

Center for Education Reform

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GETTING THE WORD OUT: CHARTER SCHOOLS DO SUCCEED

*A Guide for Charter School Activists
Provided by The Center for Education Reform*

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The ongoing battle over charter school achievement takes on a familiar front tomorrow as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) releases a research study reliant on flawed data about students attending charter schools.

Using raw data collected in 2004, the study suggests that charter schools serve fewer disadvantaged children than conventional public school students. At issue are the indicators of poverty among charter school students used by the government, a problem NCES clearly recognizes. The problem is compounded when researchers apply various assumptions about poverty to assess and compare academic achievement between charter school students and those attending conventional public schools.

This study will surely be covered extensively in the press and championed by our opponents in the education establishment throughout the Back-to-School season. As charter school leaders and activists on the frontlines, it is important that you be armed with the tools to support your school and community. Once again, The Center for Education Reform (CER) is pleased to provide you with these resources to help charter school leaders set the record straight.

In this "toolkit" you will find the following resources:

- Getting the word out – key messages and tips for delivering research messages to the press, your elected officials and parents.
- Talking points that put the NCES report into perspective.
- Fact sheets on what the most recent research reveals about charter school achievement, numbers, and public opinion.

In addition to this toolkit, CER has over 13 years of research that refutes this study and supports the success of charter schools. If you have additional research questions, please do not hesitate to call us at (202) 822-9000.



GETTING THE RESEARCH MESSAGE OUT

Staying on Message

Refuting studies that suggest charter schools are underperforming can appear to be a difficult task, especially if they are stamped with the “government” label. While sharing the good news about charter school achievement is important, it is equally important that your message be followed by a call to action: we need more thorough research to get a true picture of charter school success.

The best way to take on the research wars is to stick to the facts and to CER’s rule of “three” simple messages:

1. State-level assessments are stronger indicators of charter school achievement. Comparisons at this level continue to show that charter school students are outpacing their conventional public school peers in reading and math.
2. It is important to see the NCES study for what it is, a flawed report relying on raw data and flawed poverty indicators. The government data center even acknowledges this flaw itself.
3. To truly understand how well charter schools are succeeding, more detailed research must be done to explore individual student progress from year-to-year.

Educating the Media

More reporters are covering charter schools than ever. Kick-off this school year right and make sure reporters in your community know that there is a whole host of research available on charter school achievement, and that your school’s story is a shining example of this national movement.

- Give reporters you have worked with a quick call and let them know about the flawed NCES report; provide them with a fact sheet about why it’s flawed and how your own school is evidence of success. (Reporters will appreciate the heads up on a major story.)
- Find out who your editorial editor is, or who is in charge of arranging regular editorial board meetings, and request a time to come in and talk about this timely topic. Bring along a parent, a local lawmaker or a teacher who can help strengthen your case.
- Draft an **opinion-editorial** that outlines the positive research and what it says about local charter school success. Include local achievement numbers and anecdotal stories. And remember – no matter how great a story you have to tell – keep it under 650 words!
- Write a **letter-to-the-editor** to your local paper with your three key messages – remember to try and include local statistics. Keep the letter under 150 words.
- Invite reporters to your school to see first hand the kind of success most research reports can’t even come close to illustrating. Ensure satisfied parents are there to share their experiences.

Remember, it's okay if the reporter doesn't write a story right away – it's important that he or she have the information for future stories.

Having trouble identifying the right media? Need a second-look at your opinion-editorial? We're here to help. Call CER at (202) 822-9000.

Informing Parents

Recent, widespread media coverage on charter school research may leave parents overwhelmed or confused. There are a number of ways to reassure your parents. And remember, keep the message simple!

- Make research an agenda item at a regularly scheduled parent meeting – be sure to provide simple fact sheets that outline how your school is doing, as well as provide very general information on national and statewide data, and some key arguments from favorable research.
- Send a letter to parents outlining key national research on charter schools and include key local achievement data. Address directly any local negative news coverage, and then set the record straight.
- Include a short article on what research says about charters in other regular correspondences with parents, such as school newsletters.
- Encourage parents to write a letter to their local newspaper when they read negative coverage on charters.

Engaging Lawmakers and Community Leaders

As you well know, our lawmakers read the newspaper, too. It's important that they know that there is more to charter school research than what NCES has to say about it.

