

## **NPR Tavis Smiley**

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Tavis Smiley (NPR)

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Interview: Jeanne Allen and Bella Rosenberg discuss recent data suggesting charter schools are falling short of public schools

Host: TONY COX

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TONY COX, host:

From NPR in Los Angeles, I'm Tony Cox, in for Tavis Smiley, who is on vacation this week.

On today's program, the 9-11 Commission is pushing hard for swift enactment of its controversial recommendations. We'll hear from two commissioners. Correspondent Leoneda Inge gives three cheers for summer camp, the most spirited coming from her own six-year-old. And jazz musician Harvey Mason marches to the beat of his own drum after working with some of the biggest names in the music industry. That's a little later.

But first, a failing grade for charter schools. Data from the US Department of Education suggests that test scores of children in charter schools fall markedly short when compared to their counterparts in public schools. For example, researchers cite that when it comes to reading and math, fourth-grade charter school students lag behind public school kids by at least six months. And children of color in charter schools fall routinely short compared to those in public schools. About 3,000 charter schools serve more than half a million students nationwide.

The results are based on the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress, more commonly known as the Nation's Report Card. The findings were discovered by researchers for the American Federation of Teachers and made public in yesterday's New York Times.

Meanwhile, charter schools in California were dealt a major blow this week. A reported 10,000 students in the state are looking for new schools after California's largest charter school operator shut down at least 60 campuses. The reason: new state restrictions and an investigation into possible financial and academic practices.

NPR education correspondent Claudio Sanchez has more on the findings of the Education Department's report and the fate of charter schools. He's on assignment in Miami, where he joins us now by telephone.

Hi, Claudio.

CLAUDIO SANCHEZ reporting:

Good to be with you, Tony.

COX: Thank you very much. Before we jump into the findings of this report, would you briefly

explain the difference between charter and regular schools?

SANCHEZ: Charter schools are privately run, often by a small group, or often, as in the case of California and other states, large for-profit organizations. But they are publicly chartered, either by the state or by local school boards. In other words, they are given an enormous amount of autonomy. They get waivers. They do not have to follow the same regulations that most public schools follow. They can hire anyone they want. And they are pretty much free to run the schools the way they want, presumably to experiment, to try new things, especially with kids who have trouble in regular public schools. And so there is this enormous amount of freedom that they have and little or no oversight, in some cases.

COX: So what are the politics behind how this information was disseminated, this report card?

SANCHEZ: Well, the politics have to do with, in many ways, the timing of this. Back in November of 2003, NAEP, as you were mentioning at the onset, had done a study. In fact, it did a study on charter schools, comparing their kids' performance, fourth- and eighth-graders, although the eighth-grade sample was too small--fourth-grade and eighth-grade samples in reading and math. That had been requested by charter school proponents, and it was supposed to have been released in January of 2004. That was delayed, and it's now scheduled for December.

Now the delay has to do with the fact that this data--it is very, very hard to interpret, in some respects. What the AFT did, the American Federation of Teachers, it had some people go online, get the raw data and analyzed it, and found evidence that hurts the Bush administration's argument that charter schools are an alternative to failing public schools. Remember that, under the No Child Left Behind Act, one of the outcomes of, I mean, really cracking down on failing or bad public schools is that they give parents choices. They say, 'Look, you can go elsewhere.' Or, in some cases, proponents of the law say, 'You can create another school with public funds that will do a better job.' And charter schools have been right smack in the middle of this issue.

They've been around since 1990. I mean, I've been curious to know whether any of the schools that were evaluated in this study--there were 167 that participated in the NAEP study or the testing--how many of them have been around more than three, four, five years. Because it is also legitimate to say that, if they've only been around two or three, four, maybe five years, it is kind of early to know or tell whether the progress that kids have made in these schools is enough. But, again, there are schools that have been around at least 14 years.

COX: All right. We're going to be talking to some people who should give us some insight on that. Claudio Sanchez is education correspondent for NPR.

Claudio, thank you very much.

SANCHEZ: You're welcome, Tony.

COX: Not everyone thinks charter schools are a lost cause, despite the dismal news contained in the report. Jeanne Allen is founder and president of the Center for Education Reform, or CER. She is a supporter of the charter school system, and she joins us from our NPR headquarters in Washington, DC.

Jeanne, nice to have you on.

Ms. JEANNE ALLEN (Founder and President, Center for Education Reform): Nice to be here, Tony.

COX: We're also joined by Bella Rosenberg, who is also in our DC studio. She is a special assistant to the president of the American Federation of Teachers, the group that provided the findings. Bella says there are some realities people need to face about charter schools.

Bella, great to have you on the program as well.

Ms. BELLA ROSENBERG (Special Assistant to the President, American Federation of Teachers): Thanks for the opportunity.

COX: Setting aside for the moment how the findings were released, Bella, what's the problem, the real problem, with charter schools as you see it? Is it a lack of oversight or something more?

Ms. ROSENBERG: Well, we did not provide an analysis of what the real problem is. I think the first order of business is to look at the results. NAEP is considered the Nation's Report Card. It's the gold standard. And this is the first time that there are nationally representative results for charter schools. And there is a huge disconnect between the claims of charter school advocates, who say particularly that charter schools are virtual magic bullets for poor and disadvantaged kids, and what the results show.

