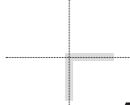


# Hopes, Fears, & Reality



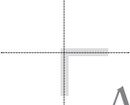
A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN  
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN 2005

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## About NCSRP and *Hopes, Fears, & Reality*

**T**he University of Washington's National Charter School Research Project aims to bring rigor, evidence, and balance to the national charter school debate. Its goals are to 1) facilitate the fair assessment of the value-added effects of U.S. charter schools, and 2) provide the charter school and broader public education communities with research and information for ongoing improvement.

*Hopes, Fears, & Reality* is the first publication from NCSRP. This report will be published annually and will explore controversial, developing, or pressing charter school issues. NCSRP intends to identify the root causes, illuminate complexities, and move beyond polemics to elevate the level of the discussion around each problem, without making specific arguments for or against any position in the debate. NCSRP hopes that this report will be useful to charter school advocates, skeptics, and people curious about this new form of public education.

For more information and research on charter schools, please visit the NCSRP website at [www.crpe.org/ncsrp](http://www.crpe.org/ncsrp). Original research, state-by-state charter school data, links to charter school research by other groups, and more can be found there.



## CHAPTER 7

# Challenges of a Maturing Reform

*Paul T. Hill and James Harvey*

**A**s the charter school movement enters fully into its adolescence, it has a lot of successes to point to, as the essays in this volume demonstrate. It has survived the initial skepticism that it would amount to much of anything. It has grown into a pretty healthy 15-year-old, a survival term probably three times as long as most educational innovations, which run their course in three to five years. It can now count more than 3,300 schools and more than 900,000 students under the charter umbrella, a genuine benchmark of a considerable impact on the educational life of the United States.

Despite all that, this reform faces all the challenges adolescents everywhere face. It needs to watch its step carefully over the next five years. Chartering is like an adolescent in another way as well: it confounds observers. Whatever one says about a teenager might make sense today but be totally wrong tomorrow—and might even be both true and untrue on the same day.

As the essays in this report show, recent public discourse about charter schools seldom takes full account of the facts. For example:

- While chartering has advocates and detractors at the national level, it is less of a national movement than a reform implemented by states in vastly different ways.
- Despite what advocates on both sides of the question would have people believe, it is currently impossible to draw a national bottom-line conclusion about charter schools' academic performance.
- Published claims about whether charter schools get more or less money to educate their students are often founded on poor data and weak analysis, although the sophistication of financial analysis around schools is improving and can get better still.

- Closing bad charter schools can be tough on the students and districts involved, but on close examination the scare stories about closure of one big California school proved exaggerated and mislaid blame.
- Claims and counter-claims about charter schools' innovativeness are hard to resolve without a great deal more information. However, charter schools apparently offer grade-level options and intimate environments that many families feel are not otherwise available to them.

Many of the issues arising around charter schools are unprecedented. Policymakers and analysts are just starting to explore them. Scaling-up—creating new charter schools modeled on successful ones, and expanding the supply of charter schools as fast as demand from parents and big city officials permits—is a new issue. Foundations interested in charter schools are considering alternative ways to advance growth and scale-up.

The possibility of using charter schools as a replacement strategy for low-performing public schools is a new idea introduced by *No Child Left Behind*, and school districts like Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York are in the midst of ambitious efforts to take advantage of these provisions. Those districts' past efforts to reconstitute their own schools failed, and they are hoping to use the advantages of chartering—greater flexibility and the possibility of tapping the expertise of independent school providers—to increase the odds of success.

This report has tried to shed light on these issues, but holes in the database limit just how far the report can go. The National Charter School Research Project (NCSRP) plans to return to many of these issues in future years. Every future publication of this annual “year in review” will re-visit the student achievement question, since data and analysis are expected to improve steadily. NCSRP will also examine emerging questions about which there is now little evidence:

- If only to improve studies of test scores, educators and policymakers need to know much more about who attends charter schools and why.
- To understand charter school finances, they also need real evidence about the many ways the income and costs of charters differ from those of district-run schools.
- To understand the prospects for scaling-up charter schools, better information is required on whether charter schools can develop reliable and steady access to the kinds of principals and teachers they need.

- To improve understanding of problems associated with charter school closure, much more needs to be known about how government oversight agencies can protect children without regulating schools so closely that they lose the freedom of action necessary for innovation.

More generally, NCSRP expects to learn much more about an overarching issue that will largely determine the success or failure of the charter school movement in the years ahead. That issue is government's capacity to oversee schools—an aspect of the charter school phenomenon that both supporters and opponents initially overlooked. Chartering is a set of laws and policies that allows new kinds of schools to emerge, with new ways of using student and teacher time. It is also a way to attract new people into teaching and school leadership, and to let teachers and families sort themselves into schools that they trust and think will work for them. These attributes—public funding, performance-based oversight, openness to new ideas, free flow of people and money in search of better options, open labor markets, and choice for families—did not come together accidentally. Citizens want real options and public oversight of schools. Charter schools are a serious attempt to manage the tensions between these aspirations. The next few years will tell whether that aspiration is a pipe dream or a realistic possibility.