



## RESEARCH

## Checking Up On Charters

**C**AN YOU remember when a single piece of educational research led to a full-page ad in the *New York Times*? Me neither. But that is what happened in August 2004. A chronicle follows.

It would be kind to say that the U.S. Department of Education was dawdling in its analysis of the data on charter schools that were collected by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). ED collected the data with the regular NAEP assessment in 2003 and placed the regular data on its website in the fall of 2003. The American Federation of Teachers found the charter school data, though, and analyzed them. The *New York Times* reported the AFT's findings in a front-page story on 17 August 2004.

Charter schools did not come off well when compared to regular public schools, even when the analysis controlled for family income and location. There were no ethnic differences between the student populations of the regular public schools and the charters, but the white/minority achievement gap was as large in charters as it was in regular public schools.

To say that the appearance of this article caused the Right to go ballistic is to practice understatement. August 18 saw an op-ed in

the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Dog Eats AFT's Homework," by Harvard's William Howell, Paul Peterson, and Martin West. Secretary of Education Rod Paige inveigled the *Times* to do another article and allow him to defend charters. *Newsday's* editorial page said that the jury was still out on charters. The op-ed page of the *Chicago Tribune* said that the AFT's findings were "as new as a lava lamp, as revelatory as an old sock, and as significant as a belch" (thereby indicating a need for remedial simile instruction). The editorial in the *Times* claimed that the findings were bad news for No Child Left Behind because the low performance of charters meant that it made no sense for chronically failing public schools to convert to charter status.

On August 19, the Rev. Floyd Flake defended charters in a *New York Times* op-ed. (In its credit line, the *Times* failed to point out that Flake is the president of the Charter Schools Division of Edison Schools, Inc.) In his *New York Post* op-ed, "Defaming Charters," Chester Finn, Jr., labeled the analysis "a mischief-bearing grenade, hand delivered by the charter-hating American Federation of Teachers." (Historical note: the *Washington Times* once called Finn himself a "bomb-thrower.") Finn's piece overlooked the fact that, without longtime AFT President Albert Shanker's backing of charters, there probably wouldn't be any. Shanker later became disillusioned and saw charters as frivolous and divisive.

Also on August 19, Jay Greene, a Manhattan Institute fellow, published an op-ed in the *New York Sun*; the Center for Education Reform's Jeanne Allen appeared on NPR's "Tavis Smiley Show"; and ED's Nina Shokraii Rees showed up on "The News-Hour with Jim Lehrer."

But about that ad. It appeared on August 25, its \$125,000 cost borne by Allen and her Center for Education Reform. The ad, signed by 31 professors, scolded the AFT for its analysis and the *New York Times* for re-

porting the story. The ad said, in part, "The study in question does not meet current professional research standards." It then described the standards that the AFT and the *Times* had violated. There is nothing wrong with those standards except that they constitute a massive exercise in hypocrisy, because many of the signatories violate them regularly. The signatories guilty of such violations include Paul Peterson and his group at Harvard; Caroline Hoxby, whose work was sharply criticized by Laurence Mishel in *The American Prospect*; Howard Fuller, a propagandist whose work does not approach being research; and Jay Greene, all of whose seven extant "working papers" from the Manhattan Institute violate one or more of the listed standards.

The ad appeared a few weeks later in *Education Week*, minus two signers who told me they didn't know what they were getting into. It can be viewed at the Center for Education Reform's website, [www.edreform.com/\\_upload/NewYorkTimesAd.pdf](http://www.edreform.com/_upload/NewYorkTimesAd.pdf). The ad overlooked the fact that a number of state-level studies have yielded similar findings; many of them were reported in the 13th and 14th Bracey Reports.

By December 15, Deputy Secretary of Education Eugene Hickok and Darvin Winick from the National Assessment Governing Board held a press conference to release ED's overdue report. Both emphasized that "most charter schools are relatively new," implying that it's too soon to evaluate them. However, they could not account for the fact that the NAEP data showed that the longer a school was open, the lower it scored (Table 1).

**TABLE 1. Charter School NAEP Scores**

Years of Operation	Math	Reading
0 to 1 year	235	234
2 to 3 years	232	214
4 to 5 years	227	212
6 years or more	228	210

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Only the scores of schools open for one year or less are above the national average, which was 234 in math and 217 in reading. The 20-point drop in reading equals roughly two years of growth. It is interesting to note that a study of Texas data by Eric Hanushek, John Kain, and Steven Rivkin found that students in charter schools showed smaller *gains* in achievement than their counterparts in regular public schools, but that for schools that were open three or more years, the difference in gains between charters and regular public schools became insignificant.

