreign Language Education in the United States**

The development of public education is a fundamental part of creating a nation with common values, a common language, and shared traditions. In the U.S. specifically, public education is closely tied to the expansion of the U.S. from colonies into a unified country in 1776, and foreign language education was an integral element of the education system (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021). Already in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Latin, Greek, German, and French were commonly taught at schools and universities in the United States (Herrera, 2018). Beginning in the 1800s, however, foreign languages began to be perceived negatively by the American public, as an influx of Chinese immigration occurred in the American West, and this resulted in an anti-immigrant attitude and federal legislation that restricted immigration (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021).

Foreign language education came to the forefront of public interest at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the onset of industrialization and urbanization, as 20 million

immigrants, primarily from Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe, arrived between 1880 and 1920 (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021), bringing with them various skills, cultural identities, and—significantly—languages. This brought new attention and concern to the poor societal adaptation of the immigrants (Lee, 1996), particularly in terms of linguistics. In response, the U.S. made Ellis Island a federal immigration station in 1892, passed laws requiring immigrants to pass a literacy test, put immigration quotas in place, and restricted foreign language education (Rury & Watkins, 2021). The assimilation of the newcomers became a priority, and this integration started with language. Several movements arose out of the backlash against immigration, including the English-Only Movement (Flowers, 2019) and the Immigration Restriction League (Decker, 2014). Arguments against bilingualism came from psychologists, as well.

Two schools of thought arose regarding the poor performance of immigrants on intelligence tests: hereditarians believed that intelligence was innately-based and that the immigrants were the descendants of people who were intellectually and genetically inferior; thus, bilingualism was not considered as a factor in their intelligence (Lee, 1996). The other school of thought was the environmentalists, who suggested that bilingualism “retarded cognitive growth and only led to mental confusion” (Lee, 1996, p. 501). Studies of their IQ and academic retardation provided support for the negative cognitive effects of bilingualism. MacNamara (1966) suggested that the lower verbal intelligence of bilingual children was because of a balance effect, in which the acquisition of a second language required the forfeiture of proficiency in the first language. Studies at this time found that bilingual children displayed poorer vocabulary, deficient

articulation, lower standards on written composition and more grammatical errors, and deficiencies in developmental of non-verbal abilities (Lee, 1966).

The effects of these schools of thought were powerful in education, as schooling was a “critical factor in homogenizing an increasingly diverse society by shaping future citizens in views deemed to be essential for the growing nation” (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021, p. 246). The parents of immigrant children encouraged their children to learn English quickly, as this was perceived as an avenue to becoming assimilated as an American. The English-Only Movement was successful in that children learned English, but a major repercussion was the repression of the languages and cultural heritage of immigrants. The studies that had supported this policy by tying bilingualism to negative effects on cognitive development were later deemed unreliable, as the researchers had not controlled for the socioeconomic (SES) differences between bilingual and monolingual subjects and did not sufficiently measure and study differences in the degree of bilingualism of subjects (Lee, 1996). Linguists during the same period, in direct contrast to the findings of psychologists, “continued to provide accounts of children displaying mental advantages from simultaneous exposure to two languages” (Lee, 1996, p. 502).

It was not until the late 1950s that the perception of bilingualism shifted: rather than being viewed as societal or empirical, it took on a cognitive meaning and was recognized as the proficiency of an individual in two languages (Lee, 1996). A landmark study conducted by Peal and Lambert (1962) controlled for sex, age, SES, and language proficiency and found that bilingual children significantly outperformed monolingual children in most verbal and nonverbal intelligence measures, especially in terms of mental manipulation and reorganization of visual symbols, concept formation, and

symbolic flexibility. The study concluded that the strong performance of bilingual children was because of their enhanced mental flexibility and strong concept formation skills; overall, the study indicated cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism (Peal & Lambert, 1962).

Another major development for foreign language education was the onset of the Cold War, in which the U.S. government funded an investigation into schools in the context of the space race. Their findings resulted in the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) (1958), which sought to remediate the state of math, science, and foreign language education by providing funding for the teaching of these subjects, which they found to be critically lacking (NDEA, 1958); the law described the U.S. education system as having imbalances that resulted in a lack of citizens educated in science, math, foreign languages, and technology.

The law provided for language and area centers through institutions of higher education, student loan preference to “students whose academic background indicates a superior capacity or preparation in science, mathematics, engineering, or a modern foreign language” (NDEA, 1958, p. 1584), as well as funding for state education agencies for science, math, and foreign language instruction and stipends to individuals taking advanced training in a modern foreign language. The act also authorized the creation of a commissioner to investigate the lack of quality instruction in foreign language education in order to identify the areas, regions, and countries where certain languages are commonly used, as well as to research effective foreign language teaching methods and develop materials to be used in training foreign language teachers.

