

# Reinventing America's Schools: Lessons from Denver

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# Industrial Era Public Systems

- Centralized bureaucracies
- Hierarchical management
- Control through rules & regulations
- Standardized services
- Command-and-control methods
- Public monopolies

# Public Education Was No Exception

- 19<sup>th</sup> century: informal systems, with some public schools, some private, some combinations, and few rules
- 20<sup>th</sup> century:
  - Centrally run school districts; everyone an employee
  - Hierarchical decision-making; central office controls school budgets, hiring, etc.
  - Attend school you are assigned to; no choices
  - All schools teach roughly same thing in same grade; students march through based mostly on age
  - Control through rules; eg. teacher tenure
  - No one measures school or teacher performance
  - If schools perform poorly, there are no consequences (for the adults)

# Then the World Changed...

... and a 21<sup>st</sup> century operating system began to emerge:

- A network: schools independent of authorizers
- Operating authority decentralized to the schools
- Control through fewer rules, more accountability for results
- Different schools for different kids
- Parents have choice and dollars follow children, so parents have leverage
- No monopoly: schools compete for students

# Denver is a Leader in Making This Transition

It has gone farthest of any district with an elected school board:

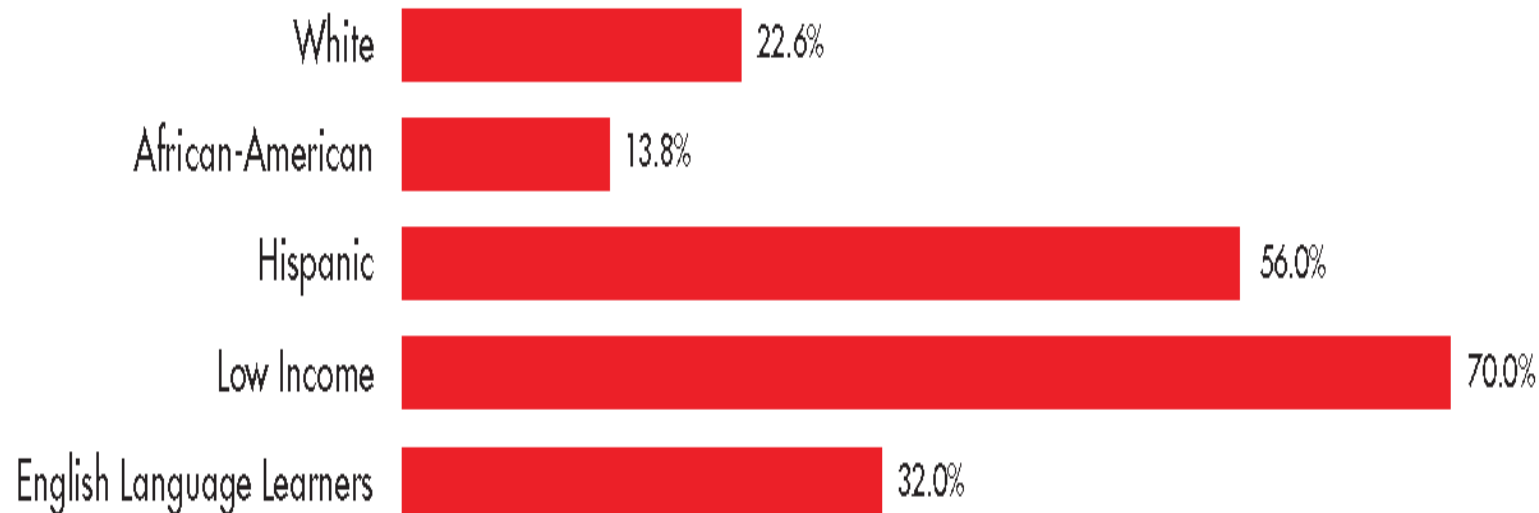
- Replaced 48 failing schools and opened more than 70 new schools (of 223 total) since 2005
- At least 40 of the new schools have been charters, which educate 18.3% of students
- 38 of the new schools have been Innovation Schools—with heightened autonomy—which educate 19.3%
- New “Innovation Zone,” a nonprofit with four innovation schools and its own board, to increase autonomy
- Both charters & DPS-operated schools participate in a computerized enrollment system, with full choice

# A Bit of Background on Denver

- High growth: 25% increase in students since 2007

## Denver Student Demographics

Percent of Students, Selected Demographic Measures



# Reform Always Creates Political Challenges

- In 2009, the teachers union ran a slate and won a 4-3 majority
- But one member of the slate turned out to be a reformer, flipping the majority
- For 4 years, reform was controversial and board meetings often lasted until the wee hours
- Two things turned the tide:
  - Results
  - National funding for strong reform candidates
- Today majority is 7-0 for reform

