

CHARTER SCHOOLS

Research Update

The **BALANCED VIEW:**

Research-based
information on
timely topics

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The *Balanced View* first reported on charter schools in 1997, when they were just beginning to become part of the educational landscape. Since that time, the number of charter schools has grown three-fold, with nearly 1,700 currently operating in 32 states. As charter schools continue to flourish, questions about their effectiveness are being raised:

- Do they increase *access* to quality education for all students?
- Do they provide more *choices* to more families?
- Do they stimulate *innovation* and create new models of schooling?
- Do they provide teachers with new opportunities for *professional development*?
- Do they have a greater *impact* on student learning than traditional public schools?
- Have they put *competitive pressure* on traditional public schools to change?

The answers to some of these questions are beginning to emerge with the publication of several major reports, including four reports from the national evaluation sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education (DOE). This issue of the *Balanced View* summarizes what we know from this latest research, focusing on findings from the national study, and including results from recent state-level studies in Arizona, California, and Michigan—states with the largest number (45%) of charter schools.

What Research Tells About Charter Schools

We begin our review with some statistics on the basic characteristics of charter schools (DOE, 2000):

- Most charter schools are newly created (72%), small schools with an average enrollment of 137 students.
- The median student to teacher ratio for charter schools is 16:1.
- 350,000 students attend charter schools, or about 0.8% of the public school children in charter states.
- Many charter schools have non-traditional grade configurations, including a higher proportion of K-12, K-8, and ungraded schools than other public schools.
- Since 1992, 59 charter schools (4%) have closed.

Access and Choice

According to the national evaluation, charter schools enroll a diverse population of students—one that mirrors the racial/ethnic mix of surrounding districts. The evaluators concluded:

- There is no evidence that charter schools are elitist schools that disproportionately serve white or economically advantaged students. Most charter schools (69%) are within 20 percent of their surrounding district's minority average, and 18% serve a distinctively *higher* percentage of minorities (DOE, 1999; 2000).

❑ The state-level studies, however, reported just the opposite.

❑ In both Michigan and Arizona, charter schools were found to contain substantially greater percentages of white students than nearby public schools. The researchers concluded that there was support for the concern that charters are “skimming or creaming” and otherwise “increasing segregation” (Western Michigan University, 1999, p. v; Arizona State University, 1999, p. 30).

❑ California charter schools were found to have “too much choice over who attends.” In some cases, they had more choice than parents did. The researchers also noted that charters were not held accountable for reflecting the racial/ethnic make-up of their host district, calling into question their ability “to provide more choice to those who have the fewest options” (UCLA, 1998, p. 7).

Innovation

According to the national study, most charter schools (75%) were created to realize an alternative vision for schooling. State-level data, however, suggest that charter schools have been not able to develop and implement new and different educational approaches.

❑ In Michigan, charter schools were found to be “remarkably similar to other public schools”; there was limited innovation that could be transported.

❑ California researchers observed that charter schools were not serving as models of innovation from which educators in other schools could learn.

Professional Development

Both the national and state evaluations found the following:

❑ Most charter schools hire certified teachers, even though many are not required to do so.

❑ Michigan researchers further observed:

❑ Most charter school teachers are teaching subjects in which they are certified.

❑ Most charter school teachers are satisfied with their school, and 88% plan to return next year, despite heavy workloads.

❑ Charter schools do not offer better professional development than other public schools.

❑ California researchers also examined teacher satisfaction:

❑ Teachers in charter schools are “empowered by their freedom to create smaller, more intimate school communities and their enhanced professional identities,” but heavy workloads are an issue (UCLA, p. 6.).

Impact on Learning

Only one of the studies—Michigan evaluation—reported on the impact of charter schools:

❑ Many Michigan charter schools use the state’s standardized tests to demonstrate success. On these tests, charter schools have lower scores than their host district and lower 2- and 3-year gains. Charter schools also have higher dropout rates than their host district.

❑ On measures of school climate, charter schools have better climates than other public schools, and better teacher-student relationships.

❑ Most parents and students (66%+) are very satisfied with their charter schools.

Competition—Ripple Effects

All state-level evaluations reported on the “ripple effect”—whether or not charter schools would create a competitive market and force public schools to change. Two studies observed such an effect:

❑ In Michigan, charter schools have forced more accountability upon traditional public schools. They have also had an impact in other areas: the introduction of all-day kindergarten, increased supervision on playgrounds, provision of more extended-day programs, increased efforts to involve and communicate with parents, and more emphasis on customer satisfaction.

❑ In Arizona, the *possibility* of charters has prompted reforms such as outreach campaigns and teacher inservice training. The *presence* of charter schools has resulted in “high cost” reforms such as full-day kindergarten and other changes in school structure or curriculum (James Madison University, 1999).

In California, however, a ripple effect was not observed:

❑ Charter school reform has not put pressure on regular public schools to change the way they do business. I

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In summary, the findings on charter schools at this early stage are mixed, and more research is necessary before conclusions about their effectiveness can be drawn. Furthermore, in light of the difference between the national study findings and the state-level results, as well as differences among the three states themselves, other states would be wise to collect their own evaluation data for accountability and policy formation purposes. Despite the paucity of research-based data, charter schools remain a popular alternative for a growing number of parents.