

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: August 26, 2014

Published in Print: August 28, 2014, as **It's Déjà Vu All Over Again for Charter Schools**

Charter School Activists Suffer From Truth Deprivation

By **Gerald N. Tirozzi**

"Rarely in the history of education have so many been willing to risk so much on the basis of so little evidence." This cogent statement was included in a 1996 Education Policy Institute report, alluding to the "risky business" of private management of public schools. It is truly amazing how little has changed in promoting school reform initiatives in the 18 years since this prophetic pronouncement.

Consider the reality that, as a nation, we continue to follow and accept the declarations of education reformers in their relentless promotion and implementation of "cures" that generally have no documented research base for school improvement. Conversely, these same strategists apparently have little time to consider existing research and evaluation findings, which rebut the very reform strategies and initiatives they are espousing.

A prime example of such "evidence avoidance" is apparent in the accelerating growth of the high-profile charter school movement. It is truly difficult to comprehend the escalating commitment to, and major infusion of federal and state funds for, this movement—especially in the absence of supportive data on its effectiveness in the education of young people.

Ironically, this apparent evidence avoidance comes on the heels of the No Child Left Behind Act, which required states, school districts, and schools to use only research-based programs and initiatives in school reform efforts—a directive that is oft-cited in the legislation. It is truly amazing to grasp the contradiction within the federal government in mandating accountability for NCLB, and then taking a completely different approach in validating the progress of charter schools.

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To this latter point, one has to really wonder what U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was thinking when he **informed states**, with no documentation to support his edict, that they would jeopardize their applications for Race to the Top funds unless they lifted any existing ban on the growth of charter schools. In reality, his pronouncement resulted in marching orders for governors and legislators to jump on the charter school bandwagon.

The Obama administration's focus on charter schools as an innovative model for school improvement seems imprudent given the absence of desired outcomes, including student achievement. To this point, Grover J. "Russ" Whitehurst, the former director of the Institute of Education Sciences, offered a prescient warning for the fast tracking of charter schools in 2009 when he wrote: "Unless effectiveness is thought of as a central dimension of innovation, the current innovation zeitgeist will subject the nation to yet another fad and fantasy in education

rather than continuous improvement." As the nation is well into the implementation of the Race to the Top initiative, ought not one of its major component parts—charter schools—be seriously challenged?

Charter school advocates, including Secretary Duncan, need to consider that the ultimate verdict on the success of charters will not be rendered based on their propensity for accelerated growth, nor the celebration of opening new schools on a grand scale.

The **2013 report of the Center for Research on Educational Outcomes** presents a validated body of research findings and raises serious concerns and questions regarding the impact of charter schools on improving student achievement. CREDO researchers examined test data from 27 states and concluded that about a quarter of charters delivered better reading scores than traditional public schools, but more than half produced no improvement, and 19 percent had worse results. In math, 29 percent of the charters delivered better math scores than traditional public schools, while 40 percent showed no difference, and 31 percent fared worse.

A concluding statement of the report reinforces the negative findings: "There remain worrying numbers of charter schools whose learning gains are either substantially worse than the local alternative or are insufficient to give their students the academic preparation they need to continue in their education or be successful in the workplace."

A **2009 CREDO charter school study** offered an earlier and significant caution from its lead author: "If this study shows anything, it shows that we've got a two-to-one margin of bad charters to good charters. That's a red flag."

It would appear that the charter school devotees didn't see, or didn't want to see, the red-flag warning, as demonstrated by a steadfast resolve to move their agenda forward. That same year, as charter schools were beginning to accelerate their meteoric rise, the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools reported that 11 states had not been included in any major charter studies beyond those revealing national student-achievement data, such as National Assessment of Educational Progress scores.

A **2010 report from the Center for Public Education** noted that, in effect, in a total of 18 states, there was no effort, or evidence, to creditably represent the extent to which charters had any impact on improved student achievement. The CPE reported the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools' concern that states with a large population of charter school students—Michigan, Minnesota, and New Jersey—did not have a single longitudinal student-level published study. The report also pointed out that some states with significant recent growth in charters had not engaged in any studies.

Such pronouncements should bring into clear perspective the lack of confirming data to validate the proliferation of charter schools. This lack of data also raises serious concerns about the fairness of comparing charter school student-achievement outcomes with those of students in traditional public schools.

Additionally, other research reports have documented that charter schools, in general, disproportionately accept fewer students with disabilities and English-language learners, and that they have higher attrition and expulsion and suspension rates than traditional public schools. This reality should send a clear message that charter schools play by a set of rules that is different from that of traditional public schools, which have an unwavering commitment to equity for all students.

The findings and observations cited here do not represent victory pronouncements for charter schools, and definitely do not warrant their unmitigated growth. In reality, the charter activists may very well be suffering from a form of truth deprivation. An old military adage further serves to capture their unbridled lack of concern for documented evidence: "Damn the torpedoes; full speed ahead!"

Fast forward from the 1996 Education Policy Institute report to today. It should be obvious that, as a nation, we are guilty of risking so much in the absence of so little corroborating data, as demonstrated by the overzealous expansion of charter schools. Perhaps the eloquent words of that great philosopher Yogi Berra best make this point: "It's déjà vu all over again."

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Vol. 34, Issue 02, Pages 22-23