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*The New York Times*

## **A Second Report Shows Charter School Students Not Performing as Well as Other Students**

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**December 16, 2004**

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Retrieved 12/16/04 from

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/16/education/16charter.html?oref=login&oref=login&th>

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 15 - A federal Education Department analysis of test scores from 2003 shows that children in charter schools generally did not perform as well on exams as those in regular public schools. The analysis, released Wednesday, largely confirms an earlier report on the same statistics by the American Federation of Teachers.

The department, analyzing the results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress test for fourth graders, found charter students scoring significantly lower than regular public school students in math, even when the results are broken down for low-income children and those in cities.

In reading, the report said, over all there was no statistically significant difference between students in charters and in regular public schools. However, when students in special education were excluded, charter students scored significantly lower than those in regular public schools.

When broken down by race, the results show charter students generally lagging behind those in regular public schools in reading and math, but the differences were not statistically significant, the report said.

The report, which included responses to a questionnaire administered with the test, shed light on the nature of charter schools and their performance. They showed, for example, that the only charter schools that outperformed regular public schools in reading were those that had been in operation for less than a year. Otherwise, test scores generally declined the longer a school had been operating as a charter.

Also, schools that were not chartered by a school district but functioned as independent districts tended to do worse than those over which districts exercised some oversight.

The data were released at an unusual news conference, at which the deputy education secretary, Eugene W. Hickok, who is resigning, pronounced the Education Department a defender of charter schools and described the results as encouraging.

"In case there's any doubt, we are big supporters of charter schools," Dr. Hickok said. "So as I read these studies on charter schools, I read them through that lens."

He noted that in specific areas, charter students did not do significantly worse than those in regular schools, and said the results portrayed only a "snapshot in time," not a measure of growth. He noted that charters tended to enroll more black students, and were disproportionately located in cities.

Given those differences, he said, the scores were "not a bad sign." He added, "While the study does point out some differences, it also points out that in many ways charter students are holding their own."

After the release of the report, the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the test, sponsored a discussion with Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, which supports charters, and Bella Rosenberg, an author of the teachers' union report. That report, released in August and based on the same test scores released Wednesday, prompted a storm of criticism from charter advocates.

Ms. Allen, citing studies that purport to show stronger results for charters in comparisons that are statewide, rather than national, said, "Charter school students in the aggregate are in a dead heat with students in regular schools."

She also rejected the survey questions that found that charters with district supervision performed better than those without.

"Autonomy is not accurately measured by asking are you part of a school district or not," she said. "It does not take into account the wide variety of ways" in which charters operate, she said.

Ms. Rosenberg differed. "If our much-maligned regular public schools are failing," she said, "then charter schools, the very schools that promised to deliver higher achievement in return for, and as a result of, freedom from rules and regulations, are failing too, and often at significantly worse levels."

In a statement, Representative John A. Boehner, Republican of Ohio and chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Work Force, described the new report as a refutation of the teachers' union report, although the results were largely the same. He highlighted findings showing that in comparing students of the same race, charter students were not doing significantly worse than students in regular schools.

But Ms. Rosenberg rejected that analysis, borrowing a line from President Bush in calling it "a standard of success otherwise known as the soft bigotry of low expectations."

"We don't tolerate that from regular public schools," she said, "and we certainly shouldn't tolerate it from a movement whose schools flourished because it promised elected representatives - and more poignantly, poor and minority parents - that charter schools could and would do better, not the same or worse."

For the first time, the survey also collected national data comparing the performance of students in charters managed by nonprofit organizations with those run by commercial companies, the largest of which is Edison Schools. Those results showed no difference in performance between the two types of schools.

Adam Tucker, a spokesman for Edison, said that while the quality of companies that managed charter schools varied widely, he doubted the survey's findings. He cited a study by the Brookings Institution, which found that schools run by commercial companies did somewhat better than other charter schools.