Charter Schools Continue To Provoke Questions and Debate

With 37 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico having enacted charter school laws, and around 2,300 charter schools in operation serving more than half a million students, policymakers’ questions about the impacts of such schools are intensifying. The focus of these questions ranges from student achievement trends to accountability for student performance to charter schools’ influence on traditional public schools and districts.

Charter schools are public schools founded by educators, parents, community groups or private organizations that operate under a written contract, typically for three to five years, with a state, district or other entity. This contract, or charter, details such matters as how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be taught and expected to achieve, and how success will be measured. Underlying this contract is an explicit exchange of deregulation for accountability, in which states apply less regulation to charter schools and demand a higher level of accountability for results. Charter schools may be closed for failing to satisfy terms of their charters.

Within this broad definition, there is significant variance in the types of charter schools that have been created. On one hand, charter schools’ curricular offerings and instructional approaches vary widely, from the more traditional to the more progressive. Variations also result, in part, from differences in state laws. For example, in some states, charter school teachers must be certified, while in others they do not have to hold a teaching certificate. Also, in several states, charter schools receive an automatic waiver from most rules and regulations, while in others they must seek waivers on a case-by-case basis from the state board of education.

What is perhaps most significant about charter schools is not the specific type of school created, but instead the innovative mechanisms put in place to approve, monitor and close these schools. These mechanisms have the potential to fundamentally change how public education is governed, and have provoked a heated debate between supporters and opponents of charter schools, across the country, in state capitols, on editorial pages and in teachers’ lounges. Amidst the clamor, a growing body of research may help shape the direction of the charter school movement. This issue of The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001 briefly reviews these research findings.
Evidence Is Emerging, But Key Questions Remain Unanswered

Here are some highlights from recent reports on the achievement of charter school students, the accountability of charter schools, and their impact on traditional public schools and districts.

Autonomy in Exchange for Accountability: An Initial Study of Pennsylvania Charter Schools
(Gary Miron and Christopher Nelson, Western Michigan University, 2000, http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter/pa_reports/pa_final_rpt.pdf)

This study of Pennsylvania’s charter schools, commissioned by the State Department of Education, noted that Pennsylvania’s charter schools serve large numbers of nonwhite, urban students with a history of poor performance on achievement tests. In addition, about 10.5% of the charter school students have disabilities, a figure only slightly below the statewide average.

It also found that Pennsylvania’s charter schools are having some positive impacts on their predominantly at-risk student population. In fact, students in the four oldest charter schools studied show gains on state assessments far above those of students in surrounding school districts. As a group, however, charter students’ scores on state assessments were lower than those of traditional school students.

The authors attribute charter schools’ positive impacts to extensive state-level support and oversight, the timely delivery of start-up funds and the schools’ tendency to form alliances with local nonprofit agencies, a step that helped benefit the community as a whole.

An Evaluation of the Michigan Charter School Initiative: Performance, Accountability and Impact
(Jerry Horn and Gary Miron, Western Michigan University, 2000, http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/charter/michigan/)

In this study of Michigan’s charter schools, commissioned by the State Department of Education, the authors concluded there is still much room for improvement in the state’s 5-year-old charter school movement. The biggest improvement needed, they said, is in holding charter schools accountable for student performance.

Overall, students in Michigan’s traditional schools tend to outperform students in charter schools on state standardized tests. Comparisons of individual charter schools and their surrounding school district, however, found that many charter schools perform significantly better than the other schools.

The authors pointed to the growth in and number of charter schools operated by education management organizations (a private firm such as Edison Schools, Inc.) as one of the most striking and surprising aspects of the Michigan charter school movement. In 1999-2000, 71.4% of Michigan’s charter schools were operated by education management organizations, compared with 16.7% in the state in 1995-96, and 10% in 1999-2000 across the country.

The report also found the following:

- Michigan’s charter schools are producing few and limited innovations.
- Few charter schools are implementing comprehensive accountability plans.
- The extensive involvement of education management organizations is creating new “pseudo-school districts” in which decisions are made far away from the school.
**A Study of Charter School Accountability**

This study focused on the six states with the vast majority of charter schools - Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts and Michigan. As a whole, the study’s findings painted a picture of a new public enterprise in which all parties are learning to play their roles.

