



CHARTER SCHOOLS IN THE NEWS

A Sampling of Coverage surrounding the AFT Report

In the days following *The New York Times* article, "Charters Lag Behind Traditional Schools," nearly 49 million people were engaged in the charter school debate across the country. The story was covered in 30 states and 21 editorials and 35 opinion-editorials were generated in support of charter schools. The opposition ran 13 editorials and only 1 opinion-editorial. The following is a sample of the coverage supporting charter schools.

Dog Eats AFT Homework

By William G. Howell, Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West
Opinion Journal from the Wall Street Journal's Editorial Page
New York, NY
August 18, 2004

A Teachers Union's Dishonest Study of Charter Schools

It is not unusual for interest groups to issue misleading reports that further their political agenda. And for this reason, newspapers generally ignore them, treat them with great skepticism, or make sure they vet the study with independent observers.

Not so in the case of the recently released study of charter schools issued by the American Federation of Teachers, which, after receiving top billing in the right-hand corner of the front page of yesterday's *New York Times*, was picked up by news media across the country. According to the *Times*, the AFT had unearthed an apparent coverup by the Department of Education, which had buried key findings in "mountains of data . . . released without public announcement." The department, it seems, is taking a long time to issue its report on charter schooling in America.

So the AFT took matters into its own hands, attributing its success in conducting the study to "a combination of intuition, prior knowledge, considerable digging, and luck." Perhaps. But within a few hours of its release, we were able to replicate its results--and conduct a similar "study" of religious schools besides.

The AFT's conclusion: "Charter schools are underperforming."

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called the nation's report card, show students in charter schools doing less well than the nationwide public-school average, which includes middle class students from well-heeled suburbs. Similar results are obtained within selected states.

Big deal. These results could easily indicate nothing other than the simple fact that charter schools are typically asked to serve problematic students in low-performing districts with many poor, minority children.

Indeed, if the AFT believes these findings, it must also concede that religious schools excel. According to the same NAEP data from which the AFT study is taken, religious schools outperformed the public schools nationwide by nine points, a gap that is as large as the public school-charter school difference AFT is trumpeting.

On other occasions, the AFT has objected to interpreting such findings as evidence that religious schools are superior, on the grounds that they attract an especially able group of students. But for charter schools, apparently, similar student differences are less important.

"To enhance the fairness of the analysis," the AFT study makes comparisons among students eligible for free lunch and in various kinds of communities, which again shows public school students doing better than those in charter schools. But if these simple comparisons prove the AFT case, then they also prove that religious schools are better than public ones--for within these same categories, religious schools outperform public ones.

Indeed, the AFT's most telling comparisons-- the ones within ethnic groups--cut against the case it is trying to make. This comparison is vital, precisely because prior research has found ethnic differences to be large. Yet when the authors look just at African-American or Hispanic children, they find no statistically significant difference between public school students and those in charter schools.

But do any of these findings--within ethnic groups or otherwise--say anything meaningful about the quality of charter schools? Not a bit. For starters, one must do much more than look separately at students grouped by free lunch status, ethnicity or school location, in order to take into account family influences on a child's learning capacity. All of these factors--and many other considerations--must be combined into a sophisticated analysis in order to begin to gauge how well students perform.

What makes such a task essential is the simple fact that charter schools are usually placed in challenging situations. Most states allow charter schools to form only where students are having difficulties, and charter schools are, in many cases, then asked to accept the most challenging of students. Any credible analysis of their effectiveness must account for these facts on the ground.

But this just touches the surface. The AFT study only looks at student performance at a single moment in time. One needs to track student progress within a school over multiple years in order to ascertain how much the child is learning. Moreover, nothing in these data accounts for the length of time that a charter school has been in place--a factor known to have an impact on a school's performance. First-year schools usually have difficulties. Having just hired new staff and teachers, implemented new curricula, and acquired a building facility to use, new schools often face considerable start-up problems. Almost one-third of the charter schools nationwide were less than two years old when the NAEP was administered, raising doubts about whether even a sophisticated analysis of NAEP data would be relevant once charter schools have had time to become well established.

According to AFT official Bella Rosenberg, "Analyses are always welcome, but first things first. . . . Surely the interests of children are better served by timely and straightforward information about whether charter school performance measures up to the claims made for it."

