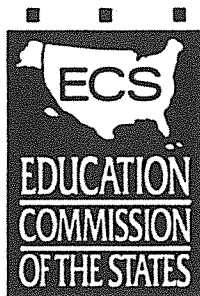
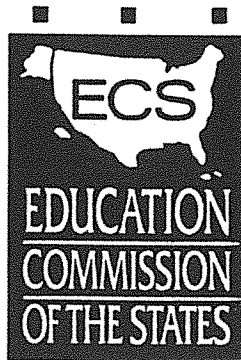


CHARTER SCHOOLS: INITIAL FINDINGS



Charter Schools: Initial Findings

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Charter Schools: Initial Findings

By Louann A. Bierlein

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Update: What We Know About the Initial Charter Schools

As policymakers begin work on their 1996 agendas, charter schools continue to be an integral part of many education reform discussions. As of early January 1996, 20 states had formal charter school laws on the books (see Table 6 at the end of this brief for a complete listing). Although data on charter school activities continue to be limited, a clearer picture of the types of schools and the children they are serving is surfacing; anecdotal "impact" data also continues to accumulate.¹ Although the long-term impact of charter schools is still uncertain, some initial questions can be addressed.

How Many Charter Schools Are There?

Table 1 depicts those states with charter school laws on the books prior to 1995, the number of schools that have been approved, and those actually operating. These figures were gathered from department of education personnel or others closely affiliated with the charter schools program within each state.

These data clearly show that the strength of a given law significantly influences the number of charter schools that open their doors. Stronger laws allow any individual or group to apply for a charter, have an appeals process or allow some entity other than the local school board to approve charters and give charter schools increased legal and fiscal autonomy.² In the six initial states with stronger laws, 222 charter schools are known to be operating, compared with 14 in the five initial states with weaker laws.

Table 1 Approved and Operating Charter Schools (as of December 1995)						
"Stronger" Charter Law States				"Weaker" Charter Law States		
<i>State (year passed)</i>	<i>Approved</i>	<i>Operating</i>		<i>State (year passed)</i>	<i>Approved</i>	<i>Operating</i>
MN (1991)	19	17		GA (1993)	3	3
CA (1992)	100	80*		NM (1993)	4	4
CO (1993)	27	24		WI (1993)	20*	6
MA (1993)	20	15		HI (1994)	1	1
MI (1994)	74*	40		KS (1994)	0	0
AZ (1994)	51	46				
Totals	291	222		Totals	28	14
*In CA, it is estimated that there are at least 80 schools operating under charter school status; In MI, both initial and final approvals are included; in WI, 10 districts had been authorized to have up to 2 schools each.						

What Do These Charter Schools Look Like?

Of the charter schools known to be in operation at this time, no two schools are exactly alike. Unlike the "one-size-fits-all" scenario typically found within school districts, many charter schools offer the best of what alternative education has to offer (e.g., smaller schools, experiential learning, teachers who want to work with students in non-traditional settings) -- with the added features of true site control, limited rules/regulations to follow, and a contract that requires results. Some have a special emphasis such as science or arts; others serve a special population such as dropouts. Many are housed in nontraditional education facilities such as recreation facilities or old church buildings. Others are housed in regular school buildings, having converted from an existing school rather than starting from scratch. Numbers of students range from a low of 10 to more than 1,200 per school.

Table 2 reveals that many charter schools are being developed to serve K-5 elementary populations (34% of those in operation during December 1995 within the six states with the largest number of charter schools in operation). A growing number of schools, however, are targeted toward students at the middle and high school levels, or some combination of these grades. Of note is the number of charter schools trying to create a "one-room schoolhouse" effect by serving a broad range of students within a given school: 12% currently serve grades K-12, and 20% serve grades K-8. Many others plan to expand into such groupings. This is in sharp contrast to most traditional public schools which have moved away from such groupings (especially K-12), unless forced to by geographic isolation.