For example, on the positive side, the authors found that charter schools are creating opportunities for teachers, parents and community groups to offer new schools. On the other hand, these groups are learning, sometimes with great difficulty, how to handle the challenge of being accountable to public officials, as well as parents, students and the community.

The authors also found that charter school authorizers are struggling to learn how to relate to schools on the basis of performance rather than compliance. If the authorizer is a new organization created to oversee charter schools, such as a special office in a university, school district or state government, the job is learned relatively quickly. Conventional school district offices, however, have trouble breaking long-established habits of detailed, compliance-oriented oversight.

To improve the performance of charter school authorizers in holding charter schools accountable, the study recommends that state policymakers do the following:

- Fund professional development for administrators and school board members responsible for charter school oversight
- Make sure school districts and other charter school authorizers face negative consequences if they do not follow the intent of state law in processing charter school applications and overseeing charter school performance.

**Educational Performance and Charter School Authorizers: The Accountability Bind**

This study examined whether charter schools are accountable for student results to charter school authorizers. The author suggests that contract-based accountability for educational performance in charter schools may not be working as proponents argued it would.

According to the study, charter school authorizers are in an “accountability bind,” wanting to enforce accountability through the process of renewing charters, but finding it difficult to do so. The author identifies four challenges at the heart of this “bind”:

- Performance is not simple to define or measure, nor is “how good is good enough.”
- Other aspects of a charter school’s program, which are often more difficult to measure than test scores, also are important to families and authorizers. In this context, authorizers sometimes turn to proxies to assess charter school quality.
- Closing charter schools is difficult because teachers, parents and students become invested in particular charter schools and resist their closure.
- Charter schools have become a highly politicized issue, and some authorizers are concerned about their decisions reflecting poorly on charter schools as a reform idea.

Strengthening charter schools’ accountability to their authorizers, the author says, will require an ongoing relationship focused on accountability rather than one that enforces accountability at a single point - when the contract is up for renewal. Authorizers are working to establish more productive and educationally substantive relationships with charter schools that allow them to take some action short of revoking or not renewing a charter school’s contract. Examples include emphasizing the importance of the application process as a quality-control mechanism, intervening in
Challenge and Opportunity: The Impact of Charter Schools on School Districts

This study, which focused on 49 school districts in five states – Arizona, California, Colorado, Massachusetts and Michigan – found that every school district reported impacts from charter schools and made changes in district operations, its education system or both.

Nearly half of school district leaders said charter schools had harmed their budgets by taking students and revenue away from the district’s regular schools. Most school districts also implemented new educational programs, made structural changes and/or created new schools with programs similar to those in the charter schools.

In addition, nearly half of school district leaders reported becoming more customer service-oriented, increasing their marketing and public relations efforts or the frequency of their communication with parents. In many districts, administrators began paying close attention to their local charter schools, typically by tracking the number of students who attended charter schools and monitoring charter school students’ test scores.

Rhetoric Versus Reality: What We Know and What We Need To Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools

This study reviewed empirical evidence on questions about academic achievement, choice, access, integration and civic socialization in voucher programs and charter schools.

Most significantly, the study found that many questions about voucher programs and charter schools have not yet been answered, and that none of the important empirical questions has been answered definitively. Still, evidence is beginning to converge in some areas.

For example, while achievement results in charter schools are mixed, they suggest that performance improves after the first year of operation. None of the studies, though, suggests that charter school students’ achievement is dramatically better or worse on average than in conventional public schools.

This study also found that parents are satisfied with virtually all charter programs examined, and that students with disabilities and poorly educated parents are somewhat underrepresented. In addition, limited evidence suggests that, across the nation, most charter schools have racial and ethnic distributions similar to those in local public schools. In some states, however, many charter schools serve racially homogeneous populations.

The scarcity of solid evidence on charter schools’ impact means policymakers and supporters and opponents of choice should proceed with caution, the authors said. Evaluations of vouchers and charter schools have not yet provided clear answers to key questions, and the list of “unknowns” remains substantially longer than the list of “knowns.”