feature article  linda a. renzulli and vincent j. roscigno

charter schools and the public good

Do charter schools work? The best studies suggest they are doing no better than traditional public schools—and are increasing racial segregation.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, "No Child Left Behind is designed to change the culture of America's schools by closing the achievement gap, offering more flexibility, giving parents more options, and teaching students based on what works." Charter schools—a recent innovation in U.S. education—are one of the most visible developments aimed at meeting these goals. Although they preceded the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, charter schools are now supported politically and financially through NCLB. Charter schools are public schools set up and administered outside the traditional bureaucratic constraints of local school boards, with the goal of creating choice, autonomy, and accountability.

Unlike regular public schools, charter schools are developed and managed by individuals, groups of parents, community members, teachers, or education-management organizations. In exchange for their independence from most state and local regulations (except those related to health, safety, and nondiscrimination), they must uphold their contracts with the local or state school board or risk being closed. Each provides its own guidelines for establishing rules and procedures, including curriculum, subject to evaluation by the state in which it resides.

Charter schools are among the most rapidly growing educational institutions in the United States today. No charter schools existed before 1990, but such schools are now operating in 40 states and the District of Columbia. According to the Center for Educational Reform, 3,977 charter schools are now educating more than a million students.

Charter schools have received bipartisan support and media accolades. This, however, is surprising. The true academic value of the educational choices that charter schools provide to students, as well as their broader implications for the traditional system of public education, are simply unknown—a fact that became obvious in November 2004, when voters in the state of Washington rejected—for the third time—legislation allowing the creation of charter schools. Driven by an alliance of parents, teachers, and teacher unions against sponsorship by powerful figures such as Bill Gates, this rejection went squarely against a decade-long trend. Reflecting on Washington's rejection, a state Democrat told the New York Times, "Charter schools will never have a future here now until there is conclusive evidence, nationwide, that these schools really work. Until the issue of student achievement gets resolved, I'd not even attempt to start over again in the Legislature."

the rationale

Most justifications for charter schools argue that the traditional system of public schooling is ineffective and that the introduction of competition and choice can resolve any deficiencies. The leading rationale is that accountability standards (for educational outcomes and student progress), choice (in curriculum, structure, and discipline), and autonomy (for teachers and parents) will generate higher levels of student achievement. The result will be high-quality schools for all children, particularly those from poor and minority backgrounds, and higher levels of student achievement.

While wealthy families have always been able to send their children to private schools, other Americans have historically had fewer, if any, options. Proponents suggest that charter schools can address such inequality by allowing all families, regardless of wealth, to take advantage of these new public educational options. Opponents contend that charter schools cannot fix broader educational problems; if anything, they become instruments of segregation, deplete public school systems of their resources, and undermine the public good.

Given the rationales for charter schools before and after the NCLB Act, it is surprising how few assessments have been made of charter school functioning, impacts on achievement, or the implications of choice for school systems. Only a handful of studies have attempted to evaluate systematically the claims of charter school effectiveness, and few of these have used national data. The various justifications for charter schools—including the desire to increase achievement in the public school system—warrant atten-
tion, as do concrete research and evidence on whether such schools work. The debate, however, involves more than simply how to enhance student achievement. It also involves educational competition and accountability, individual choice and, most fundamentally, education's role in fostering the "public good."

is there proof in the pudding?

Do students in charter schools do better than they would in traditional public schools? Unfortunately, the jury is still out, and the evidence is mixed. Profiles in the New Yorker, Forbes, Time, and Newsweek, for example, highlight the successes of individual charter schools in the inner cities of Washington, DC and New York, not to mention anecdotal examples offered by high-profile advocates like John Walton and Bill Gates. While anecdotes and single examples suggest that charter schools may work, they hardly constitute proof or even systematic evidence that they always do. In fact, broader empirical studies using representative and national data suggest that many charter schools have failed.

One noteworthy study, released by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 2004, reports that charter schools are not providing a better education than traditional public schools. Moreover, they are not boosting student achievement. Using fourth- and eighth-grade test scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress across all states with charter schools, the report finds that charter-school students perform less well, on average, in math and reading than their traditional-school counterparts. There appear to be no significant differences among eighth-graders and no discernable difference in black-white achievement gaps across school type.