Table 2 Initial Charter Schools: Grade Levels Served (December 1995)*							
	AZ	CA	CO	MA	MI	MN	Total
Elem. (K-5)	11 (24%)	38 (42%)	9 (38%)	6 (40%)	14 (35%)	1 (6%)	79 (34%)
Middle (6-8)	4 (9%)	10 (11%)	5 (21%)	3 (20%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	24 (10%)
H.S. (9-12+)	13 (28%)	8 (9%)	1 (4%)	3 (20%)	11 (28%)	2 (12%)	38 (16%)
Elem. + Middle (K-8)	4 (9%)	22 (24%)	5 (21%)	2 (13%)	5 (13%)	8 (47%)	46 (20%)
Middle + H.S. (7-12)	8 (17%)	4 (4%)	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	3 (18%)	18 (8%)
Full (K-12)	6 (13%)	8 (9%)	3 (13%)	1 (7%)	6 (15%)	3 (18%)	27 (12%)
	46	90	24	15	40	17	232
* These data were extracted from documents created within each state, either by the state department of education or individuals working closely with charter schools within that state. They reflect the "general" grade levels that charter schools serve, although not all schools fit these grade ranges exactly. Many schools are planning to serve additional grade levels in the future. For CA, these data do not represent data on every operating charter school, but the best available at the time.							

Existing charter schools are also on average very small. Table 3 indicates that within the six largest charter school states, 42% have enrollments of 100 students or less (nearly half of these schools have fewer than 50 students). With the exception of California, in which a larger percentage of charter schools are converted public schools, nearly every school is designed to serve fewer than 500 pupils. Considering that many charter schools serve students in the middle and/or high school levels, these schools are significantly smaller than traditional public schools.

<p align="center">Table 3 Operating Charter School Enrollments (1995)</p>							
Student Enrollment	AZ	CA	CO	MA	MI	MN	Total
0-100	19 (41%)	23 (35%)	8 (33%)	5 (34%)	18 (45%)	14 (82%)	87 (42%)
101-250	18 (39%)	11 (17%)	10 (42%)	7 (47%)	19 (48%)	3 (18%)	68 (33%)
251-500	7 (15%)	8 (15%)	6 (25%)	2 (3%)	3 (8%)		26 (13%)
501-1000	2 (4%)	19 (29%)		1 (7%)			22 (11%)
1001+		5 (8%)					5 (2%)
Total	46	66	24	15	40	17	208
<p>* Data extracted from individual state summaries provided by state departments or individuals working closely with the charter schools in that state. Complete data were not available for CA.</p>							

Why are charter schools so small? First, with the exception of Massachusetts, charter schools do not have access to local bond funds which frequently are generated for the construction and/or purchase of school facilities. Therefore, most charter schools need to use a portion of their operating funds to secure facilities. The resulting facilities are often former warehouses and/or other commercial spaces which are small in comparison to many traditional school facilities and campuses.

Second, and perhaps foremost, many charter schools are being established on the premise that smaller class sizes and overall school populations are most conducive for student learning. Although budgetary constraints often are cited by non-charter public schools as the reason for not creating smaller schools, charter schools are finding ways to accomplish this, often with significantly less funding than other public schools. Private contracting for certain services, as well as a focus on a specific mission, appear to be key ingredients. For example, charter schools are not supporting a large array of electives or athletic programs that often pull funds from core academic classes.

Who Are the Students Being Served?

Charter school critics often challenge that charter schools will "cream off" the best and brightest students and that minority and/or special needs students will not be served. Preliminary data, however, clearly reveal that charter schools are indeed serving minority students. Table 4 illustrates the percentage of African American, Hispanic and Native American students being served within charter

schools as a whole compared to those in the total public school population within five states. In most states, charter schools are attracting an overproportion of such students relative to state averages. This is especially true for African American students. One reason is that many charter schools are being established within inner-city environments, often by minority leaders in those communities.

Table 4
Charter School Racial/Ethnic Enrollments*

	African American		Hispanic		Native American	
	Charter School %	State Public School %	Charter School %	State Public School %	Charter School %	State Public School %
AZ (Sept. 1995)	12%	4%	22%	29%	8%	7%
CO (Sept. 1994)	3%	5%	13%	17%	4%	1%
MA (June 1995)	21%	8%	17%	9%	1%	<1%
MI (Oct. 1995)	39%	16%	5%	3%	6%	<1%
MN (Oct. 1994)	15%	4%	2%	2%	7%	2%
Total Averages	18%	7%	12%	12%	5%	2%

* These data do not always represent complete charter school profiles [Arizona = 38 schools of 46 operating; Colorado = 14 of 14 operating that year; Massachusetts = 15 of 15 operating; Michigan = 23 of 40 operating; Minnesota = 13 of 13 operating that year]. These data were extracted from documents provided by each state's department of education. Data for California are currently being compiled by Eric Premack, Institute for Policy Analysis and Research, and should be available by March 1996.