And we just did a straight-on report, just like the government would report it had they reported those results. They actually kind of suppressed them. And they show that, on every dimension--and we did apples-to-apples, pears-to-pears comparisons--that free- and reduced-price lunch kids in charter schools do worse--and it's statistically significant--than comparable kids in regular public schools, because charter schools tend to be predominantly located in inner cities. We compared the performance of inner-city charter schools with public schools; the kids did significantly worse. We looked at the performance of African-American and Hispanic youngsters, and there, while the scores were lower in charter schools, it was not statistically significant.

So, you know, we did this about as fair as you can be, and that rarely happens, where you compare apples to apples...

COX: Mm-hmm.

Ms. ROSENBERG: ...and oranges to oranges. And the results are very disappointing. I think this is of great public-policy significance, because being restructured as a charter school is one of the sanctions in the No Child Left Behind Act. And...

COX: Well, let's bring Jeanne into the discussion, because she's sitting there with you and we'd like to hear what she has to say in terms of--how do you weigh in on these findings, Jeanne? And is it your position that you need more time?

Ms. ALLEN: Tony, charter schools are public schools that are autonomous in that they are free from a lot of the nonsense rules and regulations that have been plaguing our schools for years,

but held to high standards and lots of oversight by their authorizers that are publicly chartered. We now have a 10-year record of charter schools that give us not only local- and state-based data about who's in them, why they go, why parents choose them, but we know that they're a lifeboat and a catalyst for hundreds of thousands of kids in 38 states right now; 41 allow them. So we have a lot of data. The fact is that the NAEP data that was released--and while I agree it's a gold standard; NAEP is a terrific benchmark--it's the insight that we know about why 35 percent of our kids in this country can't even read at grade level, or only 35 percent are proficient, I'd say.

We know a lot about public education by NAEP. What we don't know from NAEP is what's going on in charter schools. It was one data set. The research the AFT did was both biased and shoddy. And, unfortunately, what we need here is fair analysis. It's not a matter of needing more time. We need fair analysis. When you look at the data that counts the most, Tony--the state scores on which parents care, the governments care--state schools can be shut down. The one you mentioned in California that was shut down, thank God we're shutting down schools that aren't working. Would that that could be said for all the other schools.

But the bottom line is, that kind of accountability is so valuable, and the other accountability is the state tests. California and Arizona, on the NAEP data that AFT helped release, actually show that charter school students in fourth grade are outperforming their counterparts in cities like LA, like Phoenix, all throughout the state. In fact, Delaware beats national averages in terms of performance. Colorado beats the national average. So actually, in the NAEP data is some really jewels about charter schools, but you don't see that in the reporting, and part of it is because AFT is an interest group that doesn't support charter schools.

COX: All right. Let me.

Ms. ALLEN: This isn't about the AFT...

Ms. ROSENBERG: I...

Ms. ALLEN: ...it's about kids.

COX: Let me...

Ms. ALLEN: And, you know, Claudio mentioned playing politics. We have to remember, we're playing politics with kids, many of whom wouldn't have had choices had it not been for charter schools.

Ms. ROSENBERG: Can I jump in here?

COX: Yeah, you can, but I want to ask this question first, because we're going to run out of time, and I want to get--obviously, with statistical data, you always have different interpretations, and we seem to have that in this case. But I'd like to know from both of you, in the minute or so that we have left--I'm going to start with you, Bella--what does this portend for the future of charter schools, in your opinion?

Ms. ROSENBERG: I think that responsible charter school advocates, just like responsible parents whose children bring home a bad report card, have to take a hard look at this and say, 'We need

to do better. This is about children.' And I invite anyone to look at the data in this report. It is completely the opposite of what Ms. Allen just said. This is NAEP data. It's not AFT data. It's the very data, Jeanne, that you use to beat up on regular public schools. It's just the plain facts. And I think that this isn't a matter of being a charter school zealot or not; it's a matter of facing up to the facts and saying, 'These schools have to do better.'

COX: All right. Let's...

Ms. ALLEN: Regular public schools...

Ms. ROSENBERG: We have to do better, too.

Ms. ALLEN: Tony...

COX: Let me let her respond...

Ms. ALLEN: Tony...

COX: ...because we have about 30 seconds. I'd like to know from you, Jeanne, what you think this will mean for the future of charter schools, in only 30 seconds, please.

Ms. ALLEN: What it means is, obviously, instead of spending all of our time focusing on getting more children the opportunity to have a choice, we've got to spend time doing defense. Unfortunately, the data is very misleading. And it's really a shame that, particularly in a year when it's been bipartisan, this has been so heralded and supported by governors and policy-makers and parents of all stripes around the country, we have to worry about something that's based on such a small subset of kids that has been declared invalid by the very, very people who issued it. So...

COX: That's where we're going to have to...

Ms. ALLEN: ...we need to look at this in more detail.

COX: That's where we're going to have to stop. Thank you both very much.

Ms. ROSENBERG: Thanks, Tony.

COX: Jeanne Allen is founder and president of the Center for Education Reform or CER. Bella Rosenberg is special assistant to the president of the American Federation of Teachers or AFT.

Again, thank you both for being with us today.

Ms. ROSENBERG: Thank you.

COX: It's 19 minutes past the hour.

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