### **Current Foreign Language Education in the U.S.**

In the U.S. today, there are four subjects generally accepted as the core subjects: English/language arts, math, science, and social studies. Three of these subjects (English/language arts, math, and science) are subject to federally mandated yearly testing, which means social studies—as well as many other subjects—are not taken as seriously. One of these other subjects is foreign language. According to Pufahl and Rhodes (2011), U.S. policymakers, educators, parents, business leaders, and major research organizations have called for improvements to the American education system for decades, with the goal of preparing students “to become competent world citizens who can communicate effectively in languages other than English” (p. 258). Long-standing elementary foreign language programs have been negatively impacted, however, by economic constraints, the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, and an ambivalence toward foreign language instruction, as the number of public elementary schools offering foreign language education today is declining.

Pufahl and Rhodes (2011) received several explanations from schools for not teaching foreign language education, including a lack of funding, decision-making at the district level, languages not being seen as a core component of an elementary school curriculum, previously existing programs no longer being feasible, a shortage of language teachers, and the existence of extracurricular foreign language instruction options. The majority of schools also cited the negative impact of NCLB, with a specific focus on tested subjects—students may be pulled from foreign language and other non-tested content classes to provide additional math and reading instruction, which are tested subjects. Budget reductions can exacerbate this issue as foreign language is often one of

the first subjects to be cut because it is seen as a luxury compared to math, language arts, and science.

In existing foreign language education programs, a lack of continuity exists from one level of schooling to the next, as “about 50% of elementary schools reported that there was no articulated sequence of instruction for their language students when they entered middle school” (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011, p. 267). Additionally, most American students do not have the opportunity to begin studying a foreign language until middle or high school, in direct contrast to the early age at which students in countries around the world begin learning foreign language. The researchers described U.S. policymakers as “paying lip service to an internationalization of our students’ education” (p. 272) but not recognizing the importance of bilingualism in terms of communication, or the cognitive, social, and academic benefits of learning a foreign language. Overall, insufficient funding is one of the most significant obstacles to “the development of high-quality, long-sequence, well-articulated foreign language programs that allow students to achieve communicative proficiency” (p. 275).

Another issue is the mode of foreign language instruction in U.S. schools, as intensive language instruction such as immersion or content-based language classes have been shown to result in greater gains in language proficiency, but the researchers found that the most common type of foreign language program offered at public elementary schools was the exploratory model, which constitutes introductory exposure to a foreign language. Unlike with immersion or content-based language classes, students are not able to achieve communicative proficiency through the exploratory model, but policymakers continue to prioritize seat time over standards in foreign language instruction, which

prevents school districts from providing quality foreign language education or accurately gauging student achievement.

### ***NDEA***

The impact of the NDEA continues to be felt in the field of education today via the importance of the growing field of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). However, foreign language education has not experienced the same growth or publicity despite the fact that “when bilingualism is a desired goal, enhanced cognitive ability is an added gain to the advantages of learning two languages and two cultures” (Lee, 1996, p. 514). The original NDEA report described foreign language education as critical, but today, most states require just two years of foreign language education as a high school graduation requirement and many allow students to substitute arts credits (Education Commission of the States, 2019). Because of this, most students are exposed to two years of introductory levels to a foreign language, at most. This approach is not supported by research, which has suggested that the length and intensity of exposure, as well as the quality of language input, are significant factors in the development of children’s lexical and grammatical knowledge (De Bot et al., 2014).

### ***English Learners***

Most education related to foreign language education today appears through services for English Learner (EL) students, who, as of 2018, make up 10.2% of public school students (National Center, 2021b) and are enrolled in almost three in four public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Language assistance programs are available for ELs to help them achieve proficiency in English and ensure that they meet academic standards (National Center, 2021b).

Two forms of bilingualism have been identified: additive and subtractive. Additive bilingualism occurs when both languages and cultures of families and communities are valued, resulting in complementary positive influences on the student, while subtractive bilingualism is when two languages are competing (Lee, 1996). This is especially relevant to EL education because EL students often experience the negative effects of subtractive bilingualism; English can replace the first language of students, and also result in a loss of the cultural values and practices associated with the first language. EL services specifically can contribute to subtractive bilingualism, as EL students “often do not fully develop their cognitive abilities in their native language while they must confront instruction in another language at school” (Lee, 1996, p. 513), which can lead to semilingualism, in which children cannot “communicate and function adequately in either language for a number of years” (p. 513).

