

Charter School Evaluation Reported by *The New York Times* Fails to Meet Professional Standards

We, the undersigned members of the research community, are dismayed by the prominent, largely uncritical coverage given by *The New York Times* to a study of charter schools by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). According to the paper's lead news story on August 17, the analysis shows "charter school students often doing worse than comparable students in regular public schools."

The study in question does not meet current professional research standards. As a result, it tells us nothing about whether charter schools are succeeding. The following considerations are key:

Data Quality. The study is based on data from the 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, NAEP provides a valuable snapshot of student performance nationwide at a single point in time. But since only limited family background information is currently available for the 2003 NAEP, the study does not provide reliable information on the effectiveness of any particular type of school.

Only One Set of Test Scores. Because only one year of information is available for charter schools from NAEP, the study provides test scores for only one point in time. But without better background information, accurately measuring school effectiveness requires information on student performance from at least two points in time.

Limited Background Information. Because of limited NAEP information on family background, the study does not take into account such key characteristics of students known to affect their performance as parental education, household income, and the quality of learning resources in the home.

Unsophisticated Analysis. When analyzing charter schools' effects on student performance, the study considers differences in only one family background characteristic at a time. To obtain accurate estimates, all available background characteristics must be considered simultaneously.

What NAEP Can Tell Us. NAEP data do show that charter schools tend to serve a relatively disadvantaged population. As compared with traditional public schools, a higher proportion of students in charter schools are eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, are from minority backgrounds, and attend a school located in a central city.

Journalistic Responsibility. The news media has an obligation to assess carefully any research sponsored by interest groups engaged in policy debates. Such studies need to be vetted by independent scholars, as is commonly done in coverage of research on the biological and physical sciences.

Further Research. To date, we lack definitive evidence on the effectiveness of charter schools, in part because they are so new and so varied. Fortunately, higher-quality research on charter schools is already underway. Still more needs to be done before jumping to conclusions about the merits of one of the nation's most prominent education reform strategies.

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