

## National Education Writers Association

## THE EDUCATED REPORTER

COMMENTARY ON EDUCATION COVERAGE, WRITING AND A FEW OTHER THINGS

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**As Guiding Lights, Charter Schools Struggle to Shine**

I've been getting a lot of questions lately about charter schools, particularly in light of what's happening in the Windy City. A recent study of Chicago Public Schools found that its charter school students were not doing any better than their peers at traditional neighborhood campuses, and, in some cases, were actually performing significantly worse. (Click [here](#) for the *Chicago Tribune* article.)

Earlier this month, less than two weeks after the study was released, **CPS announced** it planned to add 12 more charter schools. Why, exactly, would you want to add more charter schools when the ones you already have seem to be more struggling than stellar?

The findings in Chicago mirror charter school outcomes in other cities and states. Recent studies have concluded that charter schools nationally have not performed much better than regular public schools, and—again, unfortunately-- in some instances did much worse. As with almost every kind of educational model, there were pockets of excellence that could be singled out. But overall, the data was far from a ringing endorsement for these schools that use public money but are independently operated. (Click [here](#) for more on the often-cited Stanford study.)

Despite these results, support for the charter school concept hasn't wavered among some key advocates – including U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Expanding opportunities for choice in public education, including charter schools, is a key element in his reform initiatives.

When the charter schools concept first emerged in late 1980s and early 1990s, it carried the banner of the Next Great Idea in public education. Unencumbered by perceived distractions like collective bargaining agreements and district regulations, charter schools would flourish. They would also be lighthouses, shining the way for “traditional” public campuses to follow.

Being a birthplace for concepts or a guiding light for good practices presents a fairly heavy burden. The reality is that few charter campuses have managed to come anywhere close to meeting those expectations.

There are plenty of possible reasons for the lackluster data. Whether or not students succeed academically depends on a multitude of factors, many of which are beyond

the school's control. Another problem is that charter schools are often launched by well-meaning parents and community leaders who often have little or no experience in the day-to-day business of schooling. In more than a few states, for-profit management companies stepped in to run the charter schools -- and ran them straight into the ground.

For another perspective, I'd like to go back to a conversation I had recently with author and educational psychologist [David Berliner, the Regents Professor of Education at Arizona State University](#).

He's not surprised by the substandard student performance at many charter schools, given several key factors related to their teachers. Research shows that charter school teachers tend to be less experienced than their peers at traditional schools, Berliner said. Staff turnover is also much higher at charter schools than traditional campuses.

But it is unexpected, Berliner said, that charter schools aren't more successful. He contends that charter schools are often able to engage in what he called "skimming." Charter schools can turn away students with behavioral problems, something regular public schools can't do. Charter schools can also mandate parents sign contracts (pledging involvement in everything from homework supervision to on-campus activities) and then expel those students when their parents fall short.

It's important to note that charter school advocates, including [the Center for Education Reform](#), dispute that skimming is a factor in enrollment. CER argues that charter schools actually provide more high-quality learning opportunities for disadvantaged students than they would otherwise be able to access. (Click [here](#) for the organization's new report on the state of the nation's charter schools.)

But Berliner's provocative point is worth deliberation. By eliminating the families who lack the time, resources or motivation to participate more fully in their children's learning, charter schools are thinning the herd. Why hasn't this luxury translated into more academic success?

For some students, charter schools (like the highly successful [KIPP](#) model) might well be the answer. But at many of the campuses, there are still too many questions.

*Have a question, comment or concern for the Educated Reporter? Email Emily Richmond at [erichmond@ewa.org](mailto:erichmond@ewa.org). She also tweets [@EWAEmily](#).*