

CHARTER DATA POINT #1

WHAT NAEP IS REALLY TELLING US ABOUT CHARTER PERFORMANCE

Last October, charter supporters received some good news upon the release of the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), otherwise known as “The Nation’s Report Card.” Since the report received scant media attention (reporters still seem to be consulting the less impressive 2003 NAEP data), let’s note the main points:

- According to the 2005 NAEP, 4th-graders attending public charter schools were making noteworthy strides, pulling even with kids in other public schools.
- The improvements were particularly strong in reading, with charter students gaining at a faster rate than students in traditional public schools since 2003.
- These reading gains held for African-American, Latino, and low-income charter students. Latino gains were so strong that Latino charter 4th-graders opened a 10-point gap over similar students in other public schools.
- While the 2005 NAEP offered generally good news for 4th graders, it found less-robust performance for 8th graders. There, charter students trailed other public school students in math and reading. Unfortunately, no trend analyses can be done because the sample size of 8th-graders in the 2003 NAEP was too small to generate reliable results.

An In-Depth Look

In addition to the broad national numbers above, the 2005 NAEP did an in-depth survey of 390 public charter schools, released recently by the U.S. Department of Education. There’s nothing explosive to report, but the results include some fascinating fine-grained information (some positive, some not) that expands our thinking about what makes charter schools tick and confirms or confounds some previous theories and assumptions. Here goes.

Beating an Almost Dead Horse: Next time you hear that charters are “cherry-picking” the best kids, direct detractors to the National Assessment. According to NAEP, a high proportion of charter students are struggling academically when they show up at charters. For instance, 45% of kids in the 4th-grade math sample are from schools where more than three-quarters of their new 4th graders are below the state average. A litany of other reports have held that charters enroll kids from typically lower-performing groups. Now, NAEP joins a recent RAND study to show that it is not just demographics at play. When these kids come to charters, their academic performance is often hurting.

Older and Wiser: NAEP finds that performance is generally higher in older charter schools. Schools that had been open seven to 10 years significantly outperformed schools that had been open one to five years (excluding the “sixth-year dip” described below). In 4th grade math, for example, older schools outperformed younger schools 240 to 233. In 4th grade reading, the difference was 223 to 211. These findings aren’t surprising given what we know about the enormous challenges of opening a public charter school. And it tends to show that authorizers are doing their job: Schools that have been renewed are showing stronger results.

The Sixth-Year Dip: Now here's a puzzler. While charter performance is up and down the first five years, it plummets at year six, then picks up and is usually highest at the 10th-year mark. Look at 4th grade math scores: Year 5: 231; Year 6: 217; Year 7: 241; and Year 10: 249. What accounts for this sixth-year dip? One possibility is that some charters take a post-renewal breather and rest on their laurels. (Of course, it could mean that a disproportionate number of sub-par charter schools opened during the 1999-2000 school year.)

Judicious Renewals: Most renewals (61%) provide a new lease on life of five years, with three years and 10 years the next most popular renewal terms. Interestingly, charters that receive a renewal term of 11 years or more had higher scores than the charters with the more typical five-year renewals. And, schools with only three-year renewals had lower scores. Authorizers may be rewarding higher-achieving schools with longer charters at the same time that they are tightening the leash on struggling charters.

Faux Charters In Our Midst: The survey found that most charter students – 92% of 4th graders, for instance – are in schools that control personnel decisions. That's as it should be, according to the site-based autonomy precepts of Chartering 101. What should give charter supporters pause, however, are two other findings: 30% of charter 4th graders are in schools that don't control their budgets and 25% of them are in schools that don't determine their calendar. Is a school really a charter if it can't make decisions about time and money?

The Mixed Bag of Postsecondary Authorized Charters: Some of the nation's most highly regarded authorizers are colleges and universities. While we applaud these "stars," the survey offers some caution about run-of-the-mill postsecondary authorizers. Although schools authorized by postsecondary institutions showed some of the strongest performance increases in 4th grade reading between 2003 and 2005, they still lag behind charters authorized by other entities in 4th and 8th grade reading and math. It's possible that some postsecondary institutions have been slow to adopt effective authorizing practices or that they simply haven't created the kind of well-focused infrastructure needed to do the job. In either case, the findings underscore the importance of state-level vigilance about the performance of all authorizers.

The Final Frontier: For all their merits, NAEP data actually leave unanswered many important questions about charter schools, primarily due to the survey's small sample size, its exclusive focus on 4th and 8th grades, and its inability to track students over time. These data again highlight the critical need for truly longitudinal studies that follow individual students and schools over time. As we found in a previously produced meta-analysis of charter evaluations ("Studying Achievement in Charter Schools: What Do We Know?"), most longitudinal studies find greater gains in charters, others find gains comparable, and very few find charters gaining less. These studies remain the best gauge of the actual impact of charter schools on student performance.