Because the results reported in the AFT study—which have received considerable media attention—do not incorporate basic demographic, regional, or school characteristics simultaneously, they can only relate average differences across charter schools and public schools. But this ignores the huge effects of family background, above and beyond school environment. Without accounting for the background attributes of students themselves, not to mention other factors such as the race and social-class composition of the student body, estimates of the differences between charter schools and traditional public schools are overstated.

In response to the 2004 AFT report, economists Carolyn Hoxby and Jonah Rockoff compared charter schools to surrounding public schools. Their results contradict many of the AFT's findings. They examined students who applied to but did not attend charter schools because they lost lotteries for spots. Hoxby and Rockoff found that, compared to their lottery-ed-out fellow applicants, students who attended charter schools in Chicago scored higher in both math and reading. This is true especially in the early elementary grades compared to nearby public schools with similar racial compositions. Their work and that of others also shows that older charter schools perform better than newly formed ones—perhaps suggesting that school stability and effectiveness require time to take hold. Important weaknesses neverthe-

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new charter schools opening each year


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more advantaged student populations drawn from families with significant educational resources at home. We know from prior research that parents of such children are more likely to understand schooling options and are motivated to ensure their children's academic success. Since family background, parental investments, and parental educational involvement typically trump school effects in student achievement, it is likely that positive charter school effects are simply spurious.

More recently, a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), using sophisticated models, appropriate demographic controls, and a national sample, has concurred with the AFT report—charter schools are not producing children who score better on standardized achievement tests. The NCES report showed that average achievement in math and reading in public schools and in charter schools that were linked to a school district did not differ statistically. Charter schools not associated with a public school district, however, scored significantly less well than their public school counterparts.

Nevertheless, neither side of the debate has shown conclusively, through rigorous, replicated, and representative research, whether charter schools boost student achievement. The NCES report mentioned above has, in our opinion, done the best job of examining the achievement issue and has shown that charter schools are not doing better than traditional public schools when it comes to improving achievement.

Clearly, in the case of charter schools, the legislative cart has been put before the empirical horse. Perhaps this is because the debate is about more than achievement. Charter school debates and legislation are rooted in more fundamental disagreements over competition, individualism, and, most fundamentally, education's role in the public good. This reflects an important and significant shift in the cultural evaluation of public education in the United States, at the crux of which is the application of a market-based economic model, complete with accompanying ideas of "competition" and "individualism."

competition and accountability

To whom are charter schools accountable? Some say their clients, namely, the public. Others say the system, namely, their authorizers. If charter schools are accountable to the public, then competition between schools should ensure academic achievement and bureaucratic prudence. If charter schools are accountable to the system, policies and procedures should ensure academic achievement and bureaucratic prudence. Either way, the assumption is that charter schools will close when they are not successful. The successful application of these criteria, however, requires clear-cut standards, oversight, and accountability—which are currently lacking, according to many scholars. Indeed, despite the rhetoric of their advocates and legislators, charter schools are seldom held accountable in the market or by the political structures that create them.

In a "market" view of accountability, competition will ultimately breed excellence by "weeding out" inefficient organizations. Through "ripple effects," all schools will be forced to improve their standards. Much like business organizations, schools that face competition will survive only by becoming more efficient and producing a better overall product (higher levels of achievement) than their private and public school counterparts.

Social scientists, including the authors of this article, question this simplistic, if intuitively appealing, application of neoliberal business principles to the complex nature of the educational system, children's learning, and parental choice for schools. If competition were leading to accountability, we would see parents pulling their children out of unsuccessful charter schools. But research shows that this seldom happens. Indeed, parents, particularly those with resources, typically choose schools for reasons of religion, culture, and social similarity rather than academic quality.

Nor are charter schools accountable to bureaucrats. Even though charter schools are not outperforming traditional public schools, relatively few (10 percent nationally) have actually been closed by their authorizers over the last decade. Although we might interpret a 10 percent closure rate as evidence of academic accountability at work, this would be misleading. Financial rather than academic issues
are the principal reasons cited for these closures. By all indications, charter schools are not being held accountable to academic standards, either by their authorizers or by market forces.

