
Economic Policy Institute

1660 L STREET, NW • SUITE 1200 • WASHINGTON, DC 20036 • 202/775-8810 • www.epinet.org

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CONTACT: Nancy Coleman, Stephaan Harris, or Karen Conner at 202-775-8810 or news@epinet.org.

NEW STUDY DISPUTES CLAIMS THAT CHARTER SCHOOLS SERVE MOSTLY DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS

Book Sheds New Light on Charter Schools' Enrollment and Achievement

*Published by Economic Policy Institute and Teachers College Press
of Columbia University*

A new study released by the Economic Policy Institute and published by Teachers College Press concludes that, contrary to claims of many charter school proponents, charter schools do *not* serve a disproportionate number of economically disadvantaged students.

The study, based on data from the federally-sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), as well as from state-level studies, challenges the notion that the lower academic performance of students in charter schools relative to peers in regular public schools can be explained by socioeconomic differences in the students served.

“On average, the students attending charter schools are no more difficult to teach than students in comparable regular public schools,” said Lawrence Mishel, president of EPI and co-author of the study. “Thus we must look for other explanations of the relatively low achievement scores of students in charter schools.”

The new study, entitled *The Charter School Dust-Up: Examining the Evidence on Enrollment and Achievement*, was conducted by Martin Carnoy, Rebecca Jacobsen, Lawrence Mishel and Richard Rothstein. The authors undertook the research last year, in the wake of a heated controversy surrounding the initial release of NAEP data seeming to show that charter school students performed no better than regular public school students. Many charter school supporters claimed that the reason was that charter school students were more disadvantaged.

The new EPI report refutes that claim. The report shows, for example, that while charter schools enroll a higher percentage of black students than regular public schools, black students in charter schools are less likely to be eligible for lunch subsidies than black students in regular public schools, yet test scores for black students are no higher in charter schools than in regular public schools. Charter schools are schools operated with public funds but freed from most regulations that guide regular public schools. Many charter school proponents expected that freedom from regulation and union contracts would easily lead to higher average student performance. This apparently has not been the case.

The EPI report reviews studies from a number of states showing that, based on standardized test scores, students in charter schools perform at levels that were no higher – and in some cases consistently below – those of counterparts in regular public schools. These states for which data are available include those with the largest concentration of charter schools, such as California, Michigan, Texas, and the District of Columbia.

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Specific findings include the following:

- 76% of black students in regular public schools are low-income; for charter schools the proportion is 68%.
- Charter school students who are eligible for free-and-reduced price lunches score significantly lower in math and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than those at conventional public schools.
- Charter school students' test scores and test score gains are, on average, no greater than those of comparable students in regular public schools. Even in charter schools that have been operating for several years, average test scores are still no higher than in regular public schools.

Dust-Up also examined enrollment patterns at Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), a charter school network often cited as achieving better results from disadvantaged students. The KIPP analysis demonstrated that even when charter schools aim to enroll the neediest children, inherent characteristics of school choice procedures can frustrate this goal.

“The evidence that charter schools do not outperform regular public schools suggests that while some charters may be a benefit to students, others do great harm,” said Mishel. “Charter schools were designed to be experimental; it should be no surprise that some experiments lead to failures, experiences that can provide useful lessons.”

Dust-Up data show that charter schools have produced positive outcomes for specific groups and in specific times and places. For example, rapid test score gains from initially low levels were found in Arizona in the early grades in charter schools. But there were more instances where charter schools seemed to have negative effects on performance compared to regular public schools.

The authors argue that evaluation of all types of schools, charter and others, could be improved both by accounting for the difficulty of educating particular groups of students before interpreting test scores and by focusing on student gains over time, not their level of achievement in any particular year.

They also call on charter school advocates to adopt consistent standards for improving evaluation of both regular public schools and charter schools. “We hope the debate on charter schools opens up a broader discussion on better ways to assess student performance,” said Carnoy, a professor at Stanford University. “At the very least, we should use the same standards for evaluating charter and regular public schools.”

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About the Authors

Martin Carnoy is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute and professor of education and economics at Stanford University (carnoy@stanford.edu).

Rebecca Jacobsen is a research assistant of the Economic Policy Institute, a graduate student in politics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and formerly a teacher in New York City and Connecticut public schools (rjj7@columbia.edu).

Lawrence Mishel is president of the Economic Policy Institute and director of its education research and policy program (lmishel@epinet.org).

Richard Rothstein is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute and a visiting professor at Teachers College, Columbia University (rr2159@columbia.edu).

Although each of the four co-authors took initial responsibility for different sections of the book, all co-authors have reviewed and revised the entire work and all take responsibility for the whole. Questions about this book's analysis or conclusions may be directed to any of the authors.

Teachers College Press is the university press for Teachers College, Columbia University and publishes exclusively in the area of education (www.tcpres.com).

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