

INTRODUCTION

In recent months, several studies on charter schools have been rushed to the press: some claiming their effectiveness at improving student achievement, others declaring the exact opposite. What are we to make out of these conflicting reports?

CONFLICTING REPORTS

The charter school controversy intensified last fall with the release of a study by one of the nation's largest teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which has long been a staunch opponent of all forms of school choice. AFT used scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to compare the performance of a nationwide sample of 4th-grade charter school students to a sample of 4th-graders in traditional public schools. On average, AFT found that charter school students had lower NAEP scores than did students in traditional public schools, and the scores were even worse for low-income and inner-city charter students.

However, it is important to note that this study did not compare similar types of students. In other words, students who choose to attend charter schools are often fundamentally different from average students attending traditional public schools (i.e., they're more likely to be minorities who fell behind academically in traditional public schools before they transferred to charter schools). Furthermore, many critics have pointed out that the AFT study drew on a tiny sample (about 1%) of charter students nationwide and failed to distinguish long-standing charter schools from startups or to account for variations among charter schools, thus rendering any sweeping conclusions as meaningless.

In December 2004, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics

(NCES) released the results from its national study of charter schools, which also revealed that 4th-grade charter students' math achievement in 2003 was not quite as high as that of their traditional public school counterparts. However, the gap was not statistically meaningful in reading. Furthermore, when you disaggregate the data by characteristics such as race, there is no statistically significant difference. NCES Associate Commissioner Peggy Carr advises that "fairer comparisons are between students who share a common characteristic."

In fact, Carr pointed to Harvard economist Caroline Hoxby's recent study of "matched" schools as having a better methodology. Hoxby used the results of state tests (as opposed to NAEP scores) to compare the performance of 99% of all charter school 4th-graders to those in conventional public schools that are located near the charter schools (or were at least demographically similar). Though it varies by state—in some there's no difference and in North Carolina the charter pupils do worse—for Hoxby finds that for the U.S. as a whole, charter students pass state reading proficiency tests at a rate 5% higher than those in neighboring district schools; in math, the differential is 3%.

More interesting still, the longer the charter school has been in operation, the greater its advantage. Hoxby also finds charter pupils doing relatively better in states with strong charter laws (those giving schools greater autonomy) and where the charter schools are not seriously under-funded. The charter edge is also greater in poor and heavily Hispanic neighborhoods.

As Hoxby acknowledges, hers is not a perfect study either; like the two NAEP-based analyses, it's a snapshot of student performance at a single point in time and does not include "value added" data (such as parental satisfaction, school safety, or graduation rates).

SO WHO'S RIGHT?

Our view is that there is not yet adequate evidence to make definitive conclusions about the success (or failure) of the charter school movement. First and foremost, the charter school movement is still relatively young, beginning in Minnesota in 1992 and only recently spreading to various pockets across the country. Therefore, since many of these schools are just beginning to reach their stride, it may be too soon to label them either individually or collectively as a success or failure.

Secondly, comparing charter schools to public schools on a national basis is an inherently difficult—if not impossible—task. First, there are a multitude of different types of charter schools, serving many different kinds of students. Plus, critical variables, such as school leadership, funding, and other resources, also differ greatly from school to school, making direct comparisons difficult at best. (In a recent *Education Week* editorial, U. of Washington professor and Koret Task Force on K-12 Education member Paul T. Hill makes a convincing case for the limits of nearly all current research on charter schools).

In addition, snapshot comparisons of average achievement levels across schools at a single point in time (as the NAEP does) can not adequately account for differences in student backgrounds or other characteristics (known among researchers as “selection bias”). For example, in the AFT study, charter school students whose NAEP scores were lower than national averages may well come from communities where achievement (and, perhaps, expectation) levels are chronically low.

Hoxby's study tries to address the community effects by comparing charter schools to public schools that are nearby. But as RAND researchers Ron Zimmer and Brian Gill point out, she does not address potential differences within communities. For example, if the students who choose to attend charter schools tend to be higher achieving than students who stay behind, her method will overestimate the effectiveness of charter schools.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There are two good ways of overcoming problems with selection bias and “snapshot” comparisons in

the research base on charter schools: randomized experiments and longitudinal analyses. Both methods allow researchers to account for the amount of time a student has spent in a particular school, and both methods address differences among student populations served. A few studies in progress promise to address these issues, including a study of Chicago public schools by Hoxby and two national studies that the U.S. Department of Education has commissioned to education research groups AIR and WestEd.

In the meantime, the new National Charter School Research Center at the University of Washington (led by Paul T. Hill) is conducting a meta-analysis of all existing studies on charter schools to see what kinds of schools have been studied and what kind of comparisons have been made (i.e., new charters vs. converted public schools; supportive vs. hostile local regulatory environment). From this center's large matrix of critical variables, we may soon begin to have a fuller picture of whether students benefit from attending charter schools (and if so, which ones).

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