In addition to measuring accountability through student performance, charter schools should also be held to standards of financial and educational quality. Here, some charter schools are faltering. From California to New York and Ohio, newspaper editorials question fiscal oversight. There are extreme cases such as the California Charter Academy, a publicly financed but privately run chain of 60 charter schools. Despite a budget of $100 million dollars, this chain became insolvent in August 2004, leaving thousands of children without a school to attend.

More direct accountability issues include educational quality and annual reports to state legislatures; here, charter-school performance is poor or mixed. In Ohio, where nearly 60,000 students now attend charter schools, approximately one-quarter of these schools are not following the state’s mandate to report school-level test score results, and only 45 percent of the teachers at the state’s 250 charter schools hold full teaching certification. Oversight is further complicated by the creation of “online” charter schools, which serve 16,000 of Ohio’s public school students.

It is ironic that many charter schools are not held to the very standards of competition, quality, and accountability that legislators and advocates used to justify them in the first place. Perhaps this is why Fredrick Hess, a charter school researcher, recently referred to accountability as applied to charter schools as little more than a “toothless threat.”

**individualism or inequality?**

The most obvious goal of education is student achievement. Public education in the United States, however, has also set itself several other goals that are not reducible to achievement or opportunity at an individual level but are important culturally and socially. Public education has traditionally managed diversity and integration, created common standards for the socialization of the next generation, and ensured some equality of opportunity and potential for meritocracy in the society at large. The focus of the charter school debate on achievement—rooted in purely economic rationales of competition and individual opportunism—has ignored these broader concerns.

Individual choice in the market is a key component of neoliberal and “free-market” theory—a freedom many Americans cherish. Therefore, it makes sense that parents might support choice in public schooling. Theoretically, school choice provides them market power to seek the best product for their children, to weigh alternatives, and to make changes in their child’s interest. But this power is only available to informed consumers, so that educational institutions and policies that provide choice may be reinforcing the historical disadvantages faced by racial and ethnic minorities and the poor.

We might expect that students from advantaged class backgrounds whose parents are knowledgeable about educational options would be more likely to enroll in charter schools. White parents might also see charter schools as an educational escape route from integrated public schools that avoids the financial burden of private schooling. On the other hand, the justification for charter schools is often framed in terms of an “educational fix” for poor, minority-concentrated districts in urban areas. Here, charter schools may appear to be a better opportunity for aggrieved parents whose children are attending poorly funded, dilapidated public schools.

National research, at first glance, offers encouraging evidence that charter schools are providing choices to those who previously had few options: 52 percent of those enrolled in charter schools are nonwhite compared to 41 percent of those in traditional public schools. These figures, however, tell us little about the local concentrations of whites and nonwhites in charter schools, or how the racial composition and distribution of charter schools compares to the racial composition and distribution of local, traditional public schools.

African-American students attend charter and noncharter schools in about the same proportion, yet a closer look at individual charter schools within districts reveals that they are often segregated. In Florida, for instance, charter schools are 82 percent white, whereas traditional public schools are only 51 percent white. Similar patterns are found across Arizona school districts, where charter school enrollment is 20 percent more white than traditional schools. Amy Stuart Wells’s recent research finds similar tendencies toward segregation among Latinos, who are underrepresented in California’s charter schools. Linda Renzulli and Lorraine Evans’s national analysis of racial composition within districts containing charter schools shows that charter school formation often results in greater levels of segregation in schools between whites and nonwhites. This is not to suggest that
minority populations do not make use of charter schools. But, when they do, they do so in segregated contexts.

Historically, racial integration has been a key cause of white flight and it remains a key factor in the racial composition of charter schools and other schools of choice. Decades of research on school segregation have taught us that when public school districts become integrated, through either court mandates or simple population change, white parents may seek alternative schools for their children. Current research suggests that a similar trend exists with charter schools, which provide a public-school option for white flight without the drawbacks of moving (such as job changes and longer commutes). While those from less-privileged and minority backgrounds have charter schools at their disposal, the realities of poor urban districts and contemporary patterns of racial residential segregation may mean that the "choice" is between a racially and economically segregated charter school or an equally segregated traditional school, as Renzulli's research has shown. Individualism in the form of educational choice, although perhaps intuitively appealing, in reality may be magnifying some of the very inequalities that public education has been attempting to overcome since the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954.

