

The AFT Charter School Study: Not News

Point of View Essay

by

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The recent flap over the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) charter school report is surprising, not because the study used the wrong methods or reached the wrong conclusions, it didn't, but because AFT's conclusions are nothing new. The AFT study *is* the first to use the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as its database but state-level reports from around the country have documented charters' problems for years. Consider summary statements from evaluations in three of the most active charter states, Ohio, Michigan and California.

The Legislative Office of Educational Oversight, not a body hostile to charters, studied Ohio's charters for five years. In its December 2003 final report on "community schools," as charters are called in Ohio: "In sum, the most that can be said about the academic performance of community schools as a group is that they are doing no better than low-performing traditional schools with similar demographic characteristics." That's the *most* that can be said?

The AFT study was attacked on the grounds that many charters are too new to be evaluated, but the LOEO studied only the oldest ones. The LOEO then laid out a number of recommendations for the charter sponsors and the Ohio Department of Education. It considered the situation so dire that if the recommendations are not implemented, the legislature should terminate all charter school funding.

Western Michigan University researchers Gary Miron and Christopher Nelson concluded, "In the aggregate our findings cast doubt on proponents' claims that Michigan charter schools will leverage gains in student achievement. With the exception of Grade 4 math, Michigan Educational Assessment Program pass rates in the typical charter school grew less (or fell faster) than those in their host districts." Researchers at Columbia University and the W. E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research reached similar conclusions in separate, independent evaluations.

Miron and Nelson also found that charters run by private, for-profit firms did worse than those run by non-profits, no small finding since 76% of Michigan's charter

are operated by the for-profits, and, nationally, an increasing proportion of charters are in the hands of such companies.

In California, the RAND Corporation's evaluation gave charters something of a free ride. Tracking the same students over a number of years, RAND concluded "charter school students are keeping pace with comparable students in conventional schools." RAND and the media, including the *New York Times*, treated this as a positive outcome. But is it? What does it mean to "keep pace" with public school students in California? In the 2003 NAEP, California finished 49th in reading at the fourth grade and tied for 50th at the eighth grade. Thus, "keeping pace" means matching the performance of the lowest scoring kids in the country.

That is *not* what charter schools promised. Joe Nathan, a charter school advocate at the University of Minnesota delivered the charter schools' vow in 1996: "Hundreds of charter schools have been created around this nation by educators who are willing to put their jobs on the line to say, 'If we can't improve student achievement, close down our schools.' This is accountability—clear, specific and real."

And non-existent. The charters haven't improved achievement and they haven't been shut down. On the rare occasion when they do go out of business, it is almost invariably because they mismanaged the money, sometimes criminally. Charters with clean books and low achievement stay open.

One must wonder why policy makers and the public have criticized charters so little in spite of many headlines like these: "Charter Schools Fail Proficiency Testing: Pupils Score Far Below Their Public-School Peers" (*Akron Beacon Journal*), "Substandard Charters Fail 17,000: 6 Management Firms Underperform Worst Michigan Urban Districts" (*Detroit News*); "Quality Uneven Despite Popularity: No Evidence That Achievement Tops That of Regular Schools" (*Washington Post*); "Most Charter Schools Fall a Bit Short" (*Chicago Tribune*).

Consider these propositions:

- Charter schools sprang from disillusionment and outrage over the alleged poor performance of public schools.
- Charter schools promised to improve achievement.
- The overwhelming majority of charters are small (fewer than 200 students) with smaller classes sizes than found in most public schools. Small schools and small classes both act to produce higher achievement. Thus, charters have two advantages over most public schools.
- Charter schools do not perform as well as demographically similar public schools.

So, where is the outrage and disillusionment over poor charter school performance?