The U.S. has experienced several notable court cases and passed numerous laws relating to the education of EL students. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974 (EEOA) mandate that “public schools must ensure that EL students can participate meaningfully and equally in educational programs” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014, para. 1). In *Lau v. Nichols* (1974), Chinese-speaking students sued, and the Supreme Court found that the school district had to take steps to make its instructional program available to students and correct language deficiency (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020); following this the EEOA was created and went into effect in August 1974, which affirms that the state must give educational opportunities to students and take appropriate action to overcome language barriers (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020). In 1981, the Supreme Court

case *Castaneda v. Pickard* established a three-part assessment that can be used to determine if a district's EL program is adequate. The implications of these laws and decisions are that school districts are obligated to help EL students learn English, which involves 1) the implementation of programs purposed to help EL students; 2) the evaluation of these programs to ensure that they work as intended; and 3) not providing English-only instruction to students who are not proficient in English, as this is exclusion based on language. As the stated goal of EL education is for students to be classified temporarily as EL students (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020), the focus of this area of education continues to primarily be on integrating these students as quickly as possible into the classroom by teaching solely English, reflecting the nature of what Lee (1996) called "American culture's ambivalent perspective on language maintenance of minorities" (p. 517).

Today, challenges facing American public education include highly diverse classroom settings, pressure from neoliberal politics, and debates about citizenship education (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021). Policymakers and public school leaders are therefore faced with the task of creating unified and educated citizens through the education of "increasing numbers of immigrant and refugee children" (p. 246). The state-based nature of American education complicates the task, as the U.S. has a very decentralized school system; local government additionally has a strong influence on school funding and the districting of students. Debate has also reopened regarding access to education, equity in education and the role of public education in modern societies due to COVID and virtual education. As of 2018, 91% of U.S. children attend public schools

(National Center, 2021a), but competition between private and public education has been ongoing for several hundred years (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021).

### **Foreign Language Education in Other Countries**

A significant difference between foreign language education in the U.S. and in other countries is the age at which students begin learning them. Notably, the American states that do require a foreign language make it a high school graduation requirement (Education Commission of the States, 2019), meaning that most American students are not exposed to a second language until the age of 14 or 15. Only 5 states, however, have an absolute requirement that students take a foreign language in order to graduate; many allow students to substitute credits in fine arts or technology, or have no requirement pertaining to foreign language at all (Education Commission of the States, 2019).

In the EU and Asia, foreign language instruction begins in early primary school—often in their equivalent of kindergarten or 1<sup>st</sup> grade (Eurostat, 2015; Li, 2007). De Bot et al. (2014) found that “the number of pupils in primary education that are being taught at least one foreign language is on the rise, with pupils being offered foreign languages at an increasingly younger age” (p. 527). This early age is an important factor in foreign language education, as the minds of students are more open to learning a new language at an earlier age, when their brains are still developing in terms of linguistics. Studies show that students are better able to acquire new languages, and with little to no accent, when they are exposed to a second language at a younger age (Montrul, 2008).

It is also important for it to begin early, rather than in high school. In a study of English as a Foreign Language Learner (EFL) students in the Netherlands, “children in early EFL programmes scored significantly higher than children who were not in such

programmes” (De Bot et al., 2014, p. 539). De Bot et al. (2014) also found that the intensity of exposure, or the frequency of lessons, is important, as “more than 60 min of English classes per week appear to be necessary to lead to significant gains” (p. 544). It is therefore critical for American public schools to increase foreign language instruction, and at the early childhood level (Lee, 1996). Due to the elasticity of younger minds in terms of learning new languages, it is important to capitalize on this period, as opposed to the current practice of exposing older students to two years of introductory levels of a language when they are past being able to easily acquire languages.

### *Europe*

Foreign language education in the U.S. contrasts sharply with the foreign language education practices and policies of other nations. 27 of the 45 countries in Europe are members of the European Union (EU), an organization that has significant influence on the educational policies of its member states. In the EU, as of 2013, 82% of all primary school students were taking at least one foreign language, and 5% were studying two or more (Eurostat, 2015). Davin (2017) described the contrast between U.S. foreign language education policy and that of the EU, in which citizens are expected to be multilingual “due to the European Union’s emphasis on the teaching and learning of the mother tongue plus two world languages in school” (pp. 488-489).

### *Asia*

Foreign language education is also a significant aspect of education in Asia, as it is seen as integral to staying competitive in the global market. In China, for example, the perceived importance of English has increased based on the aggressive steps by the Chinese government to implement English language education by publishing the National

English Language Teaching Guidance in 2001, which requires that students begin learning English in the first year of primary school (Li, 2007). The document additionally delineates minimum proficiency levels that students should reach at three stages (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016) and treats English as one of three required subjects in secondary school, along with Chinese literature and mathematics. Li finds that “decisions on [foreign language education in primary schools] have been affected primarily by the socio-political context,” (p. 156), and foreign language education policy “represents the exercise of political power” (p. 152) in China.