Of course timeliness is important, but bad information is worse than none. To know whether charter schools are doing better, careful analyses are essential. For all of the reasons outlined above, the Department of Education is well advised to prepare its report on charter schools carefully, taking as much information into account as possible. If this explains the official report's delay, this can hardly be called a coverup.

The limited information currently available prevents anyone, including the AFT, from taking even the most modest steps toward addressing these issues. In short, the AFT's report tells us hardly anything about the relative effectiveness of charter schools. But one thing is sure: Charter schools do not appear to be bastions of privilege. What remains unclear is how much they can do for the underprivileged. Sadly, the AFT report tells us nothing about that.

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Link to [Opinion Journal from the Wall Street Journal's Editorial Page](#) (free registration required).

The facts about charter schools
Editorial
Chicago Tribune
August 18, 2004 Wednesday

The American Federation of Teachers this week breathlessly revealed its analysis of federal education data that it "unearthed" showing that charter school students often do worse on standardized tests than comparable students in regular public schools. This has been billed as the first national comparison of test scores measuring student achievement in the two types of public schools.

Problem is, the study findings are about as new as a lava lamp, as revelatory as an old sock and as significant as a belch. Too bad federal education officials didn't realize as much when they decided to quietly bury the data instead of releasing it in context.

Much of the previous research on charter schools, which operate free of most of the regulations governing neighborhood schools, suggests that charters tend to attract lower-performing students in the first place. These data only seem to support that.

"Any parent who has a kid in a school who's doing great and is learning a lot, is happy and is scoring high on standardized tests probably isn't going to take him out of his regular school and put him in a charter school," says Tom Loveless, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, who has conducted several studies on charter schools.

The AFT analysis unfortunately glosses over a central difference between charter and neighborhood schools: their missions. In Chicago, for instance, North Lawndale College Prep posts lousy standardized test scores; yet because its focus is on college attendance, an astonishing 85 percent of graduates go on to higher education.

Triumphant Charter School was created specifically to educate failing middle school children. The most difficult students are recruited from neighborhood schools, and teachers there are only too happy to hand them over.

So of course Triumphant students also post dismal test scores, compared to state averages. But their overall gains in reading and math usually exceed those of the neighborhood schools that sent them, and attendance is better, too.

And more important, after three years of being called "scholars" and treated as individuals with potential, most abandon the feeling that they are failures and start believing they can actually succeed in life and enjoy learning.

Loveless conducted research showing this trend holds true nationwide, that--over time--charter students tend to make greater gains than students in regular public schools.

This study, by contrast, looks only at 4th graders in a handful of states, at one point in time. Some of the most intriguing data about charter schools can't be measured by standardized tests. It's the number of children on waiting lists, hoping to get into charter schools. In Chicago, that list has gotten so long most charters have stopped actively recruiting.

**Report card on charters;
Despite low test scores, the jury is still out on these schools**
Newsday
Opinion
August 18, 2004 Wednesday

For more than 10 years, the jury has been out on charter schools - self-governing schools financed with public money but operated more flexibly than other public schools. Now, federal test results show that charter pupils lagged behind their public peers in fourth-grade reading and math last year.

Should these test scores, the first nationwide numbers, be seen as proof that charters don't work? No. But they provide evidence that charter schools are not the silver bullet their advocates hoped for improving education. Troubled schools can be improved - as shown in our recent editorial series that ran in June - but it takes much, much more than the snipping of red tape to make them succeed.

It takes enlightened leadership at the school board and administrative levels; high expectations for students and teachers alike; intense parental engagement and more time on task for kids, to name just some of the necessary steps. To the extent that charters - or regular public schools - get their arms around these needs, they can succeed.

The new numbers, teased out of a massive U.S. Department of Education data pile by researchers from the American Federation of Teachers, should be seen as one

more block of evidence to be added to the mounting - but still inconclusive - wall of research on charters. Here's why:

First, there are no trend lines. It'll take several repeats of the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests to see whether charter kids remain consistently behind students from regular public schools. It is possible they can improve at a faster pace than their public peers. A recent study by the Brookings Institution showed charter students' scores over time rise more sharply than others'.