- Write a letter to your local city council members, mayor and state legislator informing them of new, exciting research on charter school achievement. Include local statistics as well as anecdotal stories that support the message that charters are doing a great job serving kids in their community.
- Make sure that your allies in the state legislator or city council have a fact sheet on charter school data. Keep them updated so they can remain credible champions for your school and for your cause.
- And remember, thank these lawmakers for all they've done to provide an environment in which charters can succeed, and encourage them to take the next step (removing restrictive caps, allowing alternative authorizers, or providing equal funding, to name a few).

Questions?

CER's, advocacy, media, and policy experts are available to offer advice or answer any questions you have. Call us at (202) 822-9000. We're here to help you get the message out.

CHARTER SCHOOLS GET HIGH MARKS

-Research Fact Sheet-

All across the country charter schools are continuing to provide parents with an exceptional choice, and kids a chance for improved academic achievement. While parental satisfaction is important, local and state measures offer the depth and validity in studying charter school success. The following is a sampling of key findings from around the states:

From the States

- In 2005, a higher percentage of charter school students in **Massachusetts**, compared with students in conventional public schools, scored proficient or advanced in the state's assessment test – 9.2 percent, 8.7 percent, and 8.3 percent higher in English, math, and science, respectively.
- In a comparison of African-American students, those attending charter schools outperformed the students in conventional public schools in **Michigan's** 2004 assessment test – 46 percent of eighth grade African-American charter students passed the math assessment compared with 21 percent among African-American eighth graders statewide.
- In 2005, charter schools in **California** showed stronger year-to-year improvement than conventional public schools, especially in Los Angeles. Statewide, charter schools scored an average gain of 28 points in the state assessment compared with a 20-point gain posted by conventional public schools.
- In the 2004-05 school year, fourth grade charter school students in **New York** were 7.1 percent more proficient on the state's English test and 7.7 percent more proficient on the math test than conventional public school students. In New York City, where a restrictive cap limits the number of charters that can open statewide, charter students outperformed their counterparts in the third, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. Sixty-two percent of charter students achieved proficiency in reading compared to 55 percent of conventional public schools. In math, the difference is even larger; 61 percent of charter students reached proficiency compared to only half of all conventional public school students.
- The percentage of charter school students in **Florida** who tested proficient in the state's reading assessment has grown faster than the gains posted by conventional public school students – charter school students rose from 55 percent to 58 percent, compared with an increase of 54 percent to 56 percent among conventional public school students.
- Charter students in the **District of Columbia** now account for 26 percent of all public school students, the highest in the nation. The 65 charter schools are also scoring higher in reading and math. Fifty-four percent of DC charter students are proficient in math, a full 10 percent higher than conventional schools. In reading 45 percent of charter students are proficient compared to 39 percent of students in conventional public schools.

- Using individual state assessments, a 2004 Harvard University study found that charter school students are outscoring their counterparts in neighboring conventional public schools by as much as five percent nationwide. This study is significant in that it makes “apples-to-apples” comparisons between charter schools and their closest traditional public school that had a similar racial composition (ethnic make-up).

Need achievement data for a state not covered here?

Contact us at (202) 822-9000.

Source: The Center for Education Reform, www.edreform.com

CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVE DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

-Research Fact Sheet-

The results continue to roll in. Charter schools do serve students who are underserved by the conventional public school environment. CER's *2005 Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools* found that 63 percent of the students in a typical charter school qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. Additionally, the survey found that an average of 75 percent of students in charter schools fall into categories defined as "at-risk."

Just last week CER polled the nation's charter schools again in preparation for the NCES study. The survey found that nearly half of the respondents who do not participate in the free and reduced federal lunch program choose not to for a number of reasons.

Some of these reasons include:

- Some charter schools reported that they did not have the facilities to offer lunch.
- In South Carolina, the state law says that free and reduced lunch is available to school districts and private schools, but most charter schools are denied participation because districts interpret the state language to be exclusionary.
- Several schools reported that because their schools serviced home-schooled families, they require all children to bring a bagged lunch and provide lunch for those children in need.
- Charter Schools reported that participation in the free and reduced lunch program would have required hiring an additional staff member just to handle the paperwork because of the uniqueness of the school.
- Many charter schools reported that they choose to feed all of their students, and while most of their children would qualify for free and reduced lunch, they do not participate so they can feed all of the children and utilize their resources more wisely.

For more information please contact CER at (202) 822-9000.

Source: The Center for Education Reform, www.edreform.com