The shaded areas with bold numbers represent situations in which the charter school enrollment of African Americans, Native Americans and/or Hispanics is equal to or exceeds those within the state's public school system.

Others argue that income levels will be a determining factor both in where charter schools will be established and who ultimately will attend. Indeed, preliminary findings from UCLA researchers suggest that less affluent communities (and often therefore largely minority communities) in southern California frequently lack the wherewithal to establish charter schools.³ Another recent study by the Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL) confirms that California's current charter schools do enroll fewer low-income students than the comparison schools in their study.⁴ An earlier study, however, found that California's metropolitan charter schools served high concentrations of low achievers, minority students and limited English proficient students.⁵ A survey of Michigan's initial charter schools revealed that five of six schools had larger percentages of low income students when compared to the neighboring districts.⁶

The truth is nationwide definitive data on the low-income issue do not exist. Many charter schools do not participate in the federal free/reduced-price food program so economic data on such students are not readily available. Nearly one-half of the operating charter schools opened their doors less than six months ago (every charter school in Massachusetts, Michigan and Arizona, plus several others within the other states). Therefore, state enrollment data are preliminary at best.

Regarding special needs students, many charter schools are specifically designed to target at-risk students or other special populations. Indeed, several charter school laws encourage and/or require this focus. To this end, many schools are focused on dropout retrieval, troubled youth or students with learning disabilities. For example, the Macomb Academy in Michigan targets educable mentally

impaired students, while the Metro Deaf Charter School in Minnesota provides a day program for deaf students. City Academy in Minnesota and YouthBuild Charter School in Boston both target dropouts and the Success School is run in conjunction with Arizona's correctional department. A nationwide survey of operating charter schools conducted during Spring 1995 by ECS and the Center for School Change, reveals that one-half of respondents noted their school was designed to serve at-risk students.⁷ The recent SWRL report notes that California's charter schools are serving three times as many students who had previously been retained in grade; and twice as many former dropouts when compared to surrounding public schools. On the other hand, this report also notes that California's charter schools as a whole have fewer special education students than found in comparison schools.

Unfortunately, concrete student profile data do not exist. Early information, however, reveals that charter schools are not "creaming off" the best and brightest students as critics often challenge. Indeed, many charter school operators contend they are attracting more than their share of students who were not succeeding in the traditional public school system.

What Impacts Are Charter Schools Having?

Student Outcomes

In reference to student outcomes, current information remains limited to self-reports surfacing from various charter schools. Although generalizations cannot be drawn at this point, some charter schools appear to be reporting tangible student outcomes. Several examples include:

- City Academy, St. Paul, Minnesota, reports that of its 42 graduates to date (all former dropouts), 100% had been accepted into postsecondary programs.⁸
- Horizon Instructional Systems, a charter school near Sacramento, California (which uses an individualized education plan for each student), notes that its test scores increased an average of 10% over the rest of the district.⁹
- Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in the heart of Los Angeles, California, (an existing public school of more than 1,200 students which converted to charter status) reports that their language arts scores improved from the 9th percentile to the 39th, while its math scores increased from the 14th percentile to the 57th.¹⁰

Of concern however, are reports which state that a number of charter schools have not developed rigorous performance expectations for students, nor have they specified precisely the methods by which performances are to be measured.¹¹ While this may be true for many traditional public schools as well, it is a serious concern for charter schools attempting to "prove" their worth.

Students Being Attracted Back to Public Schools

Preliminary data from several states show that a number of private school and home-schooled students are being attracted back into the public school system through charter schools. Approximately 9% of Arizona's current charter school students formerly had been home schooled, while 19% had been in private schools. In Massachusetts, initial data show that about 14% of their current charter school students came from private schools. Less than 1% had been home schooled.

While no other state data are available, Hudson Institute researchers who visited 35 charter schools in seven states found that families who had left the public school system view charter schools as a viable

option. In addition, a number of charter schools also are serving former dropouts — often those who could not or would not function within the traditional system. The attraction of formerly home-schooled, private and dropout students back into the system is an important step toward rebuilding support for public education.

