



GAO Report on Privately Managed Schools is Limited in Scope and Findings

CER Analysis
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The General Accounting Office recently released a "Comparison of Achievement Results for Students Attending Privately Managed and Traditional Schools in Six Cities." The report's main finding is that no significant difference exists between privately managed schools and traditional public schools. Some privately managed schools perform better; some perform worse, while others equal the performance of their traditional public school counterparts. However, a review of the report by CER researchers reveals that there are a number of problems that are readily apparent, including:

- The sample size for this study is 14 charter schools in six cities, which is too small statistically to make strong scientific determinations about all privately managed schools.
- The 14 privately managed schools were compared with 2 or more traditional public schools in each of the six respective cities. The traditional public schools used as comparisons included some magnet schools. The report says, "In St. Paul, traditional public schools closely matching the privately managed schools included magnet schools and neighborhood, that is, attendance-zone schools. The two "best" matching magnet schools and the two "best" neighborhood schools were selected as matches for the analysis." In Cleveland, former magnet schools were used.
- Schools representing only six private management companies were used in their report, even though they state that there were 47 private management companies at the time of the study.
- The study uses publicly available information on student achievement in privately managed schools. Their sources include various Internet Web sites.

The GAO makes several admissions of the limitations of their analysis, including;

- "GAO's results are limited to the schools and grade levels examined and may not be indicative of performance at other schools."
- "Our study is constrained to varying degrees by incomplete data from some locations and by the lack of information on the reasons that individual students enrolled."
- "Differences in school performance at any particular grade might be due to differences in the students in that grade, as the reports released by the Leona Group warned, rather than due to factors related to management or educational strategies of the school. For this reason, report cards, while useful to parents, are not the best source of information if the goal is to evaluate the effectiveness of one school compared with another"
- "Descriptive information about achievement in these schools was widely available in the form of individual school report cards that often provided comparisons with state or district averages, but often not with similar traditional schools.
- "Answering this kind of evaluative question requires a different kind of methodology and more complex analyses to isolate the effects of the particular strategies of interest-educational practices, management techniques, and so on- from many other factors that could affect student achievement.
- "Finally our mixed results may be evidence of the complexity of the factor under study."

The GAO, to their credit, does note the importance of a parent's use of information to make sound choices for their children's education. "As opportunities increase for parents to exercise choice in the public education arena, information on school performance, such as that found in school reports produced by many states becomes more important." The key underlying principle continues to be that school choice promotes competition, which is beneficial to all schools whether privately managed or traditionally funded. Competition raises the bar across the board and offers parents the freedom of choice when it comes to the educational future of their children. For more information about the condition of charter schools, their achievement and their progress, consult the following sources:

The Center for Education Reform's [Charter Schools Today: A Record of Success](#) Makinac Center for Public Policy, <http://www.mackinac.org/> Pacific Research Institute, www.pacificresearch.org South Carolina Policy Council, www.scpolicycouncil.com The



Center for School Change, www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/school-change The Milken Family
Foundation, www.mff.org The Friedman Foundation, www.friedmanfoundation.org

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