Second, charters are not all alike. Of the 88,000 U.S. public schools, 3,000 are charters and they tend to educate kids who are poorer than traditional at-risk kids. Not all succeed: About 80 have failed and closed their doors. But the Center for Education Reform cites the same U.S. data to show that fourth graders in California, Colorado and Arizona - states with one-third of the nation's charters - outperformed their public school peers in reading.

In other words, the jury's still out on charters.

The reality of charter schools

The Denver Post

Editorial

August 18, 2004 Wednesday

True or false? Charter schools are not always the silver bullet for boosting student achievement that some politicians and educators have portrayed them to be.

True.

And are they the root of all evil?

False.

The American Federation of Teachers unveiled a study this week that, using national test scores, attempted to compare student achievement in charter schools with regular public schools. The data, published in *The New York Times*, seemed to suggest that charter students often fare worse than their public-school counterparts. Charter proponents challenged the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, claiming that NAEP tested less than 1 percent of charter students in seven states.

The comparisons are disingenuous at best, said Jim Griffin, executive director for the Colorado League of Charter Schools. He says that charters tend to be concentrated in more urban, low-income areas and often cater to students with special needs. He also wondered about the age of the charter schools included in the report. "If these are a bunch of first-, second-, third-year schools, the test results are not of that school but of the kids' prior five years," he said.

But even as charter proponents picked at the data, Colorado advocates took some pride in the AFT's assertion that California and Colorado charters fared about the same as regular public schools.

A cursory glance at Colorado Student Assessment Program scores for charter schools, compared to nearby neighborhood schools, bears that out. In some categories, the neighborhood schools fare better, in others the charter schools had an advantage. But generally, they're about the same.

For example, the Denver Arts and Technology Academy, a charter school in northwest Denver, has nearly the same number of low-income students as nearby Centennial Elementary. And while its fourth-grade reading scores were better than Centennial's, it lagged behind in third-grade writing.

The new data will garner gobs of attention because charter schools are now part of the national hammer of accountability.

According to the No Child Left Behind Act, public schools that don't meet certain benchmarks year after year will be converted into charter schools. Under Colorado law, enacted before No Child Left Behind, schools considered "unsatisfactory" for three consecutive years become charters. Cole Middle School in northeast Denver will become the first next fall.

Those who don't like charter schools, or accountability laws, for that matter, will see the new data as proving that charters don't provide the answer to conventional-school ills. Indeed, they should be considered just one tool.

Some charter schools in Colorado, particularly in Denver, have shown good results. The Wyatt Edison School, down the street from Cole, draws from a similar pool of students but has drastically better test scores.

Charters aren't a silver bullet, but they can offer an alternative that suits some students. We hope the end result of this report is better education for all kids.

Charter Schools Better

Letter to the Editor: Philadelphia Inquirer, Denver Post, Kansas City Star

PA, CO, MO

Jeanne Allen

August 20, 2004

The Star ran an article last week claiming that new government data reveal that charter schools are no better than traditional schools (8/17, A-3, "Charter schools lag in test scores").

This statement is baseless. More than 10 years of comprehensive research demonstrates that charter schools produce strong student achievement, especially among minority and at-risk students.

In Missouri, more than 27 charter schools are successfully meeting the needs of more than 12,400 students. Unfortunately, these students are caught in the middle of a political battle.

Opponents of charter schools are threatened by the growth of independent public schools that offer a promise of performance, are held to account by contract and are open to parents by choice.

The most important test data for all public schools is that which is used by states to measure student achievement. That data, coupled with national data, reveal that charter students are achieving despite their challenges.

Charter schools are working — in Missouri and across the country. It is time to stop playing politics with America's kids.

Jeanne Allen
President, The Center for Education Reform

Off the Charts? Reward good charter schools, close bad ones

The Dallas Morning News

Editorial

August 20, 2004 Friday

Some states may be having serious second thoughts about charter schools since news reports this week raised questions about how charter students stack up against other public school children in test scores.

The American Federation of Teachers discovered the test scores - seemingly buried last fall by the Education Department - and tipped off The New York Times.

Education Secretary Rod Paige disputes the conclusions. He believes the first news reports didn't distinguish between the various kinds of charters, which are public schools that operate outside many state and local regulations.