# Results:

- Four-year graduation rates have risen from 39% in 2007 to 65% in 2015
  - 72% for those who entered DPS high schools in 9<sup>th</sup> grade
- 15 percentage point increase in students scoring at or above grade level in reading, writing, and math, from 33% to 48%, 2005 to 2014 (new PARCC test in 2015)
- DPS has more than doubled the number of students taking and passing Advanced Placement courses
  - Passage rate is up to 43 percent.
- ACT scores have risen from 16 to 18.3 since 2007 (more than twice as fast as the state average)



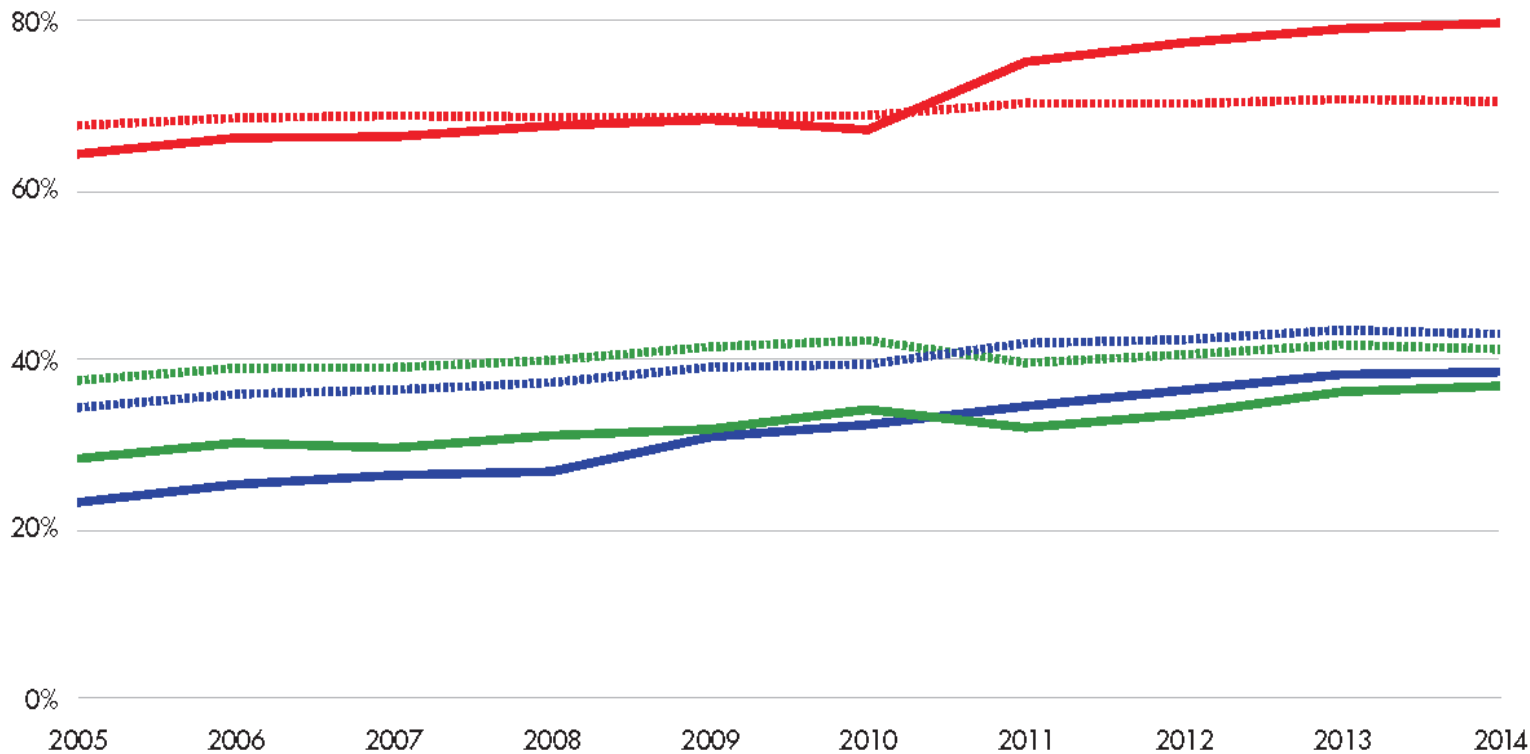
# But the Achievement Gap Has Widened:

