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RAND Study Balances the Debate on School Choice

BY MARK WALSH

A major review of scholarly research on private school vouchers and charter schools released last week concludes that there are no clear answers yet about whether they are an effective alternative to the traditional public school system.

But the overall tone of the report from RAND—a respected, independent research organization based in Santa Monica, Calif.—suggests that vouchers and charters are experiments worth continuing and studying more closely.

"Our review of the evidence leaves us

without a crisp, bottom-line judgment of the wisdom of voucher and charter programs," the 266-page report says.

Still, the report adds, proponents of those two ideas can "point to promising indications of modest, short-run achievement gains, as evident for students in Arizona charter schools, students in at-risk charters in Texas, and African-American students participating in privately funded voucher programs."

The report, published as a book titled *Rhetoric vs. Reality: What We Know and What We Need to Know About Vouchers and Charter Schools*, is an analysis of

dozens of recent studies and data. It examines not only academic achievement, but also such topics as racial and socioeconomic integration in voucher programs and charter schools.

"The summary of the evidence is that neither the hopes of the supporters nor the fears of the opponents have yet been realized," Brian P. Gill, the study's lead author, said in an interview.

In what is arguably one of the most noteworthy approaches in the study, the RAND researchers considered private school vouchers on a par with charter schools as an alternative to traditional

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Both Vouchers and Charter Schools Merit Continued Study, RAND Says

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public education. Charter schools are far more prevalent and more accepted by public education groups, which sometimes argue that vouchers are at best a distraction and don't contribute to the debate over improving American education.

The RAND study does not cast aside the voucher concept so readily.

"We are trying to make a conceptual point by lumping vouchers and charters together," said Mr. Gill, a researcher in RAND's Pittsburgh office. "Both represent a departure from the traditional system in the United States, and an interesting and important one."

Florida Motivates

On the issue of academic results, the authors express some surprise that the relatively small number of experimental voucher programs have been the subject of more serious research than the more widespread charter school movement has.

The RAND authors—who also include P. Michael Timpane, Karen E. Ross, and Dominic J. Brewer—dive into the so-called research wars over vouchers and find that some of the most reliable studies have been those of privately financed programs such as the School Choice Scholarship Foundation in New York City.

They cite several studies that found significant academic gains for participating African-American students in New York, as well as in Washington and Dayton, Ohio. But those same studies found no similar gains for Hispanic students in the same program. The results raise as many questions as they answer, and several issues deserve to be researched more fully, the authors say.

When it comes to the major government-financed voucher programs serving children from low-income families in Milwaukee and Cleveland, the authors express disappointment with the state of available research. Wisconsin stopped requiring that Milwaukee voucher students be tested about five years ago, and the official evaluation of the Cleveland program "leaves a series of unanswered questions about methodology and the validity of the comparison group of nonvoucher students," the report says.

Kim K. Metcalf, an Indiana University researcher who is conducting the evaluation of the Cleveland program, took issue with that judgment. He said that some analysts had problems with his first-year data, but that the issues had been ironed out in subsequent reports.

The criticism from RAND "seems a bit out of date," Mr. Metcalf said.

Examining studies of Florida's voucher plan, which is limited to students in consistently low-performing schools, the RAND authors endorse research that found that the threat of vouchers had led public schools to improve their performance.

"We conclude that Florida's A+ Accountability system induced modest short-run improvements in the scores of low-performing schools in writing and probably in math as well," the RAND report says.

When it comes to charter schools, the authors could not come across any controlled experiments comparing the achievement of students in the independent public schools and that of their counterparts in traditional public schools. Other research about charter school achievement is mixed, they found, with sometimes poor first-year performance improving in later years.

"None of the studies suggests that charter school achievement outcomes are dramatically better or worse on average than those of conventional public schools," the authors write.

Parental Satisfaction

Besides looking at achievement, the RAND report examines evidence about parental satisfaction with voucher and charter options, access for students with disabilities, and racial-integration concerns.

Based on a review of a variety of studies, the report concludes that parents enrolling their children in voucher and charter programs are highly satisfied with those options. They are motivated not only by a perception of better academic opportunities, but also by their belief that their children are getting more discipline and moral values in a safer school environment, studies show.

The authors say that there is little evidence about how children with disabilities fare in voucher programs, but that such children tend to be underrepresented in charter schools. "Many of them lack the resources to provide special services," the report says of charter schools.

On racial and socioeconomic issues, the report notes that existing voucher programs targeting children from low-income families are, not surprisingly, dominated by poor minority children.

When it comes to the schools accepting voucher students, RAND states that participating private schools in Milwaukee tend to be less stratified by race than the local public schools are. Evidence in the Cleveland

program—the subject of an upcoming U.S. Supreme Court case on the use of publicly funded vouchers for religious schools—and in privately financed voucher programs is deemed less conclusive.

The integration picture is "murky" in charter schools, according to the report.

"Nationally, most charter schools probably have racial distributions within the range of local public schools," the report says. But in some states, "most charter schools serve

populations that are either largely white or largely minority, with few being highly integrated."

The report concludes with a series of recommendations for policymakers on making voucher and charter programs more effective. And it calls for more and better research.

Henry M. Levin, the director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education—based at Teachers College, Columbia University—praised the RAND report as a balanced look at some of the most fiercely debated questions in education.

"With few exceptions, there have not been terribly bad results" from voucher and charter programs, Mr. Levin said. "They haven't been disastrous, nor have they saved American education."

The report's middle-of-the-road conclusions left plenty of room for advocates on both sides, particularly of the voucher question, to find some argument to bolster their case.

"One of the things this report shows is that there is a lack of accountability for voucher schools and charter schools," said Denise Cardinal, a spokeswoman for the National Education Association. "They are not held to the same standards as mainstream public schools."

She also took issue with the conclusion that it is too early to judge the efficacy of vouchers,



Two of the authors, Dominic J. Brewer, left, and Brian P. Gill, talk to reporters about the research they did on vouchers and charters.

ers, which the NEA vigorously opposes.

"I kind of disagree if you say the jury is still out," Ms. Cardinal said. "I think there is plenty of evidence out there to show they don't work. They've been around, and they're not working. They're distracting us from pursuing programs that really do work, like smaller class sizes."

Marc Egan, the director of the Voucher Strategy Center at the Alexandria, Va.-based National School Boards Association, which also opposes vouchers, found evidence in the RAND report that private schools in voucher programs are not doing all they could to be evaluated. "There is no public accountability" for the schools participating in the voucher programs, he said.

Jeanne Allen, the director of the Washington-based Center for Education Reform, which strongly supports vouchers and charters, saw the report in a different light.

"They found evidence that the programs they analyzed are working for many children," she said. "I think the report cites more evidence for the pro [voucher and charter argument] than the con."

FOLLOW-UP: The report can be found online at www.rand.org/publications/MR/MR1118/. Copies also are available for \$15 by calling (310) 451-7002, faxing (310) 451-6915, or e-mailing order@rand.org.