We agree with Mr. Paige. There are different kinds of charters. Test measurements alone should not drag down a movement that is aimed at finding creative ways of helping children learn. For example, many charter schools serve a disproportionate number of troubled and disadvantaged youths, who initially may not do as well on standardized tests as students at other schools.

Yet states that have academically failing charters must deal with them. We have supported charters since their inception in Texas in the 1990s. But we want to make sure the good ones continue, while the bad ones go out of business.

For example, we know that charters that impose discipline and standards succeed. Look at the KIPP Academy in Houston. It demands long hours, including on Saturdays. That may seem onerous, but students excel. The concept is even spreading nationally.

Likewise, schools that work together with social service agencies do well. The University of Minnesota's Joe Nathan, who studies charters, reports that pairing social service agencies with charter schools allows the two to better help struggling students.

Texas charter schools now enroll about 73,000 students. The Texas Legislature and Texas Education Agency have sufficient evidence to start discriminating between those that work and those that don't.

Why the silence? Fourth-grade tests show mixed results

Sacramento Bee

Editorial

August 21, 2004 Saturday

The U.S. Department of Education made a curious omission recently. It reported test results for fourth-graders at public and private schools but, for now, has inexplicably delayed reporting results at charter schools.

The American Federation of Teachers stepped in to release the numbers. There was no excuse for the Education Department's failure to release data. As Bella Rosenberg of the AFT has said, it's tantamount to withholding basic unemployment statistics or GNP data.

There's nothing startling in the numbers.

Public charter schools in California achieve academic results similar to traditional public schools - even though they get significantly less state and federal categorical funding.

Numbers mined by the AFT from the November 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress show California fourth-graders at charter schools and other public schools perform similarly on reading and math tests. In fact, fourth-graders in California charter schools do slightly better in reading than at other public schools.

No surprises there.

National results are more mixed. In math, 68 percent of charter school fourth-graders nationally are at or above basic level, compared with 76 percent at other public schools. In reading, 55 percent of charter school fourth-graders nationally are at or above basic level, compared with 62 percent at other public schools.

As with traditional public schools, variation among charter schools is great. In California, for example, we have the very successful K-8 Accelerated School in South Central Los Angeles, a model of urban public school renewal in a poor community. But we also have the disastrous California Charter Academy, 68 schools chartered by three small Southern California school districts, closed after allegations of misusing state money and inadequate oversight.

No doubt charter oversight remains an issue. Some school districts - particularly smaller districts - have neither the resources, infrastructure nor expertise to conduct oversight of charter school academic outcomes and finances.

Certainly, the Charter School Academy mess shows weaknesses in California's school-district-only model of charter approval.

One remedy would be to allow school districts to opt out of charter authorizing and to give the state's public universities the option of authorizing charter schools. For example, a nearby university may be better able than a small school district to provide educational resources and oversight.

A bill, authored by Assemblywoman Patricia Bates, R-Laguna Niguel, and Sen. Dede Alpert, D-San Diego, would do just that.

AB 2764 would allow the University of California, California State University and California Community Colleges to approve one charter school per campus and no more than 20 charter schools per system. It would require a plan for oversight and an annual report to the Legislature on student performance.

Eight states - Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, New York, Ohio and Wisconsin - already allow universities to approve charter schools.

AB 2764 would give priority to colleges or universities offering teacher education programs and those that convert existing underperforming schools to charter schools. Get this bill passed.

Charter schools shouldn't be seen as a panacea to public school problems. But they do give options to individual students who, for whatever reasons, are not succeeding in a traditional public school setting.

The results released by the AFT show that, no matter the setting (public charter school or traditional public school), we still have a long way to go to improve student achievement in reading and math.

Study On Charter Schools Gets 'F' for Inaccuracy

The Augusta Chronicle

Editorial

Jeanne Allen; Guest Columnist

August 28, 2004 Saturday

The American Federation of Teachers sent home a failing report card last week to nearly 800,000 of the country's lowest-income and most challenged students. Newspapers such as The New York Times reported the AFT's claims that national test data, called the National Assessment of Educational Progress, proves that students in charter schools "lag behind" students in traditional public schools.

This statement is baseless. More than 10 years of comprehensive research demonstrates that charter schools produce strong student achievement, especially among minority and at-risk students. These students have worked hard to overcome significant challenges and they deserve to be acknowledged for their success.