## Denver Outpaces State on Test Score Improvement For All Races

Percent Scoring Proficient or Advanced, 2005-2014

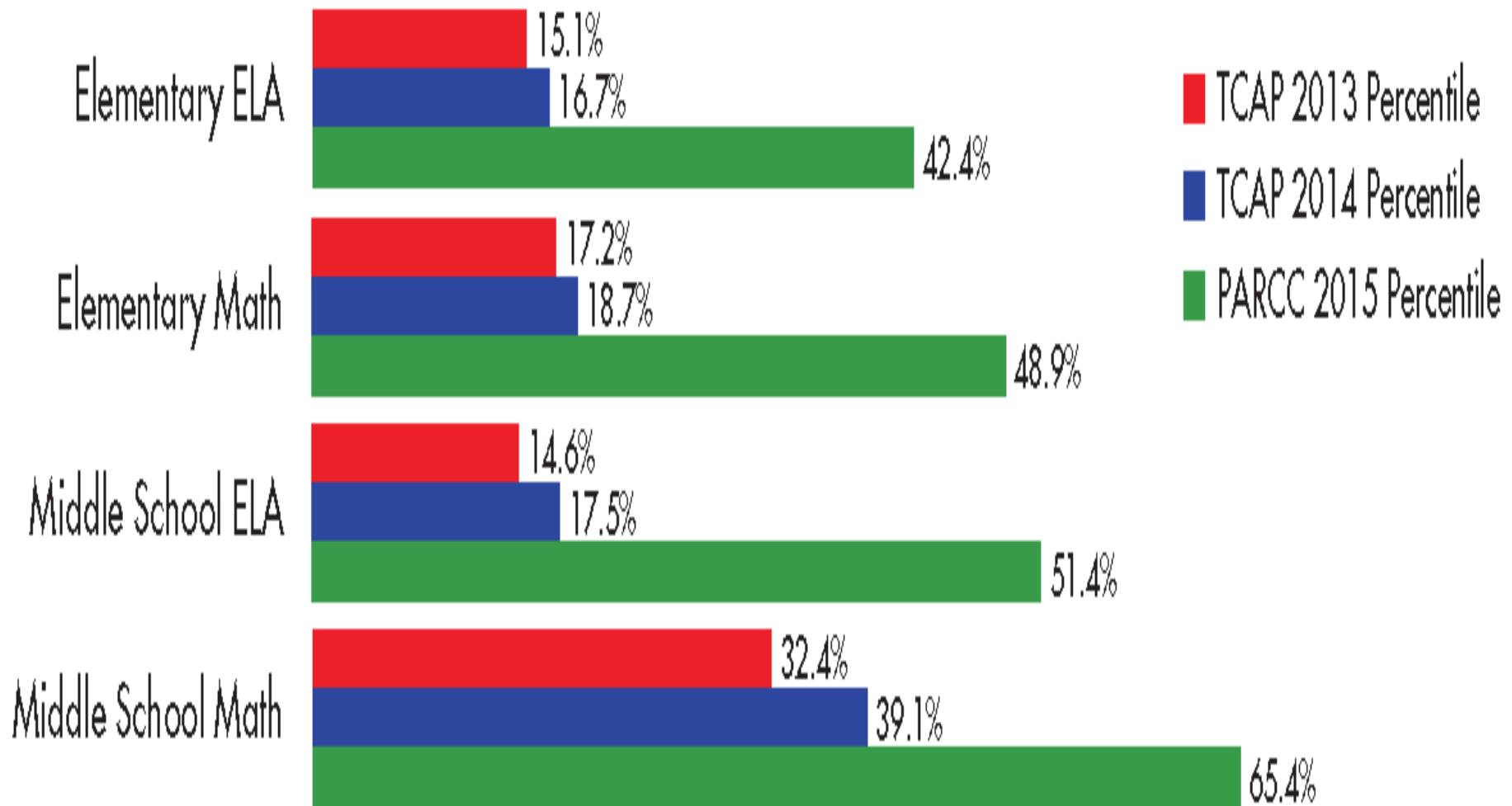
Colorado: ■ White ■ Hispanic ■ African-American  
Denver: — White — Hispanic — African-American

% Proficient/Advanced



## Denver's Leap Forward On PARCC Tests, 2015

Percentile Ranking of Denver Schools vs. All Colorado Schools on Standardized Tests, 2013-2015

