

The Balanced View: Research Updates

Summary of new research on *Balanced View* topics

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Charter and Vouchers Schools

A recently released report from RAND provides a comprehensive analysis of the nation's experience to date with two leading edge reforms to promote **parental choice**: charter schools and vouchers. Drawing upon hundreds of studies, the report concludes that there are no clear answers yet about whether charter and voucher programs are effective alternatives to conventional public schools; still, the programs are worth continuing and studying more closely. Key findings from the report—*Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools*—are summarized below according to five major policy areas.

Academic Achievement. Achievement results in charter schools are mixed. Some studies show that charters outperform conventional public schools in reading and math, while others show the opposite. In several studies, charter school performance has been found to improve after the first year of operation, which suggests that as charters become more established they could provide an achievement benefit for students. Studies of small-scale voucher programs demonstrate modest gains in achievement for African-American students. Similar results have not been found for children of other racial or ethnic groups.

Choice. In virtually all charter and voucher programs studied, parent satisfaction levels are high, surpassing those of comparison groups of parents in local public schools on a variety of indicators. In addition, there is strong parental demand for the choices that charters and vouchers afford.

Access. There is no evidence to suggest that charter and voucher programs “cream” high achieving students from the public schools. Many studies, furthermore, show that these programs create new options for low-income and minority students who might otherwise lack a choice. Charter and voucher schools have not done as well in extending access to students with disabilities or with poorly educated (less informed) parents.

Integration. Studies on integration show that most charter schools have racial/ethnic distributions similar to those of local public schools. Evidence on voucher programs suggests that in highly segregated communities vouchers may increase racial integration by including minority students in schools that are predominately white.

Civic Socialization. Virtually nothing is known about whether charter or voucher schools help students to become responsible, tolerant, or democratically active citizens.

The RAND report concludes with a series of recommendations for policymakers on making charter and voucher programs more effective; and it calls for more rigorous research and experimentation.

The report is available on the Web at: <http://www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1118/>