INSTEAD, THESE students are caught in a political battle. Charter opponents are threatened by the growth of independent public schools that offer a promise of performance, are held to account by contract and open to parents by choice. They have deliberately skewed valuable data to suit their cause.

For example, the NAEP data reveals that charter fourth-graders in California and Arizona, representing fully a third of all charter schools, do better than their traditional public school counterparts in reading performance. And the differences in the other states are miniscule, at best. These facts were not front-and-center in AFT news reports. Also missing in the report was the fact that charter schools serve more poor, at-risk and minority students than traditional public schools.

The most important test data for all public schools is that used by states to measure student achievement, and in the case of charter schools, decide whether they may continue to operate. Such data reveals that in the core states examined in the NAEP

report, and in other states, charter schools are succeeding and, in most cases, outpacing competition.

Consider Michigan, where students in charter schools showed greater gains in last year's Michigan Educational Assessment Program in all but one of 10 grades and subjects. Massachusetts students are meeting the same high standards - with more than 60 percent of urban charters outperforming their traditional counterparts. A study of 60,000 Arizona charter students reveals that the longer a student is in a charter school, the better he or she achieves. The University of Wisconsin at Madison found that fourth- and eighth-graders in its state's charter schools are also outscoring public schools.

This achievement is significant given the huge number of children whose families move them to charters because they were unsuccessful in public schools. The nation's report card on reading paints a dismal picture of only 31 percent of fourth-graders able to read proficiently. In Washington, D.C., less than 10 percent of children are proficient in reading - most of its charter schools are doing considerably better than that.

There are indeed charter schools in this country that do not make the grade - sometimes because of financial mismanagement or facilities challenges, every once in a while because of poor student achievement. But unlike traditional schools, poor-performing charter schools must shut their doors.

THE PIONEERS of charter schools envisioned schools accountable to their students, their parents and their communities. About nine percent of the almost 4,000 schools that have opened in the last decade have closed down - mostly for financial reasons. Less than 5 percent of those schools closed due to poor student achievement.

Compare that to the 11 percent of traditional public schools that the U.S. Department of Education labeled "in need of improvement." These schools were not closed - and most of their students remain struggling in classrooms today.

For many students, traditional public schools are an ideal setting. For others, charter schools provide a well-suited alternative.

Ultimately, it is up to each parent to decide. It is up to us to ensure that those parents have the information - all of the information - they need to make those important decisions. Let's start the new school year with an open mind, a blank slate and a commitment to use real data when making judgments about schools.

(Editor's note: The writer is the president of the Center for Education Reform in Washington.)

Knight Ridder/Tribune Information Services

Link Charters to Colleges
Los Angeles Times
Editorial
August 28, 2004 Saturday

A report analyzing the failures of charter schools dropped like a bomb last week on the fledgling educational movement. After all the hopes placed on charters to boost student achievement, the numbers showed that students from the quasi-independent schools scored worse on a national test of reading and math skills than those in regular public schools.

Charter schools are publicly funded but operate free of many of the mandates that govern public schools. In exchange, they have a contractual obligation to raise achievement. That isn't happening, according to data compiled by the American Federation of Teachers, using numbers dug up from the U.S. Education Department. And the charter schools' usual defense -- that they serve a higher percentage of disadvantaged students -- falls apart in this study, which shows that even in the same demographic groups, public schools did better.

Instead of using the figures to attack all charters, though, opponents should take a second look at the report, which broke out separate data on six states. In two of those -- California and Colorado -- charter students did as well, or a bit better, than their public-school peers. And that's without taking into account the schools' more disadvantaged population. In other words, those schools did at least as well even with bigger hurdles.

These figures have value, and it's a shame that the U.S. Department of Education quietly buried the data in an online report released in November, leaving it to a teachers union to break out the numbers on charter schools. A key part of the Bush administration agenda is to privatize education through charters and vouchers, but federal officials seem unwilling to hold charters accountable. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, one option for continually failing public schools is to force them to be charters. But what happens if the charters fail? The federal law has nothing to say on the subject; the assumption seems to be that they can't possibly fail. This study makes it clear that they can. When they do, they should be closed. Better charter schools aren't created by ignoring weaknesses.