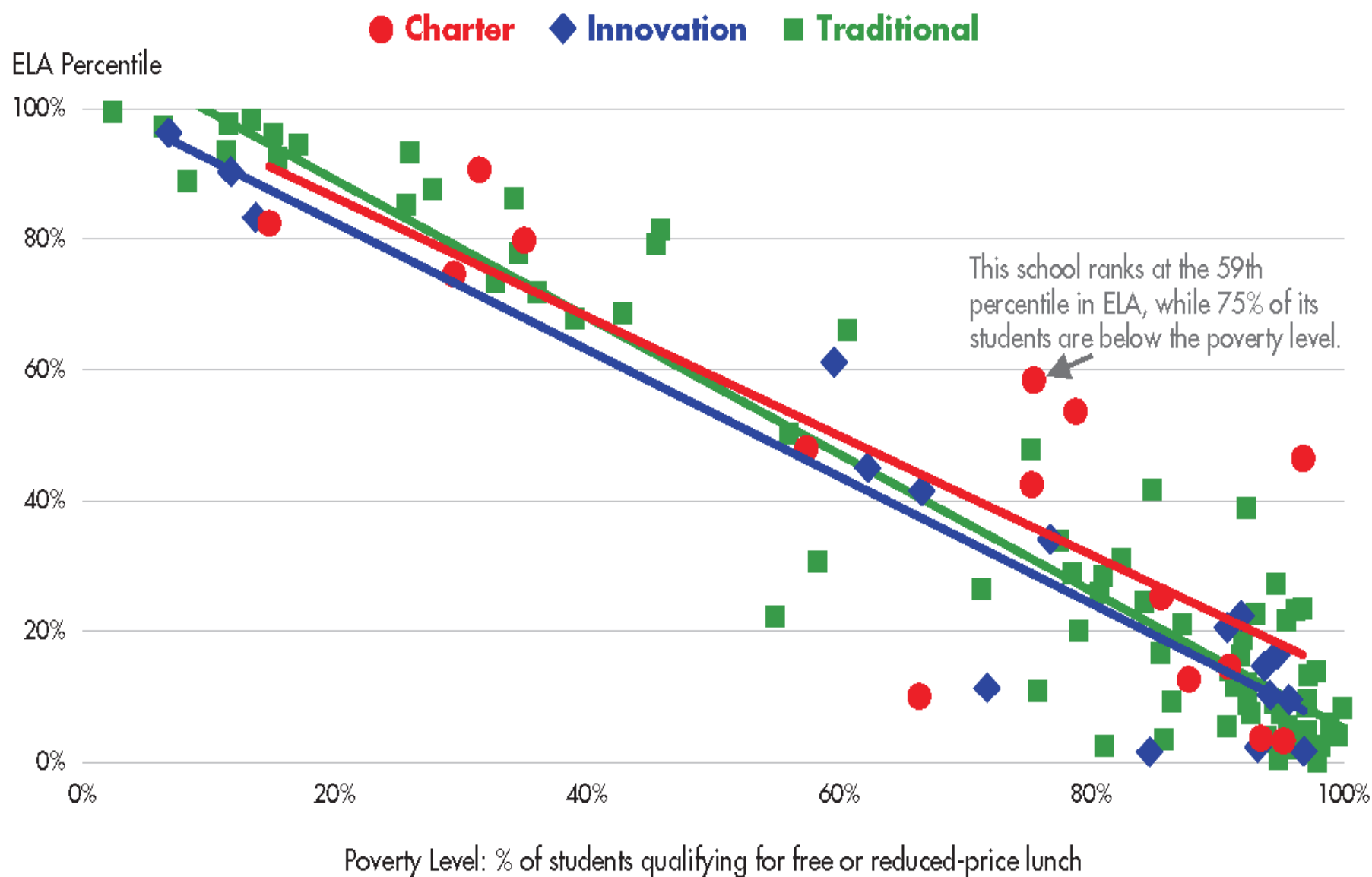


# Where Has Denver's Growth Come From?

- DPS-operated elementary schools have made significant improvement, but almost all the growth among secondary schools has been in charters.
  - Denver's charter sector is unusually concentrated at the secondary level: 16 elementary schools vs. 39 secondary schools

