

Traditional vs. Charter Schools ... What Does the Data Reveal?

Lee Matthews and Vic Ramsey

Preface

With the increasing number of charter schools joining the NCHSAA and participating in its athletic programs, there have been questions raised as to whether these schools, because they are not restricted to particular geographic attendance zones, possess an unfair advantage when it comes to the NCHSAA playoff structure. We've heard this complaint most recently from coaches and parents in 2A men's tennis.

Indeed, the universe of school types has grown much larger in the last two decades, with some high schools operating as "magnet" schools, and other counties instituting "open enrollment" policies, allowing students from any location in a given county to attend the high school of their choice.

In addition, the NCHSAA contains within its membership four parochial schools and four "special population" schools (i.e. NCSSM, Schools for the Deaf, etc.).

In May 2025, the NCHSTCA conducted a survey of the tennis coaching community regarding level-based play¹ and how different school types may impact that goal. The results of that survey are posted on the NCHSTCA website (nchighschooltennis.com).

As important as beliefs, opinions, preferences, and experiences are, we believe that good decisions require good data as a starting point. Assembling and evaluating such data is the purpose of this report.

Study Design

This study is designed to test the following hypothesis: Charter schools, by virtue of being charter schools, enjoy an enduring athletic advantage over traditional public schools.

For the purposes of this study, we defined the "traditional" school as any school operated by the local Board of Education.²

We tested our hypothesis by examining the last four years of playoff competition in all team sports. We also included the individual tournaments in tennis, given that this sport is of

¹ "Level-based play" means that, in the playoffs, teams are grouped such that, from the first round to the finals, contests are evenly competitive, both teams can win if they play well, and either can lose if it plays poorly. Such contests create interest, mystery, and excitement, which forces athletes to try their hardest and play their best, because the outcome is truly, and not just theoretically, in doubt.

By contrast, at present, in the playoffs, in too many contests, the outcome is pre-ordained, both teams know what's going to happen before they get off the bus, the disparity in ability leads to blowouts and sportsmanship issues, and the weaker team is tempted to just forfeit and save the trip.

² We included magnet and open enrollment schools in the "traditional" category. The question as to whether magnet and open enrollment schools experience different results will have to be the focus of future study, if an answer to that question is desired.

particular interest to us, and that the competition is a single-elimination bracket similar to the dual-team tournaments and to other team sports.

We paid particular attention to the playoff contests that pitted a traditional school against a charter school.³

If the hypothesis that charter schools have an athletic advantage is true, we would expect that, in contests between charter schools and traditional schools, the charters would win a majority of the time, and that the margin would be statistically significant.

If, however, the hypothesis is false, then we would expect traditional and charter schools to win against one another in roughly equal measures.

What the Data Says

Here are the results of our examination of playoffs in the most recent realignment cycle.⁴

Traditional vs. Charter Schools in State Playoffs, By Class and Sport									
	1A			2A			3A		
Sport	W	L	%	W	L	%	W	L	%
W Tennis (DT)	24	27	.471	12	26	.316	3	18	.143
W Tennis (Ind)	9	8	.529	18	28	.391	13	12	.520
Volleyball	46	67	.407	15	6	.714	4	6	.400
M Soccer	57	57	.500	17	36	.321	1	0	1.000
Football	22	15	.595	8	6	.571			
M Basketball	50	59	.459	15	18	.455	1	1	.500
W Basketball	52	37	.584	12	10	.545	3	0	1.000
M Wrestling (DT)	18	22	.450	1	1	.500			
Baseball	65	72	.474	15	15	.500	3	4	.429
Softball	61	60	.504	11	1	.917			
W Soccer	38	75	.336	19	46	.292	3	16	.158
M Tennis (DT)	27	23	.540	4	47	.078	4	9	.308
M Tennis (Ind)	12	10	.545	7	52	.119	7	6	.538

Results highlighted in red indicate sport/classification combinations where the traditional schools under-performed the charter schools to a statistically significant degree.⁵ Similarly,

³ We collected data on parochial and special population schools, but are not including that data in this report, simply because the number of such schools is so small that it is unlikely that statistically valid conclusions can be drawn from the data.

⁴ As there are no charter schools in 4A, we did not include the 4A results in this chart. Results for 4A playoffs can be found in the raw data.

⁵ Results were evaluated using a chi-square test for goodness of fit to a 95% confidence level. Darker tints indicate a 99% confidence level.

results highlighted in green indicate sport/classification combinations where the traditional schools over-performed their charter school opponents.

Observations and Analysis

1. The complaints of 2A tennis coaches are based on reality. What they are saying about being at a disadvantage is borne out by the data, particularly in men's tennis. This is true of both the individual and dual-team tournaments.
2. However, the 1A traditional schools are doing significantly better than the 2A schools when it comes to winning matches against charter schools.

We were quite surprised by this finding, as we expected, based on the volume of comments we've received on this topic, that the impact of charter schools would be consistent across all classifications.

These first two observations suggest that school type, in and of itself, may not be the decisive factor. After all, 1A charter schools are just as "charter" as 2A charter schools, yet they are much less likely to win a match against their traditional school peers.

We suggest that the underlying factor is geography. The large 2A charter schools tend to be located in major metropolitan areas, where tennis clubs are prevalent and USTA programming is more robust.

We intend to test this hypothesis in a future study by comparing playoff results with various measures related to geography and population density.

3. Most other sports are not experiencing a statistically significant difference between traditional and charter school results.
4. The exception to the previous observation is soccer. Men's 2A soccer, and women's soccer at all levels experienced statistically significant differences between the charter and traditional schools, with charter schools winning approximately 70% of their matches against traditional schools.

Conclusion

These data do not support the contention that charter schools have an enduring athletic advantage simply because they are charter schools. The difference between the experience of 1A and 2A/3A schools means that some other factor(s) are at play.

However, the discrepancies between traditional and charter schools in tennis and soccer are real, especially at the 2A and 3A level. The current classification system is not creating a level playing field in these sports for these schools.

Further study is required to determine why this is the case.

Topics for Further Study

In addition to the question about the impact of geography noted above, several questions remain which could be answered by further research on this data set, particularly on the question of the impact of school size on athletic success.

For instance ...

1. Is school size correlated with athletic success in the playoffs, and if so, in which sports? Or, is school size within a classification basically meaningless?

2. We noticed that the same schools seem to be successful in the playoffs, over and over again. If school size were the determining factor in athletic success, one would expect that, among schools of relatively even size, success would be more random than a cursory look at the data appears to reveal. Is that cursory look correct, or not? And, if not, what does that mean?

3. Does a classification system based solely on school size deliver level-based play? How many “blow-out” and “mercy rule” contests take place in the playoffs? Is there significant overlap among the classifications with regard to the actual strength of teams?

4. What will the impact of the new 8-classification realignment be on this question, particularly as it relates to the larger, urban charter schools? Will those schools continue to dominate in tennis and soccer, or will they end up in classifications with stronger traditional school opponents?