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Study of Test Scores Finds Charter Schools Lagging

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 22 — Fourth graders in traditional public schools did significantly better in reading and math than comparable children attending charter schools, according to a report released on Tuesday by the Federal Education Department.

The report, based on 2003 test scores, thrust the Education Department into the center of the heated national debate over school choice. It also drew a barrage of criticism from supporters of charter schools, the fastest-growing sector in public education, who sent out press statements casting doubt on the report's methodology and findings even before they were announced.

Even as the federal commissioner of education statistics, Mark S. Schneider, released the report, he said the agency should no longer put its official imprimatur on research comparing charter with public schools and leave such studies to independent researchers.

The study found that in 2003, fourth graders in traditional public schools scored an average of 4.2 points better in reading than comparable students in charter schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test, often called the nation's report card. Students in traditional schools scored an average of 4.7 points better in math than comparable students in charter schools.

Students in charter schools that said they were affiliated with local school districts did better than those in schools largely independent from local systems, scoring on par with children in regular public schools in reading and math.

The study also compared traditional public schools with charter schools in central cities serving mostly minority students and found no significant difference in reading achievement at the different schools. However, math scores at such urban charter schools still lagged those at traditional schools, except when those charters were affiliated with local districts.

“We know they are not doing harm,” Mr. Schneider said of charter schools, “so they pass a fundamental test of policy analysis.”

But this was weak praise considering that proponents of charter schools have long argued that students at these institutions would show progress far greater than those at neighborhood schools.

The Bush administration is a strong proponent of charter schools. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings said in a statement Tuesday, “Charter schools are empowering low-income parents with new educational options and providing an important lifeline for families in areas where traditional public schools have fallen short of their responsibilities.”

The federal No Child Left Behind law aims to expand school choice by allowing schools whose students show insufficient progress for five years running to be shut down and reopened as charters.

Edward J. McElroy, president of the American Federation of Teachers, the public employees’ union that is critical of charter schools, said the study “provides further evidence against unchecked expansion of the charter school experiment.”

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform, a Washington group that advocates for charter schools, said the study used a flawed measure of poverty to find comparable students and failed to capture the variety of children attending charter schools and the many types of charters that exist.

“This research is no more valid than the government response to Katrina,” Ms. Allen said. “Why do we need to have the government give us data when the most important data is what we get locally, looking at the school and how it does in meeting the state standards to which they have to be held under No Child Left Behind?”

Charter schools, which are largely free from education regulations and are run by groups like nonprofit organizations and for-profit managers, are a fast-growing alternative to traditional public schools. Mr. Schneider showed discomfort on Tuesday at taking a stand on which kind of school performed better.

“This is one of the most contentious issues with regard to the charter school research debate,” Mr. Schneider said. He said the department should not put its

stamp on research comparing public and charter schools but should leave individual researchers to use the data to compete in the “marketplace of ideas.”

How to judge the relative performance of public, charter and private schools has been a touchy issue for the department since 2004, when it initially avoided publicizing results from the 2003 assessment that were largely unfavorable to charters.

The teachers’ union ferreted those results out of the department’s Web site, showing that students in charters were largely trailing those in regular public schools. After the federation reported the scores, the department issued its own report confirming their accuracy.

But charter supporters objected to these findings, saying the raw scores did not convey the full picture of charter schools. They said children in charters were more disadvantaged than those in regular public schools and often turned to charters after having struck out in their neighborhood school.

Tuesday’s report, written by the Educational Testing Service, compared a nationally representative sample of 376,000 students at nearly 6,800 regular public schools with 6,500 students at 150 charter schools, controlling for race, socioeconomic status and other factors. The study did not look at students’ previous educational achievement.

Martin Carnoy, a professor of education at Stanford University who has written critically of charters, said he had found no evidence that lower-scoring students from regular public schools made up a disproportionate share of those moving to charters.

Supporters of charters argue that the findings represent only a snapshot of student performance in 2003, saying nothing about progress over time. Dr. Schneider said it had taken the National Center for Education Statistics that long to commission and review the study; the center’s main responsibility is the release of scores on the national assessment.

More recently, the 2005 national assessment showed no significant difference in reading scores between fourth graders in charters and those in regular public schools, although students at regular public schools did significantly better in math at fourth grade and in math and reading at eighth grade.