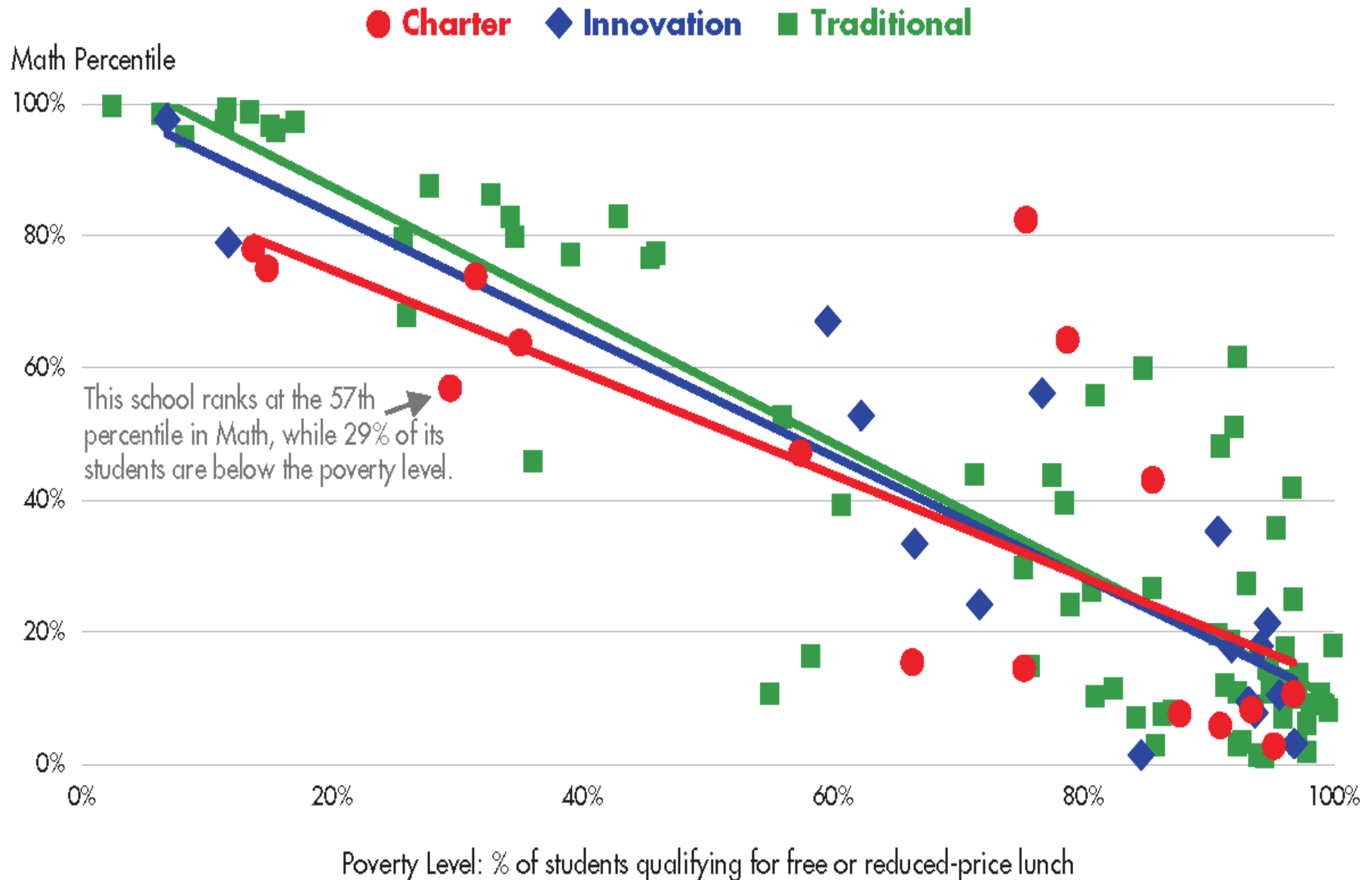
## Charter and DPS-Operated Elementary Schools Perform About the Same in English Language Arts

Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC ELA Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Elementary School