Nor are they created by legislative roadblocks, and that's where California comes in. Though the state has been wisely cautious about the charter movement, some of its limits amount to strangleholds. The state has ignored a recommendation by the legislative analyst's office earlier this year to make it easier for charter schools to get their due funding. And the Legislature has killed a bill, AB 2764, that would have allowed public colleges to authorize and supervise a modest number of charter schools. That job is done mostly by public school districts, which often are hostile or indifferent to them.

Public universities are a natural match for charters, which would benefit from professors' interest and the energy of volunteer students. The Legislature should take up this bill again next year and make it law.

Study schools that are successful too

Chicago Tribune

Clarence Page, a member of the Tribune's editorial board.

August 29, 2004 Sunday

When the American Federation of Teachers unveiled its analysis of new federal data on charter schools, it looked at first like a big score for charter school opponents against the Bush administration's "No Child Left Behind" education reforms. But, alas, nothing in the world of education reform is quite that simple.

Here's the story: Billed as the first national comparison of test scores among children in the two types of public schools, the study found charter school students are "often doing worse on math and reading tests than their counterpart students in regular public schools," as The New York Times put it.

That sounded like bad news for the No Child Left Behind law, which encourages states to hand over failing schools to non-profit community groups or to for-profit companies that want to run the failing schools as charter schools. The AFT, a major critic of charters, mined the data out of the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress study and provided it to the Times.

And it wasn't helpful that the U.S. Department of Education released the data online without a public announcement of its own. Instead, the Times trumpeted the story on Page 1, headlined with the AFT's spin. "Charter schools trail in results, U.S. data reveal."

But, as it happens with many big journalistic revelations, the further you read, the less the story backs up its headline.

You don't need to read very far into the AFT report, for example, before you discover that the gap in test scores between charter and public schools disappears when you take race into account. Compare white students with white students and blacks with blacks and Hispanics with Hispanics and the gap in scores between the charters and traditional public schools goes away.

That's important because charter schools enroll a higher proportion of minority students. More than half of charter school pupils were black, Hispanic or American Indian in the 1999-2000 academic year, compared with one-third for all public schools, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics.

Charters also enroll a higher proportion of students who were not doing well for one reason or another in public schools, which makes the stories of successful charters all the more amazing.

For example, students at the 5-year-old Amistad Academy, a New Haven, Conn., charter school on which I reported for a recent PBS documentary, "Closing the Achievement Gap," tend to enter at least two years below grade level in math and reading. But after two years at Amistad, most of these students are achieving above their grade level. After its first three years, state assessment test scores of the almost totally black and Hispanic school, which serves 5th through 8th grades, were not

only matching but surpassing those of their predominantly white suburban counterparts.

How do they do it?

A big part of it is attitude. Amistad students wear khaki pants and green polo shirts as a sort of uniform and regularly recite the school's "REACH" values--"Respect, Enthusiasm, Achievement, Citizenship, Hard Work."

In a school that respects them, they learn to respect education.

After three years, something unexpected happened, according to Doug McCurry, director of Achievement First, which New York City has contracted to replicate Amistad's achievements in five schools. "The first class of 4th-year students began to mentor and coach the 1st-year students," he said. "They came up with their own ideas and school traditions. Suddenly we were beginning to teach us some things about teaching and learning."

Amistad is not alone. A closer look at the NAEP study reveals that 4th-grade students in Arizona, California and Colorado charter schools actually outperform their traditional public school counterparts in their states in reading, the pro-charters Washington-based Center for Education Reform found. Eighth-grade charter students in the District of Columbia outscored all other public schools in the district in reading. California's 8th-grade charter school students also outscored their public school counterparts in their state in reading.

Eighth-graders in Colorado and Delaware charter schools outperformed 8th graders at all public schools nationally in reading and math.

Reform takes time. Charter schools usually contract for five years. That's more than enough time for some, not enough time for others to succeed. Either way, we should not make too many judgments based on one study that only looked at 4th graders and only tested 1 percent of the nation's 600,000 charter school students.

Sure, some charter schools have failed. That only shows the need for close oversight and accountability. Shutting down charter schools that don't work is as important as maintaining the ones that do.

How accountable, by comparison, are traditional public schools? At least when a charter school fails to perform, it can be shut down. Public schools that fail to perform too often continue to non-perform year after year.