Foreign language education is likewise significant in Japan. Japan’s current goal is the diversification of foreign language education, as foreign language education for the last century has been dominated by European languages (Kobayashi, 2013). In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education set up a project aimed at diversifying foreign language education in high schools, in which several local high schools in each region “were chosen and funded to provide solid foreign language education other than English” (Kobayashi, 2013, p. 271). English and Chinese are perceived as the languages of globalization due to their importance in the business world, and foreign language education in Japan today is characterized by a shift from European languages to Asian languages in what Kobayashi (2013) described as an “era of transition from the West to the East (p. 279).

### **Benefits of Foreign Language Education**

Foreign language education overall has been found to have numerous benefits. Bialystok (2021) conducted a study of adult patients in a memory clinic and found that healthy bilinguals outperformed monolinguals in cognitive tasks, possibly have better

brain structure, and experience slower cognitive decline associated with dementia. The study also found that “bilingualism offered some protections against symptoms of dementia” (p. 361), and that bilingualism is beneficial in maintaining cognitive functions. Additional benefits of bilingualism include enhanced vocational opportunities, increased cognitive reserve, and enhanced abilities to think flexibly and abstractly about language. In a study of South African children, researcher Ianco-Worrall (1972) found that, in terms of semantic development, bilingual children were two to three years ahead of monolinguals. A 1977 study of bilingual Hebrew-English children found that they outperformed monolingual children in symbol substitution tasks (Ben-Zeev, 1977). Lee (1996) concluded that “the literature thus strongly suggests the cognitive advantages of bilingualism, particularly with regard to metalinguistic awareness” (p. 505). Metalinguistic awareness (MLA) “involves the ability to objectify language, to focus on the form, rather than the meaning, of sentences,” and it is an important aspect of intellectual development (p. 504).

Lee (1996) also noted that a positive relationship appears to exist between bilingualism and a number of other cognitive measures, including “enhanced ability to restructure perceptual solutions, stronger performances in rule discovery tasks, greater verbal ability and verbal originality, and precocious levels of divergent thinking and creativity” (p. 506). Additionally, bilinguals may develop higher order thinking, including increased knowledge of language as a symbolic system, higher levels of symbolic and abstract thinking, and the ability to code-switch. The literature on the cognitive effects of bilingualism is not, however, conclusively positive; a 1977 study of Spanish-English bilingual children found that, though bilinguals performed better than

monolinguals in verbal transformation and analyses of structural complexity, “these same bilinguals also showed some delay in vocabulary and grammatical structures” (p. 506).

Bilingualism also has positive national implications. Pufahl and Rhodes (2011) asserted that quality foreign language education “would contribute greatly to our nation’s capacity to maintain national security, promote international cooperation, compete effectively in a global economy, and enhance our domestic well-being” (p. 273).

De Bot et al. (2014) found that factors that affect second language acquisition include socioeconomic background of children, teachers’ didactic skills and methodological knowledge, language aptitude, and out-of-school exposure.

### **Charter Schools**

One relatively new approach to education in general is through school choice, which theoretically “creates competitive educational environments by giving parents and students the ability to use public money to attend private schools” (Bohte, 2004, p. 501). However, “large-scale voucher programs like these are extremely controversial and exist in only a handful of American cities. Charter schools have been presented as a less controversial approach to school choice programs that use vouchers and allow public funds to flow to private schools” (p. 501). Charter schools are described by Berends (2015) as:

public schools funded by the government, but their governance structure differs from that of traditional public schools in that they are established under a charter run by parents, educators, community groups, or private organizations to encourage school autonomy and innovation. In exchange for such autonomy and flexibility, charter schools are held to current state and federal accountability

standards, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). (p. 161)

As of 2018, charter schools represented 6.2% of all public schools, a number that is rising steadily (Cordes, 2018). They are a type of school choice option that has been growing significantly for the past two decades (Berends, 2015) and have been by turns lauded and criticized for their novel approach to learning. In this setting, innovation and creativity is expected, as encouraging charter schools to use their autonomy to experiment, innovate, and create new educational opportunities is one of the stated purposes of over 90% of state charter laws (Wohlstetter et al., 2013). If charter schools do not perform well, they can have their contract revoked, which gives charter schools an incentive to provide a quality education. Because of the unique position of charter schools regarding state education directives, charter schools offer the possibility of using diverse approaches to foreign language education that would not be possible at traditional public schools. Advocates argue that charter schools are more innovative and responsive to the needs of students (Bettinger, 2005) based on market theory (Friedman & Friedman, 1980); increased competition additionally will improve the academic outcomes of students at local public schools (Bettinger, 2005). Critics point to institutional theory, or the idea that public schools will not change (Berends, 2015), as well as the negative effect of the existence of charter schools on neighboring public schools, who lose students—and critical funding—as a result.