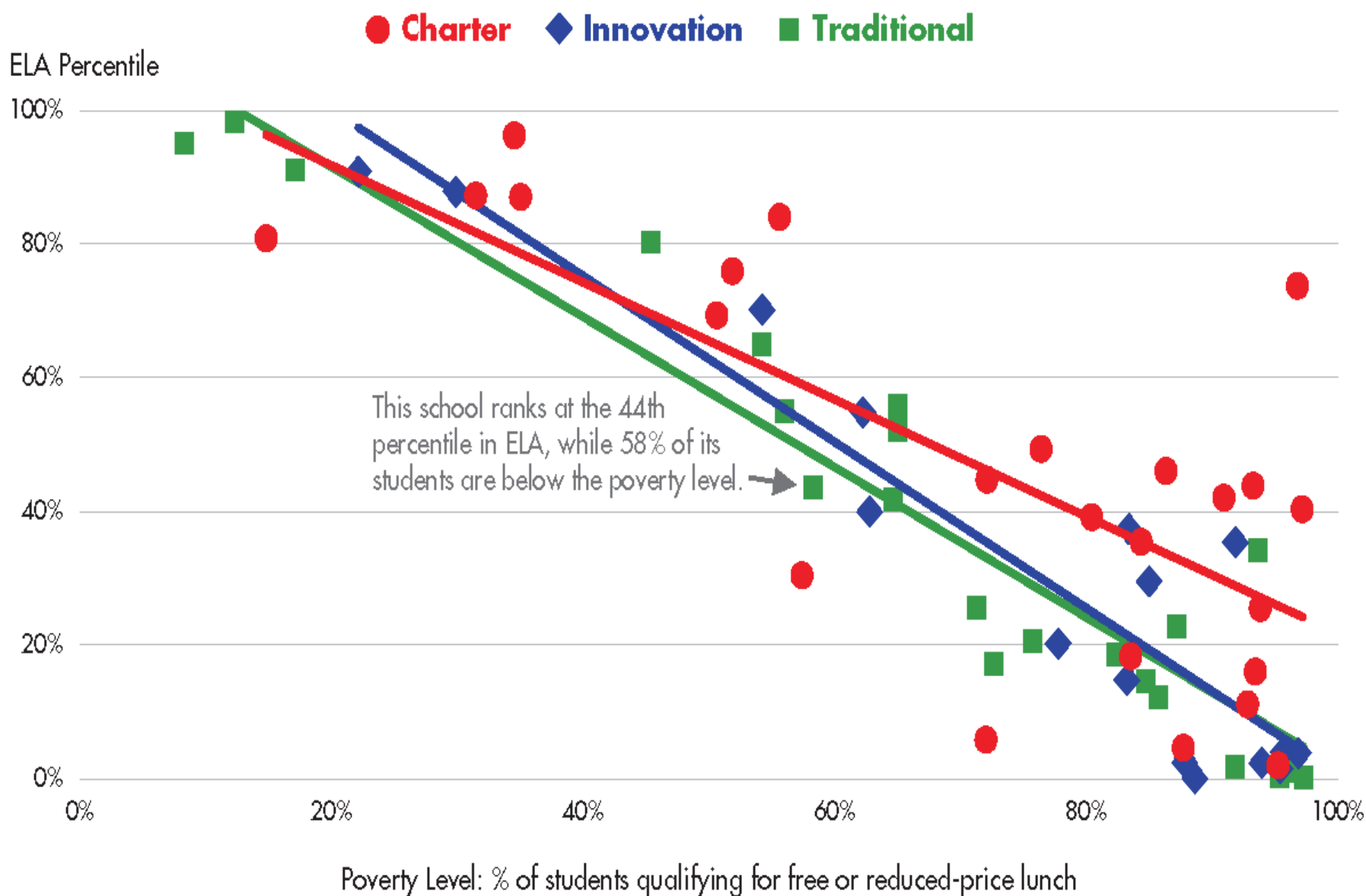
# Charter Schools Underperform DPS-Operated Elementary Schools in Math

Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC Math Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Elementary School