Parental Involvement and Satisfaction

Most parents appear to be quite satisfied with the charter schools their children attend. A survey of parents whose children were enrolled in Minnesota's initial charter schools shows satisfaction with the schools' curriculum, teachers and staff, as well as school features such as small classes, longer classes and school resources.¹² Of particular interest is that a given school's curricular focus was the primary reason parents chose that school for their children. School features (e.g., small classes, location and environment) was the second most frequent response, followed by unhappiness with prior school. Overall, only a small percentage of parents were dissatisfied with things such as lack of resources, transportation, space and first-year "growing pains."

Most parents of charter school students also appear to be very involved in education-related activities. A recent study focused on such activities within California's charter schools, especially relative to the use of parent contracts.¹³ Researchers surveyed charter school administrators as well as administrators in nearby public schools and found that parents at charter schools were substantially more involved in the daily life of the school than were parents at nearby district-managed public schools. In addition, there was more effort on behalf of charter school teachers to involve parents than was true in comparison schools. On the other hand, the researchers raised a concern that charter schools may be using contracts as a means of excluding those parents who are not supportive and educationally involved.

Innovative Practices

Although many innovative practices are found throughout the public education system, larger numbers of charter schools appear to be implementing such practices, and perhaps in a more committed manner. Table 5 depicts findings from a survey of existing California charter schools when compared to their surrounding public schools.

Preliminary findings from the Hudson Institute study provide additional case data depicting increased parental involvement and satisfaction. Numerous parents surveyed across charter school sites expressed significant satisfaction with their school. When asked to describe how the charter school differed from previous education settings that their children had been involved in, the following comments were generally offered: (1) more open to parents; (2) higher student expectations; (3) improved curriculum; (4) dedicated teachers and (5) a family feeling. When questioned why they believe these things are occurring at the charter schools but not at their previous public school, parents noted there was less bureaucracy and more accountability.

Finally, reports of long charter school waiting lists represent further "evidence" regarding parental satisfaction. For example, Massachusetts reports 1,934 students on waiting lists (as of June 1995), compared to the 2,667 students being served.

Table 5: Implementation of Innovative Practices
(California Charter Schools v. Comparison Public Schools in California)

<i>Type of Innovation</i>	<i>Specific Innovation (Examples)</i>	<i>CA Charter Schools (%)</i>	<i>Comparison Schools (%)</i>
Instructional	Experiential learning	8	0
	Individualized learning	31	0
	Project-based learning	11	0
	Use of simulations	3	0
	Use of technology for learning	36	3
Governmental	Site-based governance	25	16
	Parents in school governance	50	0
	Teachers in school governance	3	0
Parental	Parents as instructors	28	0
	Parents participation (general)	50	14
Assessments	Alternative assessments	44	0
	Performance-based assessments	11	0
	Graduation/learning standards	6	0
Community	Community service	36	11
	Community partnerships	17	0
Grouping	Multi-age grouping	36	14
	Mainstreaming students	11	3
Scheduling	After-school scheduling	14	0
	Changes in daily schedule	17	5
	Changes in weekly schedule	8	5
	Changes in yearly schedule	11	0
Extracted from R. Corwin and J. Flaherty, "Freedom and Innovation in California's Charter Schools." Southwest Regional Laboratory, November 1995, p. 67.			

Teacher Attraction, Satisfaction, and Professionalism

Charter schools are schools of choice for teachers, yet based upon preliminary findings from the Hudson Institute study, higher salaries are not a factor in attracting teachers to charter schools. Some charter schools offer salaries that are less than the neighboring districts despite longer and more work days. Yet, most charter schools are having no difficulty in finding qualified certified teachers.

Who are these teachers and why do they choose to work in a charter school? Many are individuals who previously taught in public schools, but left for a number of reasons, (e.g., raise children, work in the business world, too much violence, relocation). Some are first-time teachers; others come directly from other public school districts; and several come from private school or home schooling situations. When asked why they chose to teach in a charter school, the following general comments were offered: (1) freedom and flexibility; (2) family teaching and learning atmosphere; (3) increased decision-making; (4) dedicated staff; and (5) enhanced accountability.

When asked what was negative about working in a charter school, comments focused on a lack of resources, inadequate facilities, fear of long-term burn-out and stress because of the demands of working with higher numbers of at-risk students, and the need for teachers to wear many hats (both as teachers and decisionmakers). Low salaries were not mentioned. When asked about this, nearly all teachers responding noted that "they didn't go into teaching for the money." Despite the negatives, many charter school teachers commented that they felt like professionals for the first time in their

teaching careers. At this point, one can only speculate on whether these findings will occur in all charter schools, and whether this level of commitment (despite lower salaries in some cases) can continue indefinitely.