Regarding equality of opportunity and its implications for the American ideal of meritocracy, there is also reason for concern. Opponents have pointed to the dilution of district resources where charter schools have emerged, especially as funds are diverted to charter schools. Advocates, in contrast, argue that charter schools have insufficient resources. More research on the funding consequences of charter school creation is clearly warranted. Why, within a system of public education, should some students receive more than others? And what of those left behind, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds whose parents may not be aware of their options? Although evidence on the funding question is sparse, research on public schools generally and charter school attendance specifically suggests that U.S. public education may be gravitating again toward a system of separate, but not equal, education.

the future of public education

Variation across charter schools prevents easy evaluation of their academic success or social consequences for public education. Case studies can point to a good school or a bad one. National studies can provide statistical averages and comparisons, yet they may be unable to reveal the best and worst effects of charter schools. Neither type of research has yet fully accounted for the influence of family background and school demographic composition. Although conclusions about charter school effectiveness or failure remain questionable, the most rigorous national analyses to date suggest that charter schools are doing no better than traditional public schools.

Certainly some charter schools are improving the educational quality and experience of some children. KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools, for example, are doing remarkable things for the students lucky enough to attend them. But for every KIPP school (of which there are only 45, and not all are charter schools), there are many more charter schools that do not provide the same educational opportunity to students, have closed their doors in the middle of the school year, and, in effect, isolate students from their peers of other races and social classes. Does this mean that we should prevent KIPP, for example, from educating students through the charter school option? Maybe. Or perhaps we should develop better program evaluations—of what works and what does not—and implement them as guideposts. To the dismay of some policymakers and "competition" advocates, however, such standardized evaluation and accountability would undercut significant charter school variations if not the very nature of the charter school innovation itself.

Student achievement is only part of the puzzle when it comes to the charter school debate; we need to consider social integration and equality as well. These broader issues, although neglected, warrant as much attention as potential effects on achievement. We suspect that such concerns, although seldom explicit, probably underlie the often contentious charter school and school choice debate itself. We
believe it is time to question the logics pertaining to competition, choice, and accountability. Moreover, we should all scrutinize the existing empirical evidence, not to mention educational policy not firmly rooted in empirical reality and research. As Karl Alexander eloquently noted in his presidential address to the Southern Sociological Society, “The charter school movement, with its ‘let 1,000 flowers bloom’ philosophy, is certain to yield an occasional prize-winning rose. But is either of these approaches [to school choice] likely to prove a reliable guide for broad-based, systemic reform—the kind of reform that will carry the great mass of our children closer to where we want them to be? I hardly think so.” Neither do we.

recommended resources


Jeffrey R. Hening. Rethinking School Choice: Limits of the Market Metaphor (Princeton University Press, 1994). In this early work on school choice, Hening discusses market-oriented choice programs, suggesting they may not work and are likely to make education worse in terms of segregation and outcomes.


F. Howard Nelson, Bella Rosenberg, and Nancy Van Meter. Charter School Achievement on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (American Federation of Teachers, 2004). The authors compare the math and reading scores of charter school and noncharter school students.


Sandra Vergari. The Charter School Landscape (Pittsburgh University Press, 2002). Vergari examines charter school politics and policies in eleven states and the province of Alberta to show how charter schools are affecting public education.

out of context:
what counts as wet?

joel best

In 2005, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) reported that America’s wetland acreage, which had been declining since the 1950s, had increased. Environmentalists quickly denounced the report. Overall, wetlands increased by 440,000 acres between 1998 and 2000. But this total included an increase of nearly 700,000 acres of “freshwater ponds”—all other categories of wetlands had declined. The category “freshwater ponds” includes golf-course water hazards and other ornamental ponds, as well as ponds created by excavating earth to be used in construction projects. In other words, many freshwater ponds provide few or none of the ecological benefits of natural swamps and marshes. The FWS acknowledged that its report did “not assess the quality or condition of the nation’s wetlands,” and critics argued that the apparent good news about increasing wetland acreage masked continuing ecological damage. As always, interpreting statistics requires understanding what counts.