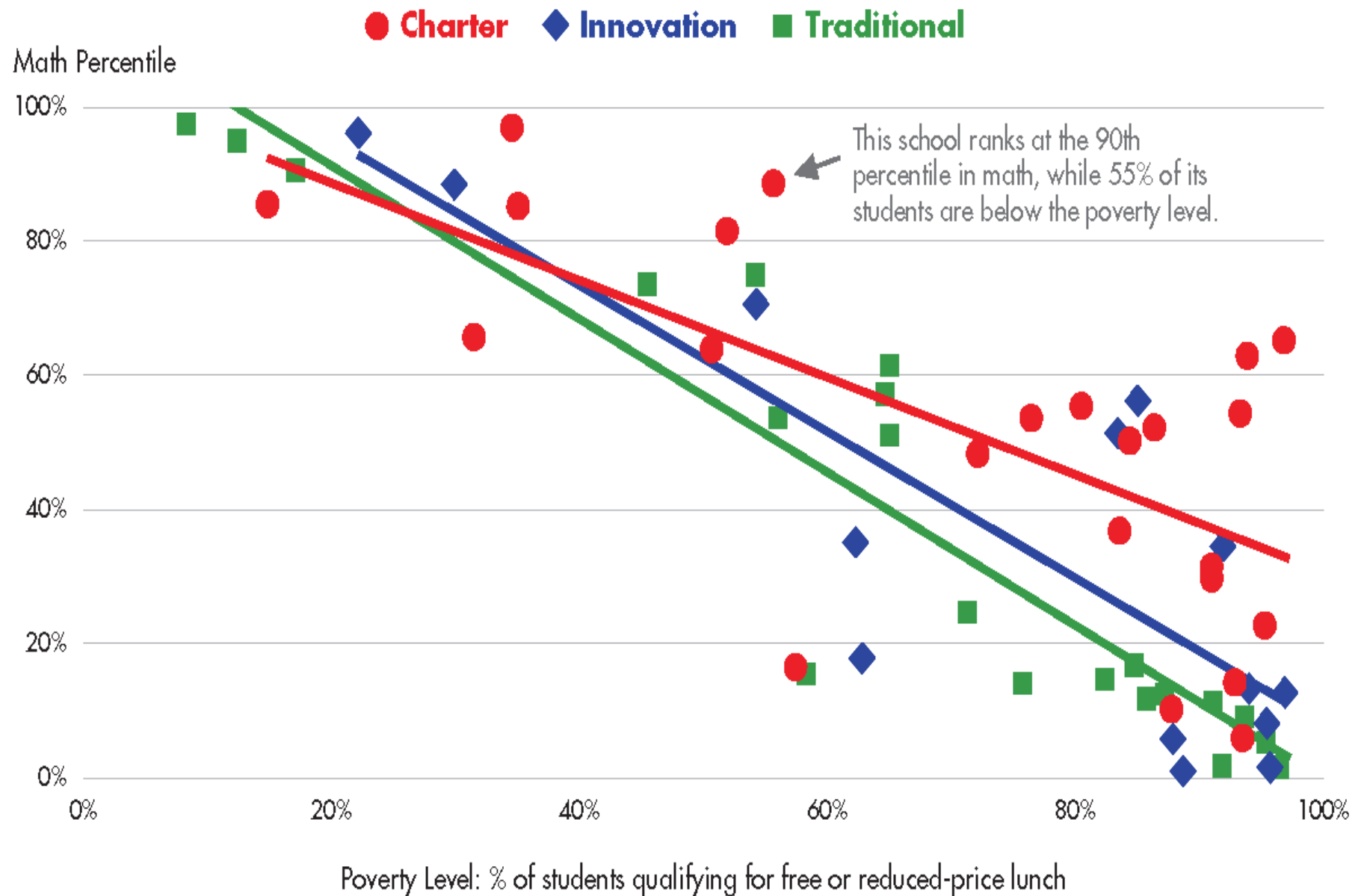


# Charter Schools Outperform DPS-Operated Middle Schools in English Language Arts

Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC ELA Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Middle School

