
The New York Times

Charter Schools Trail in Results, U.S. Data Reveals

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 16 - The first national comparison of test scores among children in charter schools and regular public schools shows charter school students often doing worse than comparable students in regular public schools.

The findings, buried in mountains of data the Education Department released without public announcement, dealt a blow to supporters of the charter school movement, including the Bush administration.

The data shows fourth graders attending charter schools performing about half a year behind students in other public schools in both reading and math. Put another way, only 25 percent of the fourth graders attending charters were proficient in reading and math, against 30 percent who were proficient in reading, and 32 percent in math, at traditional public schools.

Because charter schools are concentrated in cities, often in poor neighborhoods, the researchers also compared urban charters to traditional schools in cities. They looked at low-income children in both settings, and broke down the results by race and ethnicity as well. In virtually all instances, the charter students did worse than their counterparts in regular public schools.

Charters are expected to grow exponentially under the new federal education law, No Child Left Behind, which holds out conversion to charter schools as one solution for chronically failing traditional schools.

"The scores are low, dismayingly low," said Chester E. Finn Jr., a supporter of charters and president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, who was among those who asked the administration to do the comparison.

This document is available on the Education Policy Studies Laboratory website at:
<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EP/PRU/articles/EP/PRU-0408-70-OWI.pdf>

Mr. Finn, an assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration, said the quality of charter schools across the country varied widely, and he predicted that the results would make those overseeing charters demand more in the way of performance.

"A little more tough love is needed for these schools," Mr. Finn said. "Somebody needs to be watching over their shoulders."

Mr. Finn and other backers of charter schools contended, however, that the findings should be considered as "baseline data," and could reflect the predominance of children in these schools who turned to charters after having had severe problems at their neighborhood schools.

The results, based on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress, commonly known as the nation's report card, were unearthed from online data by researchers at the American Federation of Teachers, which provided them to The New York Times. The organization has historically supported charter schools but has produced research in recent years raising doubts about the expansion of charter schools.

Charters are self-governing public schools, often run by private companies, which operate outside the authority of local school boards, and have greater flexibility than traditional public schools in areas of policy, hiring and teaching techniques.

Federal officials said they did not intend to hide the performance of charter schools, and denied any political motivation for failing to publicly disclose that the data were available. "I guess that was poor publicity on our part," said Robert Lerner, the federal commissioner for education statistics. Mr. Lerner said further analysis was needed to put the data in its proper context.

But others were skeptical, saying the results proved that such schools were not a cure-all. "There's just a huge distance between the sunny claims of the charter school advocates and the reality," said Bella Rosenberg, an special assistant to the president of the American Federation of Teachers. "There's a very strong accountability issue here."

Of the nation's 88,000 public schools, 3,000 are charters, educating more than 600,000 students. But their ranks are expected to grow as No Child Left Behind identifies thousands of schools for possible closing because of poor test scores.

Once hailed as a kind of free-market solution offering parents an escape from moribund public schools, elements of the charter school movement have prompted growing concern in recent years. Around the country, more than 80 charter schools were forced to close, largely because of questionable financial dealings and poor performance, said Luis Huerta, a professor at Columbia University Teachers College. In California, the state's largest charter school operator has just announced the closing of at least 60 campuses, The Los Angeles Times reported on Monday, stranding 10,000 children just weeks before the start of the school year.

The math and reading tests were given to a nationally representative sample of about 6,000 fourth graders at 167 charter schools in February 2003. Some 3,200 eighth graders at charter schools also took the exams, an insufficient number to make national comparisons.

The results are not out of line with earlier local and state studies of charter school performance, which generally have shown charters doing no better than traditional public schools. But they offered the first nationally representative comparison of children attending both types of schools, and are expected influence public debate.

Amy Stuart Wells, a sociology professor at Columbia University Teachers College, called the new data "really, really important."

"It confirms what a lot of people who study charter schools have been worried about," she said. "There is a lack of accountability. They're really uneven in terms of quality."

Detractors have historically accused charters of skimming the best students, those whose parents are most committed, from the poorest schools. But supporters of charter schools said the data confirmed earlier research suggesting that charters take on children who were already performing below average. "We're doing so much to help kids that are so much farther behind, and who typically weren't even continuing in school," said Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, in Washington, which represents charter schools. She said the results reflect only "a point in time," and said nothing about the progress of students in charter schools.

That, she said, could be measured only by tracking the performance of charters in future tests. For the moment, however, the National Assessment Governing Board has no plans to survey charters again.

One previous study, however, suggests that tracking students over time might present findings more favorable to the charter movement. Tom Loveless, director of the Brown Center on Education Policy at the Brookings Institution, who conducted a two-year study of 569 charter schools in 10 states found that while charter school students typically score lower on state tests, over time they progress at faster rates than students in traditional public schools.

The new test scores on charter schools went online last November, along with state-by-state results from the national assessment. Though other results were announced at a news conference, with a report highlighting the findings, federal officials never mentioned that the charter school data were publicly available.

Researchers at the American Federation of Teachers were able to gain access to the scores from the national assessment's Web site only indirectly: by gathering results based on how schools identified themselves in response to a question.

In a significant departure from earlier releases of test scores, Mr. Lerner said the charter school findings would be formally shown only as part of a larger analysis that would adjust results for the characteristics of charter schools and their students.

In the 1990's, the National Assessment Governing Board had rejected requests from states for such analyses, with Mr. Finn, then a member of the board, contending that explanatory reports would compromise the credibility of the assessment results by trying to blame demographic and other outside factors for poor performance.

But Mr. Lerner said he thought such an analysis was necessary to put the charter school test scores in context. He called the raw comparison of test scores "the beginning of something important," and said, "What one has to do is adjust for many different variables to get a sense of what the effects of charter schools are."