

Keeping Public Schools Public: Exploding the Privatization Myth

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Charter and private schools are no better than public schools and sometimes worse

By Barbara Miner

A time-honored way to bury embarrassing news is to quietly release the information on a Friday afternoon in mid-summer when reporters are on long-awaited vacations or wishing they were. It also helps if attention is focused on a nationwide heat wave.

So it's not surprising that Bush administration officials chose Friday, July 14, when record-breaking temperatures were recorded across the country, to release a study that found that public school students' test scores in reading and math are as good as or better than the scores of comparable students in private schools.

And in late August, when the press's attention was on the arrest in the Jon Benet Ramsey case and the impending anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the Department of Education released a report that showed 4th graders in public schools did significantly better on reading and math tests than comparable students in charter schools.

These studies undermined a basic tenet of conservative politics — that charter and private schools are better than public schools. Furthermore, because a Republican administration had initiated the studies, their results couldn't be dismissed as liberal distortions.

Rather than interject any caution into its pro-charter and pro-voucher stance, however, the Bush administration decided to bury the message. Mark Schneider, commissioner for the National Center for Education Statistics, said after the second study was released that the Department of Education was going to get out of the business of evaluating its data comparing schools and instead would let private researchers use the information to compete "in the marketplace of ideas."

While Republicans have consistently touted the alleged superiority of charter schools over traditional public schools, the Bush administration has now retooled the message. Downplaying educational discussions of academic achievement, for instance, they now tout the ideological benefits of "choice."

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, echoing almost word-for-word the pronouncements of conservative, pro-voucher advocates, said after the charter report came out that charters remain valuable because they "are empowering low-income parents with new educational options."

Schneider, meanwhile, cited the benefits of maintaining the status quo. In doing so, he came dangerously close to justifying "the soft bigotry of low expectations" — the same low expectations that Bush rhetorically (and, one might add, hypocritically) criticized when he pushed through No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

"We know they [charters] are not doing harm, so they pass a fundamental test of policy analysis," Schneider said after the report's release.

Conservatives Push Vouchers and Charters

For decades, influential conservatives have argued that public school systems are inherently flawed because they are government monopolies controlled by bureaucrats and teacher unions. The two most popular conservative alternatives have been publicly funded vouchers for private schools and charter schools, especially those free of union contracts and run independently of local school districts by private or quasi-public entrepreneurs.

In 1990, Milwaukee instituted the first voucher program, and the Republican-controlled Congress passed the first federally funded voucher program (for the Washington, D.C. schools) in 2004. Despite this, the public has been suspicious of diverting public funds to private schools, and vouchers have not garnered the widespread support that conservatives had hoped.

The most significant growth has been in charters. Charters are considered public schools but are allowed to circumvent many contractual and districtwide regulations. At the same time, they must adhere to the testing requirements of NCLB. The first state charter school law was passed by Minnesota in 1991. In the 2005-06 school year, there were about 3,600 charter schools serving a million students in 40 states plus the District of Columbia.

The latest Department of Education studies have put conservatives in a quandary, and not just because the reports do not support claims that bureaucracy and teacher unions are the cause of student failure. To defend charters, conservatives are now in the position of criticizing the reliance on standardized tests that is at the heart of NCLB.

Even though many educators have long argued that standardized test scores are inherently limited markers of a students' or schools' academic accomplishments, conservatives have used test scores to argue that public schools are failing low-income students and students of color. Now these same tests are showing that charters and private schools do not live up to the conservatives' claim of superiority.

The Nation's Report Card

The studies released this summer are based on 2003 4th- and 8th-grade reading and math test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The NAEP is sometimes referred to as the nation's report card because the same test is given to selected students across the country.

The study of private schools included both 4th and 8th grade. It found that except in 8th-grade reading, public school students do as well as if not better than students in private schools, if one factors in race and socioeconomic backgrounds. The study, which looked at 7,000 public schools and more than 530 private schools, also found that conservative Christian schools did significantly worse than public schools on 8th-grade math.

The charter school study focused on 4th-grade reading and math and found that public school students did better than charter school students. In addition, students in charter schools set up by local school districts did better than independent charters.

Bush appointee Robert Lerner commissioned the charter study several years ago when he was head of the National Center for Education Statistics. At the time, conservatives had confidence in their ideological view that charter schools outperformed traditional public schools.

From the beginning, the charter study's release was enmeshed in politics. Preliminary data were available in the summer of 2004, but the Department of Education did not release a report. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) then published its own analysis in August 2004, and the *New York Times* reported it on the front page. The following December, the department issued a study generally confirming the AFT analysis.

Charter school supporters then argued that the study was flawed because charter students came from more disadvantaged backgrounds than traditional public school students. The National Center for Education Statistics contracted with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to do a follow-up study based on more sophisticated, previously unavailable data on student characteristics. The ETS study, which led to the final report, went through lengthy peer review.

Political Support Unabated

While it is increasingly difficult to defend the conservative preference for charter and private voucher schools on educational grounds, the Bush administration is blithely pushing on. This summer, Spellings announced a \$100 million federal voucher proposal to provide "scholarships" to private and religious schools providing NCLB-mandated tutoring services. Likewise, the federal government has pushed charter and voucher alternatives in areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina. [See article, page 7.]

The most thorough summary to date of charter school studies is a book published a year ago by Teachers College Press of Columbia University and the Economic Policy Institute. That book, *The Charter School Dust-Up*, by researchers Martin Carnoy, Rebecca Jacobsen, Lawrence Mishel, and Richard Rothstein, looked at 19 studies in 11 states and the District of Columbia and included data from the 2003 NAEP tests.

"There is no evidence that, on average, charter schools outperform regular public schools," the author found. "In fact, there is evidence that the average impact of charter schools is negative."

The authors also looked at the conservative claim that charters serve more disadvantaged students than traditional public schools. They found that while charters vary widely by state, on average, charter students are not more disadvantaged. In fact, taking into account race and income, charter schools "have a more advantaged population among each racial group."

Looking at the 4th-grade NAEP math exam, the authors found that 76 percent of black students in regular public schools are low-income, compared to 68 percent of blacks in charter schools.

Overall, the researchers found that charters do not generate higher academic achievement, nor do they enroll more disadvantaged students. They also found little evidence that charters spur increased competition and force public schools to improve. And they found evidence that charters are associated with increased segregation and student turnover.

"It seems therefore that charter schools are not, and likely will not be, able to play a large role in reforming public education as a whole," the authors conclude.

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