Other Visible Impacts

Beyond preliminary data focused on the students, teachers and parents within charter schools, data on other impacts also are beginning to surface. These include both "ripple" effects across the system (as reflected by the quote above), and more effective resource allocation.¹⁴

Regarding "ripple" effects, charter schools are intended not only to serve their immediate students, but also to help initiate changes within the broader system as well. Several examples illustrate that this is beginning to occur. One Minnesota district began offering a Montessori-type program after parents sought to establish such a program under the charter law. Several Colorado local school districts also approved alternative or special-focus schools shortly after the enactment of their state's charter school legislation.¹⁵ Parents and teacher-supporters of these programs had long been advocating for district action without success and believe the pressure of a potential charter school forced their local districts to act. Other district officials now are telling their staffs to "treat our parents and students more like customers."

Successes in allocating larger portions of a given school's budget toward instructional activities also are surfacing. A good example is Vaughn Next Century Learning Center. Under the leadership of a dynamic principal, the school ended the year with a \$1 million surplus (out of an initial \$4.6 million budget) during its first year as a charter school, *after* lowering class sizes and restoring a districtwide teacher pay cut. These funds were used in part to purchase and raze two adjacent crack houses and to build additional classrooms. Sound fiscal management in conjunction with private contracting for some services helped accomplish this task.

Another example involves the Johnson Urban League Charter School in San Diego which found it could procure food services much cheaper than the local district, which freed up additional funds for classroom instruction.

What About Problems?

A number of reports have documented the many struggles faced by people attempting to operate a charter school (although to date, only one charter school — Los Angeles-based Edutrain — has had its charter revoked for financial mismanagement). The recent Hudson Institute report categorizes key issues as follows: (1) inadequate capital funding and facilities, (2) cash flow problems and the difficulty of securing credit, (3) a large number of laws and regulations (and paperwork reporting) which continue to be required of charter schools, (4) struggles in obtaining local board sponsorship, (5) difficulties managing the business side of the schools and (6) inadequate planning time for many. The Spring 1995 ECS survey of operating charter schools affirmed that the biggest barriers in starting a charter school have been the lack of start-up funds, other finances, and problems related to facilities.

Lawsuits also continue to exist. In Michigan, the initial charter school was found to have violated the state constitution in part because it usurped the state board's power to oversee public education. In Massachusetts, a lower court has upheld the constitutionality of that law, while in Colorado a decision is carefully awaited. These actions are forcing policymakers to review their state's constitution as charter school laws are crafted.

Finally, many states are finding that charter schools are costing them more than originally anticipated. A key reason is that a number of private school and home-schooled students are being attracted back into the public system through these charter schools. Other costs are due to funding formula "quirks" and unclear legislation. Although nearly every charter school is operating with less funding than that available for traditional public school districts, there is often a net increase in cost to the state.

What Does the Future Hold for Charter Schools?

No one knows for sure. On one hand, stronger charter school legislation continues to be at the top of many legislators' education reform agendas, and the number of charter schools — as well as their success stories — continues to grow. On the other hand, the opposing forces continue to be strong, and many charter school operators are becoming weary in their efforts to overcome the barriers inherent in operating a highly accountable school and in battling the opposition.

Even if charter schools win the political battle, other questions remain. Can they continue to overcome the economic disadvantages of being small and being required to operate within financing systems designed to fund districts, not schools? Are the teachers being attracted to charter schools adequately prepared to work successfully with the many at-risk students being served? Are too many charter schools being approved and implemented without adequate long-term planning and evaluation? Can a small number of charter schools really influence the broader system of more than 85,000 public schools?

Despite these lingering questions, preliminary data show that charter schools continue to hold great promise for America's public education system. They appear to be successfully educating a number of students, and encouraging reforms to occur within some districts. They are serving as powerful tools for many policymakers, educators, parents and community leaders who believe that long-held traditions and structures surrounding public education need serious reexamination. And, although charter schools are not a panacea, many people believe they are an important component of long-term education reform efforts.