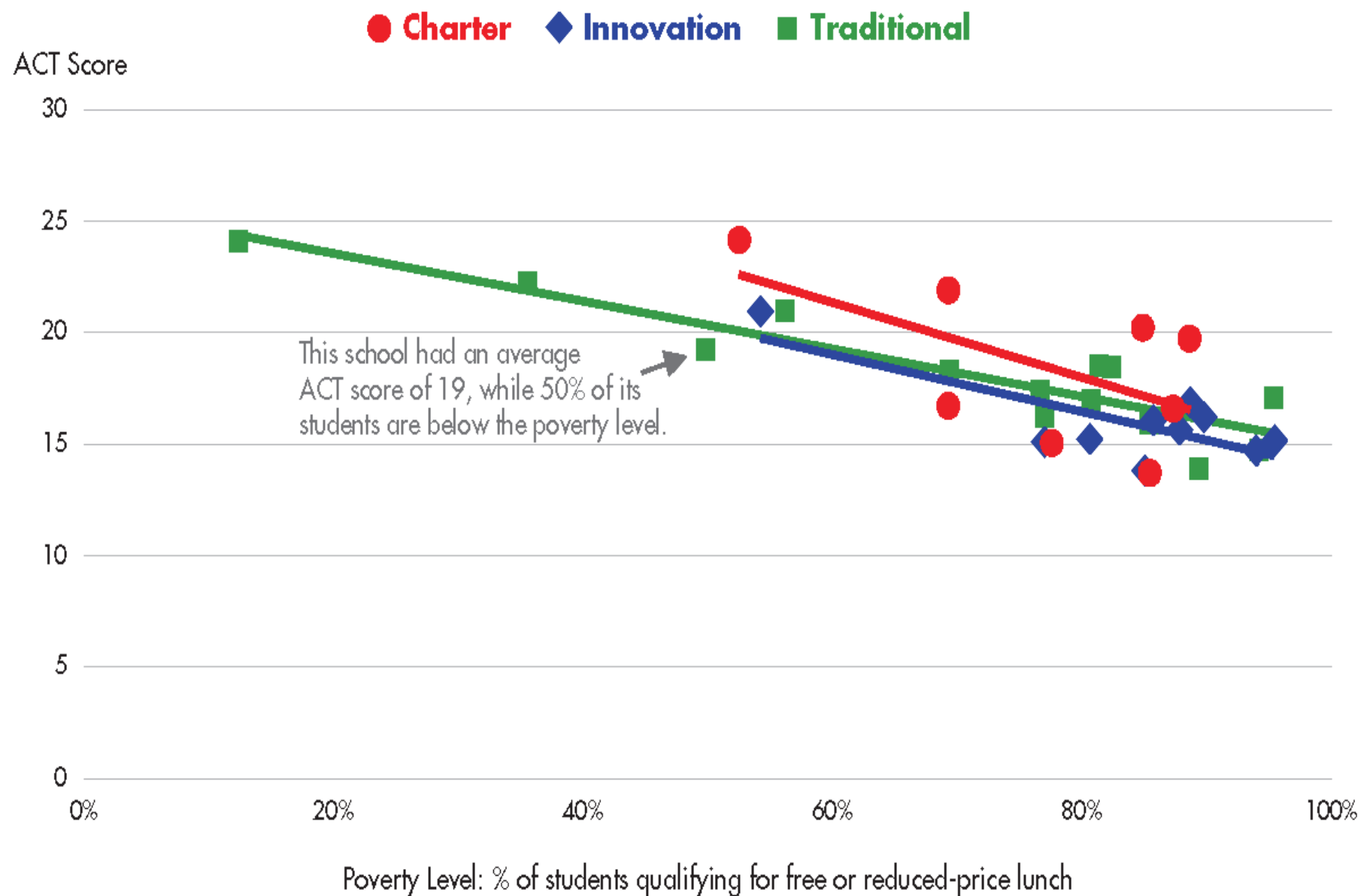


## Statewide School Percentile Rankings on 2015 PARCC Math Tests vs. Poverty Levels at Each Middle School



## Charter Schools Outperform DPS-Operated High Schools At Similar Poverty Levels

Comparing Average 2015 ACT Scores vs. Poverty Levels at Each High School





# Lessons from Denver's Success

1. DPS should continue to replace failing secondary schools with charter schools operated by successful charter networks—as it plans to do
  - Perhaps it's time to recruit high performing charter networks from other states?

# Lessons from Denver's Success--2

2. Denver's Innovation Schools have not outperformed other DPS-operated schools, on average.

Why have charters outperformed them?

- More autonomy
- More accountability: failing charters are closed
- More entrepreneurial energy & vision

So Denver is creating an “Innovation Zone,” with its own nonprofit board, to create charter-like autonomy

- The goal: charter performance without charter politics

# Other Remaining Challenges in Denver

1. Ensure there are adequate facilities for new charters
2. Tame the “district monster:” create real autonomy for all schools
3. Align DPS staff around the portfolio/21<sup>st</sup> century strategy
4. Double down on the development & recruitment of strong school leaders

# Will Denver's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategies Work Elsewhere?

- They already are!
- New Orleans now has 93% of its students in charters, and for the past decade it has been the fastest improving city in the country.
  - See *How New Orleans Made Charter Schools Work*, [http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/junejulyaugust\\_2015/features/how\\_new\\_orleans\\_made\\_charter\\_s055905.php?page=all#](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/magazine/junejulyaugust_2015/features/how_new_orleans_made_charter_s055905.php?page=all#)
- Washington D.C. has 45% of its students in charters, and on NAEP, it has been the fastest improving state on the last two tests (2013 & 2015).
  - See *A Tale of Two Systems: Education Reform in Washington, D.C.*, <http://www.progressivepolicy.org/slidertale-of-two-systems-education-reform-in-washington-d-c/>
- According to Stanford's CREDO, urban charters outperform traditional schools, nationally, by significant margins

# Why Is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Model Superior?

- Authority is decentralized: the people who run the schools make the key operational decisions.
- Customers can choose between different school models.
- Schools are accountable to their customers (parents).
- Schools face consequences: those that succeed grow and replicate; those that fail are closed.
- The authorizer focuses on steering, not rowing, and is politically free to choose the best schools and close failing schools.
- Within a competitive marketplace, children have equal opportunity and equal financial resources.

# Political Strategy: Lessons from Denver

- Create a respected catalyst for reform
- Build a broad coalition, including minority and low-income organizations
- Create positive examples of success
- Use performance data to communicate the need for change
- Seek community input before making changes

# Political Strategy: Lessons from Denver

- Treat all school types—charter, traditional, and others—with an even hand
- Get serious about winning school board elections
- Be strategic about the pace of reform
- Don't back down because you only have a 4-3 majority on the board
- Ensure consistency of leadership over time