



## Institute for Education Reform

### UCLA's Charter School "Study"

Researchers at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies issued a press release today announcing the release of a "study" entitled "Beyond the Rhetoric" which slams California's rapidly growing charter school movement. The study team was led by professor Amy Stuart Wells and apparently is another in her growing string of highly-publicized publications critical of the charter movement.

The following highlights some of the assertions and claims made in the press release as contrasted with findings of other researchers and practitioners who have closely examined charter school issues in California.

**Claim:** "Charter school reform may be pushing the public education system toward privatization in terms of funding and student selection."

**Reality:** "We found no evidence to support the concern that charter schools as a group disproportionately serve White and economically advantaged students." (Source: "A National Study of Charter Schools," US Department of Education, 1998)

**Claim:** "Beyond the Rhetoric" [the UCLA study] is the most in-depth study of charter schools ever conducted including information from more than 450 interviews and countless documents, reports, and statistics."

**Reality:** The UCLA study focuses on only 17 schools in 10 districts, in only one of the Nation's 33 charter school states (California). Several other larger studies, focusing at both individual state and national levels, have visited and based their findings on far more than just 17 schools in one state.

**Claim:** "Charter schools in California are, in most instances, not yet being held accountable for enhanced academic achievement for their students."

**Reality:** Many charter schools are struggling to articulate clear goals and measure progress. California has changed state assessment systems three times during the 6-year history of charter schools. The state of California is in the midst of a major effort to establish student performance standards and align the standards with an assessment system. In spite of these challenges, many charter schools are able to document significant increases in student achievement on various measures.

In perhaps the most carefully-executed study of several schools' performance, researchers at the WestEd regional education laboratory found that charter schools in their Los Angeles study out-performed their non-charter counterparts: "Students in these five charter schools maintain or slightly improve their performance over time with respect to students in a comparison group of non-charter District schools. . . charter schools that began with high average scores continue to maintain their high average scores. . . of the charter schools with lower average scores. . . the position of [their] students relative to students in comparison schools improved over time."

". . . We found that schools approaching renewal had spent the last year or two closely examining student performance results, assessing their student progress, more clearly articulating their standards and benchmarks, etc. Existing under a magnifying lens was a sentiment echoed by my teachers and administrators, especially in those schools serving higher proportions of LEP and economically disadvantaged students whose test performance is traditionally below the 50th percentile. These schools reported a[n]. . . emphasis on building basic skills of students, and accelerating their English literacy. . . these schools have real consequences, specifically, a date with their local Board of Education to make a case for the renewal of their charter." ("Los Angeles Unified School District Charter School Evaluation," performed by the WestEd Regional Laboratory, 1998.)

**Claim:** "We found no schools doing 'more with less' as the efficiency argument would claim."

**Reality:** "Charter schools, especially fiscally independent ones, gave numerous examples of where budget flexibility had led to changes and improvements in their educational programs. . . school operators find that having maximum fiscal autonomy allows them to act on those decisions [relating to curriculum and instruction] almost immediately. . . Budget flexibility even extends to teachers." ("Los Angeles Unified

School District Charter School Evaluation," performed by the WestEd Regional Laboratory, 1998.)

"When you combine the flexibility available through the Charter Schools legislation . . . and exemplary administrative leadership, it is possible to effect change and innovative practice practices leading to considerable economies." (Memo from former Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Sid Thompson to the Board of Education describing his staff's findings after auditing the finances of Los Angeles charter schools).

"Charter schools have shown significant ability to win community support, unleash creative energy and stretch limited resources . . . charter administrators have found ways to stretch dollars and divert them directly to the classroom." (Commission on California State Government Organization and Economy ["Little Hoover Commission"] study entitled, "The charter Movement: Education Reform School by School.")

Claim: "Although state law calls for charter schools to reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of their district, neither the State of California nor most of the local districts granting the charters are paying much attention to this aspect of the law."

Reality:

**Racial/Ethnic Composition of California Charter School Students (source: US Department of Education National Study of Charter Schools)**

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Indian/Alak.	Other
Charter	56.5	9.6	25.1	5.5	3.0	.3
Statewide	46.4	8.4	34.1	9.8	1.4	0

Claim: "While most charter school teachers were more involved in school-level governance and administration than they had been in previous schools, most had not changed what they were doing in their classroom."

Reality: "Teachers interviewed provided many concrete examples of how their participation in decision making had a direct effect on their daily life and the learning of students. Many of these changes centered on curriculum and instruction . . ." ("Los Angeles Unified School District Charter School Evaluation," WestEd Regional Laboratory, 1998.)

"A high percentage of teachers say they experiment more in the classroom, are freer to teach as they wish, and have more say over content and the subjects they teach. Most teachers consider charter structure essential or valuable to changed practice." ("Freedom and Innovation in California's Charter Schools," survey of 230 teachers in 67 California schools, Southwest Regional Laboratory)

Claim: "This finding calls into question a central claim of charter school advocates that the parental choice and school-level autonomy of this reform will lead to systemic educational improvements by infusing competition into an otherwise bureaucratic and monopolistic education system . . . competition and cooperation are at odds with each other."

Reality: "I don't think you should juxtapose the two [competition and cooperation] as a dichotomy. Competition for students has moved districts forward, and in many cases districts have begun to cooperate and co-opt what charter schools have been offering as a way of competing. So we shouldn't simplify the charter movement . . . it's an evolutionary process and charter schools are really beginning to open up the system." (Paul Berman, Principal Investigator, National Study of Charter Schools, speaking at the California Education Policy Seminar, November 1998).

"Sharing knowledge and lessons learned is an ongoing role played by many of these charter schools. . . charter schools are often visited by other school staff not only in the District, but by educators and policymakers throughout the country. And many of them are asked to present at State and National conferences. Beyond contributions that charter schools make directly to other schools in the District, there are also several lessons learned from the charter school experience that may be helpful to district reform efforts elsewhere." ("Los Angeles Unified School District Charter School Evaluation," performed by the WestEd Regional Laboratory, 1998.)

"Charter schools at first were somewhat like a virus entering a body. It frightened the unions and challenged administrators. After all, the folks running charter schools are obviously gifted people - what if they demonstrated that poor kids can learn? Today charter schools are beginning to change the public schools. We [Los Angeles Unified School District] have 700,000 students, 650 schools and 13 charter schools. The charter schools have had an effect on how we do business with the other 650 schools. We want to move away from focusing on process to measuring outcomes. . . I believe the system will begin to look more and more like charter schools as all of us move to focus on results." (Ron Prescott, Deputy Superintendent of Governmental Relations, Los Angeles Unified School District, speaking at the California Education Policy Seminar, November 1998).

--Eric Premack

Charter Schools Development Center  
at the CSU Institute for Education Reform  
[www.cacharterschools.org](http://www.cacharterschools.org)

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For further information, or to be placed on the CSDC e-mail list, please contact

Eric Premack Director at: (916) 278-4611

Laurie Gardner Co-director at: (916) 278-4088

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**Charter Schools Development Center**

**Institute for Education Reform**  
**California State University, Sacramento**

6000 J Street  
Sacramento, CA 95819-6018

tel 916.278.4600

fax 916.278.5014

email:

Dustin Johnson, electronic support

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