

SOCIETY

The Charter Advantage

“A Straightforward Comparison of Charter Schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States” by Caroline M. Hoxby, at <http://post.economics.harvard.edu/faculty/hoxby/papers/hoxbyallcharters.pdf> (Sept. 2004).

The emotional debate over charter schools has raged for years without much solid evidence on either side. Now, on the heels of a widely publicized American Federation of Teachers (AFT) study last summer that found charter students lagging behind their peers in regular public schools, comes an unusually comprehensive research paper by Hoxby, a Harvard University economist. Her conclusion: Charter schools do a better job of producing proficient students.

Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia now have charter schools, which are publicly funded but free of many of the strictures that bind the conventional public school system. Founded by community members, entrepreneurs, and others, charter schools tend to stress innovative teaching practices and parent involvement. Nationwide, they enroll 1.5 percent of all students.

Hoxby looked at how some 50,000 charter-school fourth graders did on state proficiency exams in reading and math, relative to their peers in comparable regular public schools. The results: The percentage of charter students who were proficient was four points higher in reading and two points higher in math.

The charter schools' superiority was greater in states where they had been in existence longer and enrolled more students. In the District of Columbia, which has a larger proportion of students in charter schools (11 percent) than any state, the advantage was 35 percentage points in reading and 40 points in math. Only in North Carolina, where less than 2 percent of students are enrolled in charter schools, were there charter disadvantages in both reading and math.

Because so few American students attend charter schools, Hoxby says, the tiny sample (3 percent) used in the AFT study (www.aft.org) was statistically meaningless. And the AFT compared the performance of charter schools, which often serve low-income neighborhoods, with statewide school averages. Hoxby's research, by contrast, encompassed 99 percent of all charter-school fourth graders in the 2002–03 school year, and it compared charter schools with nearby conventional public schools, where the student body is more likely to be similar in composition.

But the debate is far from over. After Hoxby's study appeared, the U.S. Department

EXCERPT

The Green Glance

Envy is always most intense when it is experienced laterally, not, as we would expect, when it is experienced vertically—that is, when it is inspired by someone we perceive as a peer rather than someone higher on the economic food chain, whose good fortune stirs only theoretical forms of resentment. The maid does not envy her mistress her jewels; she envies the housekeeper her keys. What's more, envy is so compartmentalized that one profession seldom envies another: The lawyer does not envy the physician, the used-car salesman the mail carrier, the grease monkey the florist. Instead, envy might be thought of as the opposite of xenophobia, of the hatred of strangers; it is the hatred of one's own, of one's cohorts, one's brothers and sisters, Cain's hatred of Abel, Salieri's of Mozart, Tonya Harding's of Nancy Kerrigan.

—Daniel Harris, essayist and critic, in *The Antioch Review* (Fall 2004)

of Education released a report (available at <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/pcsp-final/finalreport.pdf>) comparing schools rather than students. The results: In all five states studied, charter schools were less likely than

conventional public schools to meet state proficiency standards. Even after adjusting for differences in the composition of the student body and other factors, charter schools in two states came up short.

Dependency Isn't Dead

“Economic Success among TANF Participants: How We Measure It Matters” by Maria Cancian and Daniel R. Meyer, in *Focus* (Summer 2004), Institute for Research on Poverty, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1180 Observatory Dr., Madison, Wis. 53706.

The federal welfare reform of 1996 produced a dramatic nationwide decline in caseloads and a chorus of self-congratulatory hurrahs in Washington. Cancian and Meyer, however, aren't cheering.

They focus on Wisconsin Works, a much-admired program that was launched the year after the federal reform returned control over the welfare system to the states. Wisconsin Works requires most recipients to work or take part in work-related training, but it also provides fairly generous benefits (up to \$673 per month), child care, and health insurance. Based on their study of more than 2,200 randomly selected mothers who entered the program during its first year, the authors, who are both professors of social work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, say that the program by some measures did a good job of helping the women avoid poverty. Counting earnings and a variety of government benefits, three-fourths of the women had incomes above the poverty line.

But the real boast of Wisconsin Works

and similar programs is that they reduce *dependency*, and that claim looks much exaggerated. The federal government counts as independent all those who receive less than half their total annual income from their state welfare program, food stamps, and Supplemental Security Income, the federal program for low-income people who are aged, blind, or disabled. By that definition, 70 percent of the women in the Wisconsin Works study achieved independence.

But that standard is too loose, the authors say. If independence is instead defined as receiving less than \$1,000 in benefits from the three programs, only 26 percent of the women qualified. (The chief reason: Many continued to receive food stamps.) And an even more deflating picture emerges when the focus is restricted to the crucial subcategory of long-term welfare recipients, those who were on the welfare rolls for more than 18 months before entering the program. Only 17 percent of them achieved independence.

Free Blacks in Colonial America

“Freedom in the Archives: Free African Americans in Colonial America” by Paul Heinegg and Henry B. Hoff, in *Common-place* (Oct. 2004), www.common-place.org, sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

The traditional history of free blacks in early America may need significant revision in light of records Heinegg has found during nearly two decades of sifting through state archives in Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Delaware. Most of the free African-American families who traced their origins to Virginia and Maryland didn't descend from enslaved black women and their

owners, as is commonly supposed, but “from white servant women who had children by slaves or free African Americans.”

In Virginia, for example, more than 200 free African-American families descended from white women. When Africans were first brought to 17th-century Virginia, they entered a society that held white indentured servants in such contempt “that masters were not pun-