### ***Enrollment***

Students are able to enroll at charter schools voluntarily, giving them the choice between going to the traditional public school in their district, or a charter school. Bettinger (2005) found that 70% of Michigan charter schools are oversubscribed, and

thus admit students randomly. When oversubscription occurs in charter schools, parents can apply to have their children accepted through a lottery system, which ensures that cream skimming, or only accepting the best students, does not occur (Berends, 2015). Devall et al. (2019) asserted that “access to high-quality schools is persistently unequal in the United States” (p. 248), and school choice policies attempt to address this issue by giving more options to parents who are low-income or racial minorities. Localities with charter schools serve more low-income students and students of color, which is significant because these students score lower, on average, in reading and math compared to wealthier, whiter students in areas without charter schools (Cordes, 2018). Charter schools also serve “students whose initial test scores in both math and reading are significantly worse than students in the neighboring public schools” (Bettinger, 2005, p. 139). They are attractive to parents because they allow students to escape failing traditional public schools and go to schools with “more innovative and less bureaucratic educational settings” (Bohte, 2004, p. 501). Bettinger (2005) noted that research has shown that charter schools open in areas with greater racial diversity, which Schlomer et al. (2007) described as resulting in more diverse student populations at charter schools.

### ***Market Theory***

The primary argument for charter schools is based on market theory, specifically through the arguments of economist Milton Friedman. He believed that education is extremely influential in developing a common set of values and a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge on the part of the citizenry, which is critical for a stable and democratic society (Friedman, 1955). Levin (1991) outlined three major reasons for choice in education: 1) families should have the right to select the type of education they

want for their children; 2) families should have the right to choose the specific school that they feel best fits the education needs of their child; and 3) choice in schools will result in competition and improvements across the board in terms of school efficiency and student achievement. Friedman described the American public school system as “an island of socialism in a free market sea” (Friedman & Friedman, 1980, p. 154), and Walberg and Wang (2001) described the historical shift of school funding from local taxpayers to state government as making schools less efficient and accountable, while “programs that allow parents to choose the schools their children attend-private or public-will improve the quality of the participating schools” (Walberg & Wang, 2001, p. 28).

Friedman therefore sought to integrate free market principles with the school system and introduced the idea of market theory in education. He argued for the creation of a voucher system, the benefits of which would include a reduction in the amount of direct government involvement in education and gains in the quality of schools and education available to students through the introduction of flexibility to school systems (Friedman, 1955). Specifically, private initiative and enterprise would introduce new educational ideas and methods to the classroom and increase the variety of educational options available to students.

With a voucher system, parents would be given a piece of paper redeemable at schools for a specific amount of money that would go toward their children’s tuition. Friedman supported the idea by pointing to the economic perspective, as vouchers would introduce competition to the monopoly on education by traditional public schools (Friedman, 1955), which are totally government-funded. This new system would let different schools explore various teaching approaches and methods, as well as allow them

to specialize and focus on specific areas of interest for students, such as language, the arts, STEM, or business. Economically, the introduction of vouchers has the potential to improve local traditional public schools, as they must respond to competition by private and other public schools by improving the education they provide in order to keep the funding they receive for students. Vouchers would also provide an incentive for traditional public schools to spend the money they do have more effectively and efficiently, as their funding would no longer be guaranteed (Friedman, 1955).

Friedman and Friedman (1980) also discussed the integral role of parents in education, arguing that parents are the best advocates for their children, as they “generally have both greater interest in their children's schooling and more intimate knowledge of their capacities and needs than anyone else” (p. 160). By introducing market theory to the American school system, parents would be given a greater ability to directly express their support or opposition for the educational practices and policies of schools by choosing where to send their children (Friedman, 1955). The market approach would also allow parents “to choose the type of schooling that reflects their political and religious values” (Levin, 1991, p. 149). Without vouchers, increasing centralization and bureaucracy in American education has resulted in a decrease in the quality of education, which could be remediated by increased input by the consumers of education, which are parents and students (Friedman, 1955).

Charter schools draw significantly upon the voucher system model, as they represent the ability for parents and students to have choice in education. Traditional public schools hold a significant monopoly on education, which allows them to “spend dollars less efficiently without much bottom-up accountability” (DeAngelis, 2021, p.

225). Regardless of negative results and a lack of satisfaction by parents, traditional public schools generally continue to receive the same amount of funding, and a lack of incentives to spend wisely permits schools to “allocate more dollars toward the number of administrators and support staff rather than direct instruction” (p. 226). Bettinger (2005) found that, in Michigan, significant competition was introduced in some districts through the arrival of charter schools. This competition is fundamentally economic, because “when students exit traditional public schools and enroll in charter schools, these declines in enrollment are typically accompanied by losses in funding” (Bohte, 2004, p. 502). When faced with competition—and therefore, the possibility of losing students—traditional public schools “must undertake reforms and search for ways to improve their performance” (Bohte, 2004, p. 501).

