Charter Schools' Performance and Accountability: A Disconnect

Executive Summary

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This report argues that evidence exists for the case that the charter school movement is largely a failed reform. The report puts the charter school movement in the context of dissatisfaction with public schools and the public sector in general. It then describes the claims for charters made by the early charter school advocates, emphasizing the advocates' promise of increased achievement. From there, the report reviews evaluations of charter schools in Arizona, California, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, North Carolina, and Texas, as well as several national evaluations.

The review shows that charters have not lived up to their promise of increased achievement. This failure is surprising given that charter schools are small (most have fewer than 200 students) with small classes, two factors known to increase achievement. This failure becomes even harder to understand given the advantages that charters enjoy in their freedom from the rules, regulations, and contracts that are said to bureaucratically burden the public schools.

It appears that charter school advocates who believed that charters could increase achievement and should be held accountable for doing so have lost control of the pro-charter movement to those for whom deregulation is a sufficient condition for declaring success.