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STATEMENT ON THE OFFICIAL RELEASE OF THE 2003 NAEP CHARTER SCHOOL RESULTS

*Statement delivered by AFT's Bella Rosenberg at a panel discussion and workshop on
"America's Charter Schools: Results from the NAEP 2003 Pilot Study"
on Dec. 15, 2004*

On behalf of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and F. Howard Nelson and Nancy Van Meter, who, along with me, co-authored the AFT's August 2004 report in which the 2003 NAEP results for charter schools were unofficially released, I appreciate the National Assessment Governing Board's (NAGB) graciousness in inviting me to speak on the occasion of its official release of those results. I am particularly moved because it was the AFT, under its late president, Albert Shanker, that gave charter schools their first public face – a kinder, gentler and more honest face than the ideological one now most in evidence.

Let me also thank NAGB for taking the public information concerns we raised in our report seriously and moving up the release date for the official report. We are especially pleased that today also marks the public release of the results of the NAEP Charter School Survey Questionnaire, which were not available on the NAEP Data Tool when we prepared our August report. As you can see from the items that were included in the official NAEP report, and as I will highlight shortly, the Questionnaire results we pressed for turned out to be every bit as important as we had surmised.

We also applaud the decision to release the Questionnaire data before the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) releases its special explanatory analysis, which would have further delayed public access to the Questionnaire results. Now, independent researchers and other interested parties, along with the government, can also analyze these data -- a move that furthers the prospects for sound and open public discourse on charter schools.

So, after all the dustup about a report that straightforwardly, accurately, and fairly presented unofficial NAEP charter school results, how is the official NAEP report different from ours? In terms of the substantive results, not at all (with the one exception I'll soon discuss). Nonetheless, the official report deserves even closer attention because the new information it provides from the full sample and from the results of the Questionnaire – again, neither of which was publicly available when we prepared our report – indicates that there is even more reason to be disappointed and troubled by charter school performance than the unofficial NAEP results indicated.¹

When the AFT published its report last August, prominent charter school advocates responded to the typically poorer NAEP results for charter schools relative to other public schools mainly by arguing that charter schools educate the most disadvantaged of disadvantaged youngsters. The fact that AFT's report included breakdowns by poverty, race and ethnicity, and central-city location – every fair comparison that the NAEP Data Tool allowed – either was ignored by the critics or dismissed as being insufficient for capturing this most-disadvantaged-of-the-disadvantaged phenomenon.

¹ See page 3 of the official report for an explanation of the differences in the sample and other information available in this report and the sample available to us on the NAEP Data Tool. We are grateful to NCES and NAGB for including this explanation in the body of their report.

Indeed, like everything else, the NAEP Data Tool and NAEP itself have limitations.² Curiously, however, our critics utterly dismissed the statistically significant underperformance of low-income charter school students relative to their peers in regular public schools but were virtually ebullient over our finding that there was no significant difference between the poor performance of minority students in charter and other public schools. Whether this jubilation was caused by the “soft bigotry of low expectations,” the unseemly assumption that racial and ethnic minorities are all poor or, ipso facto, hard to educate, or by forgetfulness that charter schools were built on the promise of doing better than other public schools with these students, I leave to others to decide. What is clear, however, is that the allegation that charter schools educate the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged, let alone do a better job of it, gets even less support from the official NAEP report than it did in the preliminary NAEP results.³

First, the new NAEP data reveal that charter schools do *not* educate a disproportionate percentage of low-income (free/reduced-price lunch eligible) students after all. Indeed, the percent of low-income students in charter schools fell from 54 percent in the NAEP sample reported on by the AFT to 42 percent in the fuller sample – two percentage points *lower* than the percentage in other public schools. Yet even though charter and regular public schools turn out to have about the same percentage of low-income students, the results from the preliminary NAEP sample are echoed in the official report: Low-income charter school students perform significantly worse than their peers in other public schools in both math and reading; moreover, the *average* performance of charter schools is significantly worse than other public schools in math and, as we shall soon see, in reading, as well. If educating the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged is a legitimate explanation for poor relative performance, it is not an explanation that charter schools are in much of a position to make.⁴

Second, it also turns out that charter schools enroll a statistically significant lower proportion of special education students than regular public schools do (and almost certainly students with milder disabilities). Because special education students, on average, are the lowest-scoring students, their low representation in charter schools further undercuts the claim that these schools are educating the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged.

Indeed, as Table A-1, which is buried in the appendix of the official NAEP report, indicates, when you break down the average reading comparison – the only one of our significantly lower NAEP charter school results that was not replicated in the official report – by excluding special education students, the statistical significance of the lower reading score of charter school students relative to other public school students is restored.