Charter schools originally promised this: you give us increased autonomy, and we'll give you improved achievement. But the results showed that charters that constituted their own school district — and thus had more autonomy — did not score as well as charters that were part of a public school district: 225 to 234 in math; 208 to 218 in reading. In both subjects, students who were taught by teachers holding regular certificates scored higher than students taught by teachers with “other” certificates. And these latter students, in turn, scored higher than students taught by teachers who held no certificate.

ED's report fully replicated the AFT analysis. Although not all differences were statistically significant, the results favored public schools in 20 of 22 comparisons. Hispanic students in charters scored two points higher in reading than Hispanic students in regular public schools, and white students in the two categories tied.

At the press conference, Nick Anderson of the *Los Angeles Times* asked Winick and Hickok why they were so satisfied with charters' scoring close to regular public schools, given the charters' promise to do better. Hickok replied that the charters do the same with fewer dollars. Anderson then asked if that meant that money really does matter. There was no response.

An oft-made complaint about the analyses by AFT and by ED is that the data were a “snapshot,” providing information for only one point in time. This is true. The Hoxby study critiqued by Mishel was supposed to show that students in charters progressed faster. Thus it was significant that, almost simultaneously with the AFT report in August, Helen Ladd of Duke and Robert Bifulco of the University of Connecticut published a

study indicating that, at least in North Carolina, students in charter schools *do not* progress as fast. The Ladd-Bifulco study meets all of the standards laid out in the *Times* ad.

Even better, the study examines gains for the *same students* when they were in charter schools and when they were in public schools. Thus differences in growth in the two types of schools could not be attributable to the charters' and publics' different mix of ethnic groups or different socioeconomic status. “Because we compare the test score gains made by students while they are in charter schools to the gains those same students made in public schools,” the researchers say, “these findings cannot be explained away by differences in student backgrounds.” The Ladd-Bifulco study shows substantial negative results for charters:

The negative effects of attending a charter school are large. Charter school students exhibit gains nearly 0.10 standard deviations smaller in reading and 0.16 standard deviations smaller in math, on average, than the gains those same students had when they were enrolled in traditional public schools. Assuming such losses compounded annually, students enrolled in charter schools for 5 years would score nearly one-half of a standard deviation lower in reading and nearly eight-tenths of a standard deviation lower in math than they would if they remained in traditional public schools.

The researchers go on to say that these differences in growth are larger than the differences between kids whose parents are dropouts and kids whose parents have graduate degrees. They are also larger than differences in growth between blacks and whites.

Like the Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin study mentioned above, Ladd and Bifulco's study found that the negative impact of charters declines with the number of years the school has been open. Unlike that study, though, Ladd and Bifulco's found that the difference still remains large — and negative — even after the charters have operated for five years.

Ladd and Bifulco found no evidence that the public schools ratcheted up their performance because of competition from the charters. This is consistent with other charter school studies, such as those by Amy Stuart Wells

and by the RAND Corporation.

The researchers propose a number of possibilities about *why* charters do worse: the student mix in charters, a lack of resources in charters, or less efficiency in charters. All of these are possibilities, but the authors conclude that a substantial part of the difference is due to high student turnover in the charters. The attrition rate is much higher in charters than in regular public schools. That rate declines with the number of years the school has been open, but even charters that have been open for five years lose almost twice as many kids as their public school counterparts: 25.4% versus 13.7%.

Because of the reluctance of the U.S. Department of Education to hand over the results of its charter school studies, in November the *New York Times* had to use the Freedom of Information Act to pry loose another charter study, whose final report was delivered in June. Conducted largely by SRI International, this study also found charters performing less well than regular public schools.

Performance doesn't matter to ED, it seems. At the press conference in December, Hickok said, “We are big supporters of charter schools.” Earlier, he had demonstrated this support by doling out \$75 million to California alone to create 250 new charters. Hickok also repeated the charter school accountability mantra that “charter schools that don't work don't stay open.” Many studies contradict this claim, including the SRI study that ED was reluctant to release: “Charter schools rarely face sanctions (revocation or nonrenewal). Furthermore, authorizing bodies impose sanctions on charter schools because of problems related to *compliance with regulations* and *school finances*, rather than *student performance*” (emphases in the original).

Of course, the original argument for charters was that public schools were ineffective because they were held accountable for compliance with laws and regulations. Charter schools were supposed to improve the situation because they would be held accountable for performance.

(Full references to all stories and research mentioned in this column and longer discussions of some material can be found in the Rotten Apples in Education Awards for 2004, [www.america-tomorrow.com/bracey/EDDRA](http://www.america-tomorrow.com/bracey/EDDRA).)

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