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Chalk It Up
By Caroline M. Hoxby
Wall Street Journal
September 29, 2004

"This summer the gloves came off in the charter school debate. A study conducted by the American Federation of Teachers, charging that charter school students lagged behind their public school peers, was given unprecedented attention by the national media. Yet, the study is not at all persuasive. It compared students in charter schools and regular public schools, but the typical charter student is not the typical public school student. Affluent parents whose children are doing fine in suburban schools rarely send them to fledgling charter schools. Charter schools often arise where families have relatively low incomes, a single parent, and are minorities or recent immigrants. Parents may choose charter schools because they are motivated, but they may also choose them because their children are already performing poorly.

"Fortunately, there is a good way to see whether charter schools raise achievement. Since most charter schools cannot admit as many as want to attend, they choose students based on random lotteries. We can compare the performance of students who are and are not randomly assigned to charter schools. This is the method used by Department of Education-sponsored studies and a study by Jonah Rockoff and me. We found that a large system of Chicago charter schools raised math and reading scores by about six percentiles among students who entered in third grade or below. (Relatively few students enter after third grade, so we don't have statistically significant findings for them.)

"Any scientific study of charter schools must compare apples to apples, and the lottery method is best. The AFT, in contrast, has been pushing results based on an "apples to oranges" comparison, pitting charter students against all regular public school students, who are very different. In fact, when the AFT narrowed in on black and Hispanic students, they found no differences between charter and public schools. This has not kept them from trumpeting the result of the crude comparison. Another serious problem with their study: It is based on only a 3% sample of charter students in the fourth and eighth grades. Since charter schools enroll only 1.5% of students, the AFT proposes to dictate policy by examining a mere 0.05% of American students. That's four fourth graders in Connecticut charter schools, 14 in D.C., 32 in New York, and 38 in New Jersey! Even in charter-friendly Arizona, the number is only 108.

"Forget about studies that compare apples to oranges, based on tiny samples. Charter schools are public entities, their students take state exams, so we can do a definitive comparison between charter and public schools. I gathered assessment data that covers 99% of fourth graders enrolled in charter schools in 2002-03 (the same year as the AFT data). In states that do not have fourth grade exams, I used the fifth or third grade exam. This is not a sample: it is all charter students for whom results are reported (the missing 1% are in schools so small that scores are kept confidential to protect individuals). I compared the charter students to those in the nearest regular public school and the nearest regular public school with a similar racial composition. These are the schools that the charter students would otherwise likely attend. This comparison is not ideal, but it is reasonable.

"For the entire U.S., I found that charter students were 3.8% more likely to be proficient on their state's reading exam and 1.2% more likely to be proficient on their state's math exam than students in the nearest regular public school. These differences rise to 5% in reading and 2.8% in math if we compare charter schools to the nearest public school with a similar racial composition. In fact, the more similar the schools are, the more positive the differences. Consider states where charter schools are relatively well-established. Arizona's and California's charter students are 7% to 8% more proficient in reading than students in the nearest similar public school. Colorado's are 11% more proficient in reading and math. D.C.'s post large differences in achievement: About 36% more proficient in reading and math. Other states in which charter students have a significant advantage in at least one subject are Alaska, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Nevada, Oregon, and Wisconsin.

"Of course, not all charter students have such proficiency gains. I found that North Carolina's are less proficient than students in the nearest similar public schools. The remaining states have too few charter students for the state level comparison to be meaningful, even with 99% of students. (Think of a presidential poll with an error of plus or minus 35%, and you'll have the idea.) Nevertheless, all states are included in the overall number, so it's the true average for the U.S.

"The goal of charter reforms is not creating good charter schools in the midst of mediocre public schools. The goal is boosting the performance of all schools by fostering competition and innovation. In the long run, we want to see charter schools and neighboring public schools perform similarly, all at a higher level. In states with a significant charter presence, like Arizona and Michigan, there is evidence that public schools rise to the challenge and raise achievement faster when they face a charter competitor.

"Disadvantaged children in the U.S. do not have a special interest group to get their version of things on front pages -- but they deserve good education. Let's not demolish reforms before they can be fairly evaluated."

Ms. Hoxby is a professor of economics at Harvard and a member of the Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force on K-12 Education.