TRENTON, N.J. — Attending a Newark, N.J., charter school that participated in the city’s common enrollment system had a "large positive effect" on student test scores in math and reading and those effects lasted for up to three years, according to a new study from The Manhattan Institute, a conservative policy group.

Marcus Winters, a senior fellow at The Manhattan Institute who authored the report analyzed state Department of Education data for the school years 2013 through 2018, including test scores, demographics and school enrollments. He matched that with student records from Newark Enrolls, the city’s common enrollment assignment system parents use to choose a charter school, for the 2014-2015 through 2015-2016 academic years.

Enrolling in a charter school that participated in Newark Enrolls, rather than a traditional public school, lead to an increase of 0.263 and 0.246 standard deviations in a student’s score that year in math and English language arts, respectively, Winters found. That means the measured improvement in students' math and reading scores was large enough and estimated precisely enough to be statistically significant.

The positive effect on student scores is "especially large" for students who attend a charter school run by either the Knowledge Is Power Program or Uncommon public schools networks, according to the report. Those schools have national programs and account for about half of Newark's charter school students.

"These findings provide strong evidence that charter school enrollment in Newark has had a meaningful causal effect on student outcomes for several years, even in a city where charter schools already enroll a significant portion of public school students," Winters wrote in the report. “As charters continue to grow, future research using causal
identification methods in other localities that exhibit different distribution of charter
school types is necessary.”

The report comes as education leaders are reigniting charter-district tensions in the
New Jersey’s largest city.

Newark’s charter school program is one of the most expansive in the country, enrolling
about a third of the city’s roughly 55,000 public school students and is projected to
enroll 44 percent of public school students by 2022.

That rapid growth has pleased charter school families and advocates who point to
academic gains made by students at those publicly funded, privately managed schools,
but has invoked the ire of some parents and school leaders who accuse charters of
drawing much needed resources away from children who attend traditional schools.

In December, Newark schools Superintendent Roger León began calling for the closure
of four charter schools in the city and urged the state to deny all applications for new
charters or the renewal of existing schools in the city unless they serve “a specific
educational need.” The four schools — M.E.T.S., People’s Prep, Roseville Community,
and University Heights — are seeking state approval to renew their charter and
continue operating after this academic year.

León argued charter schools drain funding from traditional public schools and are failing
to serve enough students with special needs. According to budget documents, the
Newark public school district sends about 26 percent of its revenues to charters.

Charter advocates are denouncing León’s claims. They say Newark public school
leaders can assign more students with special needs to charter schools if they want to
and even with their charter payments, the district maintains budget surpluses. What’s
more, they say, both traditional and charter schools have made academic gains as the
charter sector has grown.

“The ideology and factual misstatements that permeate those letters threaten years
worth of work to create harmony between district and charter schools in Newark,” Kyle
Rosenkrans, executive director of the New Jersey Children’s Foundation, a nonprofit
that promotes cooperation between Newark’s traditional and charter schools wrote in a
letter provided to POLITICO. “We remain optimistic that the NJDOE will look past this
rhetoric and make decisions that show the best way forward for the hundreds of Newark
families affected.”

Gov. Phil Murphy's administration has overseen a significant slowdown in new charter
school approvals and is engaged in a statewide review of the charter school law, the
results of which are expected in the coming months. While running for governor, Murphy
called for a "time-out" on charter school expansion across the state. Even still, his
administration approved 11 charter renewals and six expansion requests in 2019.
The Commissioner of Education is expected to reach a decision on the charter renewals for the four schools León wants closed by early February.