

## Data on Charters Lacking

Point of View Essay

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There are almost 3,000 charter schools operating in the United States. In Arizona about 500 charters enroll about 74,000 students. The question of whether charter schools "work" is, therefore, of considerable interest to policymakers and the public nationally and in Arizona.

To charter school proponents, the fact that charters exist is sometimes taken as evidence of their value because they believe charters create competition for students that push traditional public schools toward improvement.

Advocates also point to increased parental choice as an unqualified good. Add to the list the promise of accountability for improving student achievement and charters seem like a pretty good deal.

As charter advocate Joe Nathan wrote in the mid-'90s, "If we can't improve student achievement close down our schools." The list of charter school promises was attractive enough to the authors of the federal No Child Left Behind Act that they made charters a solution to the problem of chronically "failing" schools.

No wonder the release of a report by the American Federation of Teachers last month showing that National Assessment of Educational Progress data revealed charter school students were performing less well than their traditional public school counterparts caused an explosion of outrage among charter supporters.

Eight days after the *New York Times* ran a story about the teachers union report on the front page, a group of social scientists and charter supporters organized by the Center for Education Reform's Jeanne Allen signed a full-page ad in the *Times* criticizing it. By any estimation, this was a rapid, and expensive, response.

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**<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRL/POV/EPRL-0409-125-EPRL-POV.pdf>**

In essence, the signatories argued that it was not appropriate to use NAEP data to assess the performance of charter schools. Some aspects of their argument have merit. Even so, because National Assessment data have been used by charter school advocates to make the case that public schools are failing, it's hard to see why NAEP data shouldn't also be used to judge charter school performance.

There is another issue lurking at the edges of the debate over the performance of charter schools: money. Charter school legislation has become, in large measure, the legal framework for the expansion of the for-profit education management industry.

Operating largely outside effective governmental oversight, for-profit firms such as Edison Schools, White Hat Management and Chancellor Beacon Academies now enroll the bulk of charter school students.

The more traditional public schools that get labeled "failing" under the terms of the No Child Left Behind Act, the more money these companies stand to make. Any potential threat to the No Child Left Behind charter school provision is a threat to their bottom line.

This raises the possibility that at least some of the vocal support for charter schools may be more about dollars than student achievement. It is instructive, I think, that in February the same Jeanne Allen who organized the full-page *New York Times* ad criticizing the teachers union report signed on as the lobbyist for the new for-profit education industry trade group, the National Council of Education Providers.

Across the country, the studies and evaluations available find that charter schools sometimes perform about as well as traditional public schools; occasionally better, but more often worse.

Overall, these studies call into question the wisdom of shutting down "failing" traditional public schools and offering students charter schools, because the charter schools may very well be worse.

Here in Arizona, the picture appears to be much the same as nationally. The NAEP data show charter performance lags behind traditional public schools. Nevertheless, although some charter schools have gone out of business for fiscal mismanagement or outright fraud, it is hard to find an example of a charter school that has had its charter revoked because of poor academic results.

In the last five years the Morrison Institute (1999) and the Goldwater Institute (2001 and 2004) have released reports on the performance of Arizona's charter schools. The results are mixed and inconclusive.

Neither the Morrison nor the Goldwater studies can provide a complete and clear overall picture of whether Arizona's charter schools improve student achievement when compared with traditional public schools. What is needed are sound, comprehensive, longitudinal data that allow us to track the performance of charter schools over time. The sort of data Arizona has, to this point, largely failed to collect.

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Perhaps the broader issue, illuminated by the controversy over charter school effectiveness, is the need for Arizona to systematically collect and competently and independently analyze the data required to make sound education policy.

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