### ***Traditional Public School Response***

One issue with charter schools is that they are often experimental in nature, which entails the inherent risk of being unsuccessful. Charter schools are not held to all of the requirements and standards of traditional public schools, which may be harmful to students. Concerns have also been raised regarding the effect of charter schools on nearby traditional public schools due to the potential for charter schools to take their best students, or cream skimming. Gray (2009) noted that, due to the introduction of competition for students that traditional public schools want to keep, school districts have little incentive to authorize the creation of charter schools. Without competition, traditional public schools hold monopolies on local education, and charter schools threaten the market share controlled by traditional public schools. Bohte (2004) noted that “in some cases, opponents of charter schools react to competition by trying to thwart

their progress” (p. 503). Another issue with the introduction of charter schools is the adverse effects they could have on struggling public schools; the competition may result in clustering of the most marginalized students, and could also “encourage schools to focus on superficial aspects, such as marketing, rather than improve curriculum and instruction” (Devall et al., 2019, p. 248).

Competition in schools can affect student performance in both charter and traditional public schools for two possible reasons: first, charter school competition can encourage administrators in public schools to “initiate programmatic innovations that eventually contribute to better student performance” (Bohte, 2004, p. 504), and second, overall student achievement may increase as students with ‘performance problems’ opt to attend charter schools. The first reason is reliant on innovation by traditional public schools, as “competition will create an incentive for poor performers to innovate” (p. 504). With this in mind, traditional schools can respond in several ways in order to increase their competitiveness; this includes improving their own efficiency and effectiveness of their instruction (Devall et al., 2019), making administrative changes to encourage quicker reactions to charter schools and more openness to change, or adjusting curricula or academic programs that are offered (Bohte, 2004). Programmatic changes may involve introducing all-day kindergarten programs, foreign language programs, after school programs, arts and drama programs, and gifted student programs. These changes can work to influence the perception of parents toward a traditional public school by demonstrating the ability to compete in terms of quality and innovation in education.

### ***Benefits***

Contrary to concerns that the presence of charter schools will result in decidedly negative effects on traditional public schools, studies have provided mixed results at best. In a Michigan study Bettinger (2005) found that “charter schools have had no significant effect on student achievement in neighboring public schools” (p. 134), while in another study, Bohte (2004) found that “the presence of charter schools contributes to performance gains in traditional public schools” (p. 515). In a study of New York City schools, Cordes (2018) found that charter expansion “can improve performance at all public schools due to increased competition and opportunities to innovate and share successful strategies” (p. 62). Rather than taking away resources and hurting nearby students, the study found that “students whose schools are near charters do better, and the closer the charter school is, the better these students do” (Cordes, 2018, p. 64).

Additionally, the effects of charter schools on neighboring schools increased as the density of charter schools increased: students at traditional public schools within a one-mile radius of three or more charter schools performed better in math compared to students at traditional public schools with just one charter school in the neighborhood.

Another significant factor was the quality of charter schools, as high-quality charter schools had greater spillover effects on neighboring public schools (Cordes, 2018).

### ***Funding***

According to Bettinger (2005), charter schools receive substantially less funding than public schools; Bettinger determined that Michigan charter schools receive, on average, 97% of state and federal money for each student, but no local funding, nor funding for school buildings. Specifically, the schools in question received “over \$1000

less per student than comparable public schools” (p. 135). A study of Wisconsin charter schools (DeAngelis, 2021) found that they receive, on average, 22% less funding per pupil compared to traditional public schools. While charter schools experience a comparative lack of funding, many have been found to be more cost-effective than traditional public schools. In the Wisconsin study, DeAngelis (2021) found that “charter schools tend to be more cost-effective than traditional public schools” by about 30 percent (p. 225) and produce 2.27 more points on the Accountability Report Card for every \$1,000 spent on traditional public schools. This is significant because of the cost of education in the U.S.—as of 2020, the United States spends over \$660 billion, or over \$13,000 per student, on K-12 education per year (DeAngelis, 2021).

### ***Access***

Devall et al. (2019) found that competition among schools may have a larger impact on achievement of minority students. A longitudinal study by Schlomer et al. (2007) of charter school students in Wisconsin found that, across grade levels, charter school students performed better than traditional public school students with ‘robust’ effects across all races, including very positive effects for Whites and Hispanics. Charter schools in general also often have higher minority enrollments compared to traditional public schools, and “about a quarter of all charter schools in the United States cite the provision of services to special student populations as one of the primary reasons for their existence” (Bohte, 2004, p. 505). Bohte (2004) noted, for example, that many charter schools in Washington, D.C. “serve substantial numbers of resource-intensive student populations, such as those with language or special education needs (p. 505). Among at-

risk students, satisfaction rates with the charter experience were higher; many cited a perception of greater safety and caring staff at charter schools.