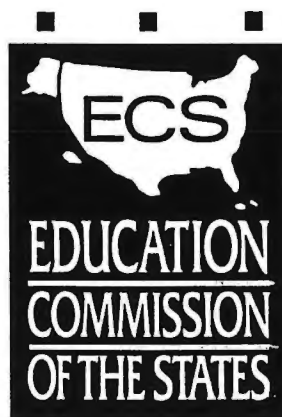
Table 6: Initial 20 Charter School Laws: Analysis of "Stronger" Components

	AZ (94)	DE (95)	NH (95)	MA (93)	MI (94)	TX ^a (95)	CA (92)	NJ (96)	MN (91)	CO (93)	LA (95)	WI ^b (93)	HI (94)	WY (95)	NM (93)	RI (95)	GA (93)	KS (94)	AR (95)	AK (95)
	----- Stronger -----										----- Weaker -----									
1 Non-local board sponsor available OR Appeal process exists"	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x					x	x				
2) Any individual or group can attempt to organize a charter proposal	x	x	x	x	x	d	x	f	x	x	x	x		x				x		x
3) Automatic exemptions from most state laws/rules & local policies	x	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	h	x							
4) Fiscal Autonomy - school has complete control over funds generated by their student count (including salaries)	x	x	x	x	x	x	e	f	x	g	x		x							
5) Legal Autonomy (e.g., teachers are employees of school, not local district) OR the charter (not the law) determines the level of legal autonomy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	f	x	g	x									
6) No (or very high) limits on the number of charter schools which can be formed (compared to total population)	x	x	x		x			x		x		x	x	x			x		x	
7) Some % non-certified individuals can teach at charter school (w/out having to seek a waiver or alt. certification)	x	b	x	x	c	x	x				x									
Total "Stronger" Components	7	7	7	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	5	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1

- a "Stronger" charter school law components are those which are most true to the charter school concept, challenge the status quo aspects of the system, and theoretically may lead to broader student impacts and ripple effects. Component #1 (availability of non-local board sponsorship or appeal) is considered a vital component in order to get an adequate number of charter schools started.
- b In Delaware, up to 35% noncertified teachers may be utilized if no qualified alternative certification program exists (and presently there is no such program in the state).
- c In Michigan, the issue of automatic law exemptions is still unclear, and certification is required except in university-sponsored schools wherein higher education faculty can teach.
- d Based upon "open enrollment" charter school portion of Texas' charter school bill. Eligible organizers are limited to public or private higher ed. institutions, a non-profit, or a governmental entity.
- e California's charter schools are allowed by law to be legally and fiscally autonomous, but this depends upon the provisions of a given school's charter.
- f In New Jersey, any teacher or parent within a district may themselves, or in conjunction with any in-state higher education institution or private entity, establish a charter school; such schools are eligible for at least 90% of the local levy budget per pupil; and district collective bargaining provisions automatically apply to converted public schools, while salaries within new charter schools must fall within the range established by the district in which the school is located.
- g Legally, Colorado's charter schools are to remain a part of the local school and to receive at least 80% of their funds; in practice, however, many are operating quite autonomously.
- h In Wisconsin, charters school are automatically exempt from most state laws and rules, not local board policies. Also, recently enacted provisions strengthen the law for potential charter schools within the Milwaukee district only in that such schools can become legally and financially autonomous, and have access to an appeal process involving the new state secretary of education.

End Notes

1. Two nationally based studies were recently launched. The first is a two-year study funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts Foundation, in which Hudson Institute-affiliated researchers are conducting case studies of 35 charter schools across seven states. The study began Summer 1995 and preliminary findings entitled "Charter Schools in Action: A First Look" (January, 1996), can be obtained by faxing a request to the Hudson Institute's Washington Office at (202) 223-9226. The second study is a four-year, federally funded study being conducted by RPP International, a research firm based in Berkeley, California. Having begun Fall, 1995, these researchers are charged to collect achievement data as part of a comparison between charter school students and non-charter school students. No preliminary data are yet available.
2. Numerous briefs profile the differences between what can be considered "stronger" and "weaker" charter school laws. See, for example, ECS Clearinghouse Brief on Charter Schools (September 1995).
3. C. Grutzik, B. Bernal, D. Hirshberg and A. Stuart Wells. "Resources and Access in California Charter Schools: A Preliminary Overview," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California., April, 1995. Note, this preliminary research has been met with significant criticism; see E. Premack, "Who Benefits from California's Charter Schools Legislation?" Berkeley, California: Institute for Policy Analysis and Research, 1996.
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