

Data Point to Failure

Point of View Essay

by

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Opposing view: Federal government shouldn't fund and encourage charters.

Starting in 1991, charter schools offered education officials a bargain: Free us from the bureaucratic burdens that afflict schools, and we promise to improve achievement. If we don't improve achievement, shut us down. After 13 years, it is clear that charters have broken the achievement promise and that they are not closed for that failure.

The latest evidence is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) charter school study. Of the 22 comparisons in reading and mathematics on gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, special education status and limited-English status, 20 favored public school students. One was a tie, and one favored charter students by 2 points.

Another 2004 federal study of charters concluded that charter schools were less likely to meet state performance standards. Charter schools rarely were sanctioned, and when they were, it was because they didn't comply with regulations or keep their finances straight, not because they failed academically. Botch the money and you might be closed; botch the kids' education and you can carry on.

Charters exist because critics claimed public schools had failed. But if charters do not do as well as the public schools, aren't those same critics obliged to label the charters as failures?

State evidence abundantly corroborates the NAEP's national findings. In Ohio, a five-year evaluation of charters concluded that they were doing no better than low-performing public schools with similar demographic characteristics. In Michigan, where private, for-profit firms run most charters, a *Detroit News* headline read, "Substandard charters fail 17,000: 6 management firms underperform worst Michigan urban districts." That's right, worse than Detroit, Flint or Lansing.

The Washington Post could find "No evidence that (charter) achievement tops that of regular schools" in the District of Columbia, while the *Chicago Tribune* said simply: "Most charters fall a bit short."

These data, all from 2003 alone, constitute but a small sample of the negative outcomes. Yet in 2004, the U.S. Department of Education lavished \$75 million on California for more charters. For heaven's sake, why? The No Child Left Behind law permits "failing" schools to convert to charters. Whatever for?

Where is the outrage?

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