### ***Factors that Lead to Success in Charter Schools***

Berends (2015) found numerous factors that were related to student achievement in charter schools, including longer school days, school-wide focus on achievement, school behavioral policies, coaching and teacher feedback, and data-based decision making. Strong leadership was also integral; first, successful charter school programs had a creator or visionary responsible for “starting the school and shaping its initial vision” (Schlomer et al., 2007, p. 571). Second, those charter schools also had a competent, day-to-day administrator. Another aspect of charter schools that is influential in their success is their ability to adapt and respond to the needs of students in a community in a way that traditional public schools cannot; by nature, charter schools are set up to offer new approaches to learning in order to best teach their students. For example, charter schools are uniquely able to provide services for EL students because of the autonomy and flexibility provided by their charters, which allows them to respond to the needs of students and the community (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020).

Finally, Devall et al. (2019) found that the design of educational policies is critical in the success of charter schools, especially in terms of their “impacts on student achievement and ability to reduce inequality” (p. 271). They also found that “the type of school-choice policy and student demographics moderated the effects of competition on student achievement” (p. 247).

### **Limitations**

In order to determine whether a correlation exists between charter school attendance and foreign language achievement, the achievement of students in foreign

language in charter schools and traditional public schools must be compared. However, no standardized assessment of foreign language occurs at the elementary—or any other—level in American public schools. The Seal of Biliteracy represents an opportunity to collect data in order to identify effects of charter schools on foreign language education

The Seal of Biliteracy is a recent program that started in 2008 in California as a “movement to reverse the deficit view of English Learners to instead honor and recognize them for their proficiency in English and another language while preparing all students for global citizenship” (Black, 2020, p. 4). It is an award given to an individual by a school, school district, or state that recognizes proficiency in two or more languages (p. 5), which can be added to a student’s high school diploma or transcript (Davin, 2017); students must demonstrate proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in order to earn the Seal. It is designed to demonstrate bilingualism and biliteracy to future employers and universities (Davin, 2017), and “has the potential to raise the visibility of world language education and influence public opinion about the value of bilingualism in the United States” (p. 495).

As of 2020, 40 states and Washington, D.C. have a state Seal of Biliteracy program (Black, 2020). An important focus for the movement is equity for English Learners; during the 2018-19 school year, 33,128 current and former English Learners earned the Seal of Biliteracy, out of 108,199 total Seals of Biliteracy awarded that year. California has consistently awarded the most Seals of Biliteracy, and it also has the most English Learners and former English Learners.

There are several issues with using the Seal of Biliteracy as a measure of the achievement in foreign language education of students in charter or traditional public

schools; 1) each state determines a particular level of proficiency required to earn the Seal; 2) students usually take the Seal of Biliteracy test in high school, so results would not reflect their early foreign language education achievement; 3) the Seal of Biliteracy is still in its infancy; and 4) data do not exist that can be used to correlate earning the Seal with the type of school attended. Because data are not collected on the type of school that students attend by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the organization that provides Seal of Biliteracy assessments, the usability of the Seal of Biliteracy as a measure of student achievement in foreign language for the comparison of public schools and charter schools is effectively negated.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Bettinger (2005) noted that “the ideal way to identify the effect [of charter schools on the students who attend them and neighboring public schools] would be to use longitudinal data” (p. 139). This would allow researchers to analyze the long-term effect of charter schools on early foreign language acquisition and would help to moderate the effects on data from students who have just started attending a charter school, which may skew the data. Cordes (2018) also called for further research in the form of a longitudinal study, which “is needed to explore whether performance gains and school-level responses are maintained over the long run and to examine whether charter schools affect students who live nearby in other ways” (p. 67). Longitudinal studies may also be preferable to the institution of nationwide standardized testing based on the negative effects of NCLB on the education system; introducing more assessment requirements would be counterintuitive and could be detrimental to students and teachers.

## Conclusion

Foreign languages have been an integral element of American education since before the founding of the U.S.; foreign language education later developed a negative connotation, however, due to immigration, especially during the period from 1880-1920 (Wilmers & Ylimaki, 2021). Studies at the time did not control for socioeconomic differences between monolinguals and bilinguals, and supported the idea that bilingualism resulted in lower intelligence due to hereditary or environmental causes (Lee, 1996). The balance effect was also proposed by MacNamara (1966), which postulated that the acquisition of a second language necessitates a corresponding loss in the first language. Later studies, however, did control for relevant factors, and the perception of bilingualism became more positive as it took on a more cognitive meaning, as opposed to societal or empirical (Lee, 1996).

