HOT TOPIC
Charter schools continue to be a contentious issue on Capitol Hill. There are now some 2,700 charter schools in the 38 states that have passed charter laws. Supporters argue that charter schools can improve student achievement, give families more choice, encourage innovation, and put competitive pressure on conventional public schools to improve. But hard data on how charter schools operate and perform are sparse. A RAND report released July 1, Charter School Operations and Performance: Evidence from California, by Ron Zimmer and colleagues, provides new evidence on charter schools. The report is based on a comprehensive review of charters in California (which constitute one-fourth of the nation’s charter schools).

**Go to Charter School Operations and Performance**

Overall, the study finds reason for cautious optimism about charter schools: Charter schools in California are generally doing as well as conventional public schools in promoting student achievement in reading and mathematics, even though many charter schools struggle to acquire facilities, employ less-credentialed and less-experienced teachers, and receive less public revenue. Specific findings include the following:

- Test scores for students in start-up charter schools are slightly higher, on average, than those of similar students in conventional public schools.
- In contrast, students in nonclassroom charter schools have significantly lower average test scores than students in conventional public schools.
- The researchers suggest, however, that these differences among types of charter schools should be interpreted cautiously. Unmeasured differences in student characteristics could lead to either overestimating or underestimating the effectiveness of different types of charter schools.

Charter schools, particularly start-up schools, generally have fewer resources than conventional public schools. This is largely due to lower participation in categorical programs, such as the state’s transportation funding program and the federal Title I program.

Charter school teachers have less experience and fewer teaching credentials than those in public schools, but they are more likely to participate in informal professional development.

**Recommendations**
The authors provide recommendations for improving the governance and accountability of charter schools:

- Implement a statewide data system to track the achievement of individual students longitudinally so poorly performing schools can be targeted for focused intervention.
- Require chartering authorities to collect and monitor fiscal information from charter schools to enhance fiscal oversight and to better address questions of relative efficiency.
- Find ways to ensure that charters have access to funding that is equivalent to that of conventional public schools (for example, by providing information on eligibility for programs or modifying the block grants provided to charter schools).
- Conduct research to determine the reasons for the low achievement of students in nonclassroom-based charters.

**PROJECT UNDERWAY**
Scaling up mathematics reform in four districts (jointly with the University of Pittsburgh).

RAND EDUCATION conducts research on a wide range of topics in education. Our mission is to bring accurate data and careful, objective analysis to the national debate on education policy. To access all of our research, please visit our web site at [www.rand.org/education](http://www.rand.org/education).