

Research Shows Mixed Findings for Charter School Performance

Evidence continues to accumulate regarding charter school performance at both the state and national level, yet the final word still is not in on how charter schools perform. In North Carolina, the Charter School Evaluation report commissioned by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction found charter schools performed less well than did their public school counterparts in a three-year cohort study. The report found charter school students overall did not perform as well as students in the traditional public schools, and charters particularly lagged in educating African American students.

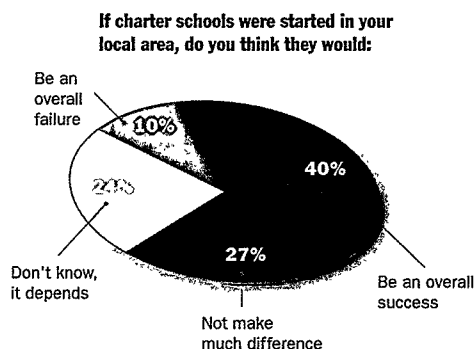
Thus, the picture is somewhat hazy in North Carolina—with charter schools showing promise but yet to prove they can outperform the public schools. The same is true nationally as dueling studies purport to show the good and the ill of the charter school movement. The Center for Education Reform, a pro-school choice think tank in Washington, D.C., stirred the rhetorical pot with its release of a report in November 2000 concluding that five years of studies across the nation had shown charter schools are meeting the needs of underserved children while forcing traditional public schools to improve.¹ The Center concluded 50 of 53 studies since 1995 had noted positive effects of charter schools, showing charter schools to be both innovative and accountable and successful in providing new education opportunities for children.

Researchers who had been more critical of charter schools were quick to critique the Center's findings. The Center for Education, Research, Analysis, and Innovation at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee assembled a panel of experts to respond to CER's findings. One such expert, independent researcher Gerald W. Bracey, noted that CER had been "highly selective in what they choose to report."

Luisa Huerta, a research associate for the group Policy Analysis for the Public Schools at the University of California at Berkeley, notes that any conclusions that charter schools are improving student achievement are premature. "The big thing missing in the charter school research

world is any substantial, reliable evidence that charter schools are doing any better than regular public school students. That's the bottom line."

If education researchers are divided on the promise of the charter schools movement, so is the public. In a 1999 national survey, Public Agenda, a New York nonprofit that polls the public on important public issues, asked, "If charter schools were started in your local area, do you think they would be an overall success, an overall failure, or would they not make much difference as far as the quality of education received?"



Some 40 percent of respondents said such schools would be an overall success, 27 percent predicted they would not make much difference, 10 percent predicted charter schools would be a failure, and 24 percent responded "it depends" or "don't know."²

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTE

¹Darcia Harris Bowman, "Vast Majority of Charter School Studies Show Positive Findings, Report States," *Education Week*, Alexandria, Va., Nov. 8, 2002, p. 18. The CER overview is available at www.edreform.com/pubs/charter.htm

²"Charter Schools: So Far So Good," finding four of Public Agenda Foundation's *On Thin Ice*, a study of threats to the public schools, New York, N.Y. Online at [HYPERLINK "http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/vouchers/voucherfinding4.htm"](http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/vouchers/voucherfinding4.htm) www.publicagenda.org/specials/vouchers/voucherfinding4.htm. 1,200 adults were interviewed by telephone June 11–24, 1999, for a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percent.