Currently, foreign language education policy has been influenced by the NDEA and the learning needs of ELs. The NDEA established a need for better foreign language education in the U.S., but this has not been reflected in U.S. education to the degree that math and science have been implemented. Instead, foreign language is not a core subject, and most states require only two years of foreign language education in order to graduate (Education Commission of the States, 2019). Many states also allow students to bypass this requirement by taking arts credits instead. This means that students are exposed to just two years of a foreign language, at most, and this usually occurs in high school, which significantly contrasts the length of exposure and quality of language input that have been found to be critical in learning a foreign language (De Bot et al., 2014).

About 10% of public school students are classified as EL students (National Center, 2021b), so EL services are an important aspect of foreign language education in the U.S. today. Through several notable laws and Supreme Court cases, EL students have been found to have the right to participate equally in education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2014) and to have educational opportunities and EL services that assist students in effectively learning English (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020). The goal of EL services is for students to be classified as ELs only temporarily, so that they are able to learn English and be integrated into classrooms.

The foreign language policies of the U.S. are at odds with those of other countries. In the EU, over 80% of primary school students were taking at least one foreign language in 2013 (Eurostat, 2015). China requires that students start learning English in their first year of primary school (Li, 2007), and Japan has taken steps to diversify its foreign language education because it has been dominated by European languages for much of the last century (Kobayashi, 2013). Foreign languages are also seen as important in other countries due to their importance in being competitive in the global business market; Chinese and English, for example, are viewed as the languages of globalization in Japan (Kobayashi, 2013).

Another significant aspect of foreign language education is the cognitive implications for language learners. Numerous cognitive benefits are associated with bilingualism, including increased cognitive reserve (Bialystok, 2021), enhanced metalinguistic awareness (Lee, 1996), semantic development (Ianco-Worrall, 1972), and higher levels of symbolic and abstract thinking (Lee, 1996). Based on the lack of adequate foreign language education in the U.S., however, charter schools have been

proposed as a new approach to education that may more effectively provide foreign language instruction than traditional public schools.

Charter schools are public schools that are government-funded, but they operate under a charter and have significant autonomy and the ability to innovate in terms of the education they provide; they are held accountable for the quality of their education through state and federal standardized testing (Berends, 2015). The establishment of charter schools is supported by market theory (Friedman, 1955), in which competition is introduced to the traditional public school system by offering parents more choice in where to send their children to school. According to market theory, this will create incentives for schools—traditional and charter—to innovate and provide higher quality education in order to compete for more students.

Several concerns have been raised against the establishment of charter schools; first, critics note that cream skimming may occur, in which charter schools take the best students from traditional public schools, leading to adverse effects on nearby traditional public schools. Charter schools are also by nature exempt from some of the requirements and standards applied to traditional public schools, which may result in a lower quality of education for charter school students. Finally, the introduction of competition to the public school system may encourage schools to focus on marketing and other superficial factors, instead of on providing a better education (Devall et al., 2019).

When oversubscription occurs, or more students want to attend a charter school than there are spots available, students are subject to enrollment through a lottery system. This effectively negates the cream skimming-issue, as charter schools do not have control over who is accepted into the school. While charter schools do not have to follow the

same rules that traditional public schools do, they are held accountable through state and federal standardized testing, which ensures that students are still receiving a quality education; if charter schools do not deliver, they can be shut down. Studies on the effects of charter schools on neighboring schools have had mixed results, ranging from no effect to a small positive effect (Bettinger, 2005; Bohte, 2004; Cordes, 2018).

While charter schools are government-funded, they receive considerably less funding than public schools (Bettinger, 2005). They have also been found to be more cost-effective than traditional public schools (DeAngelis, 2021). Charter schools also disproportionately positively affect minority students (Devall et al., 2019; Schlomer et al., 2007), in addition to serving significant numbers of student populations that are resource-intensive, including students with language or special education needs (Bohte, 2004). Factors that have been found to lead to success in charter schools include longer school days, a focus on achievement, behavioral policies, coaching and teacher feedback, data-based decision making, and strong leadership (Berends, 2015; Schlomer et al., 2007). An inherent aspect of charter schools that can make them successful is the autonomy and flexibility that they have, which allows them to adapt and respond to the needs of their communities (National Charter School Resource Center, 2020).

Due to the lack of standardized testing in foreign languages, it is not currently possible to quantitatively assess the effects of charter schools on early foreign language education in public schools. Programs such as the Seal of Biliteracy offer the opportunity for data to be collected in order to conduct such a study; additionally, researchers have recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted in order to assess the performance

of charter schools (Bettinger, 2005; Cordes, 2018). Through such studies, the effects of charter schools on early foreign language education in public schools could be analyzed.

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