Third, it also turns out that charter school enrollment is not quite as concentrated in central-city schools after all. In the fuller sample, the proportion of charter school students in urban charter schools fell from our sample’s average of 62 percent to 50 percent. While this is still significantly higher than the proportion of other public school students attending urban public schools, it also indicates that charter schools are today just as likely to locate in areas without disproportionately high concentrations of “hard-to-educate” students as they are to locate in central cities.

If anything, then, the new data provide even clearer evidence that, far from educating the most disadvantaged of the disadvantaged, charter schools are doing a poorer job with a student body

² The release of the 2003 NAEP restricted users data set will help alleviate these limitations.

³ For additional evidence undermining the claim that charter schools educate the most disadvantaged of disadvantaged students, see Jack Buckley, Mark Schneider, and Yi Shang, “Are Charter School Students Harder to Educate? Evidence from Washington, D.C.” <http://www.ncspe.org/list-papers.php>

⁴ Tables A-4 and A-9 in the Appendix also reveal that 91-92 percent of charter school students are in schools that report that they serve a “general student population” rather than a “special student target population.” While these phrases are open to interpretation, the results further undermine the claim that charter schools primarily target and serve at-risk students.

that is slightly less poor and has a significantly lower percentage of special education students than the student body found in other public schools. As for the statistically insignificant achievement differences both reports found between racial and ethnic minorities in charter and other public schools, when charter schools are disproportionately located in central cities and yet do *not* have disproportionately more low- income students than other public schools do *on average* -- but do have a disproportionately *lower* percentage of special education students -- there is good reason to suspect that the racial and ethnic minority students in charter schools are, if not less disadvantaged than their peers in other public schools, then at least no more disadvantaged.⁵ We look forward to the opportunities that the release of the full NAEP data set will allow for performing cross-tabulations to shed light on this important question.

Another major line of argument we heard about the “meaninglessness” of the unofficial NAEP results was that they revealed nothing about how long charter schools had been in operation, which was true enough since the Questionnaire results that could address this were not publicly available. According to this argument, most charter schools are new schools, which need a few years to get up to speed, so it is understandable that charter school students would do worse on NAEP. It is therefore worth examining what the Questionnaire results reveal.

As the tables in the Appendix demonstrate, the argument does not hold water. Students in charter schools that were open for a longer time did no better than students in newer charter schools.⁶ Nor does it turn out that the majority of charter school students are in newer schools; two out of three charter school students in the sample were in charter schools that had been providing instruction for at least four years.

The Questionnaire results also deliver a blow to the theoretical underpinnings of the prevailing charter school movement. Charter schools pledged to produce superior achievement results in return for greater autonomy, the theory being that freedom from rules and regulations and the creation of a competitive environment would unleash the creativity and productivity now presumably absent in regular public schools. Our report could only shed preliminary light on this subject, by looking at performance in states with “strong” or “weak” charter school laws, according to the criteria of the Center for Education Reform (CER). The official report casts a more comprehensive shadow.

Consistent with our results, the new NAEP data show that the more autonomy a charter school has, the worse it does. Students in charter schools that were authorized by and part of a school district posted average results that were indistinguishable from those of their peers in regular public schools. In contrast, students in charter schools that were not chartered by a school district and that operated as their own school district had the worst performance among charter school students and also achieved at a significantly lower level than students in other public schools. Students in charter schools run by educational management organizations (EMOs), which enrolled about one-third of charter school students in the NAEP sample, performed no better than other charter schools.

Last but not least is the information on teachers this report provides, which, previously, also could not be accessed. In charter and other public schools, regular certification is associated with higher achievement. Not surprisingly, students in charter schools were less likely to be taught by regularly certified than students in other public schools (66-69 percent vs. 90 percent). Although charter school students taught by either type of teacher scored lower than other public school

⁵ Also see Buckley et al.

⁶ Buried in a footnote of the report that the U.S. Department of Education released as a result of a FOIA request by the *New York Times* is a similar finding from a different data set: There was no difference in the performance of newer and more established charter schools. Kara Finnigan et al, “Evaluation of the Public Charter Schools Program: Final Report,” Wash., DC.: SRI International (prepared for the U.S. Department of Education), 2004.

students with either type of teacher, the difference was not statistically significant. The abysmal results for charter school students taught by teachers with no teaching credentials (9-12 percent) – there were no such students in the regular public school sample – speak for themselves.

Charter school students were also twice as likely as other public school students to have teachers with 0-4 years of experience (43 and 42 percent vs. 23 percent). Both for charter and other public school students, having more-experienced teachers was associated with higher achievement. Yet the negative impact of inexperienced teachers was significantly worse for charter school students than it was for other public school students.

If the official 2003 NAEP charter school report and Questionnaire results, along with the corroborating evidence that has been amassed over the years, does not cause policymakers to re-examine the misleading claims and specious theories of the charter school movement, it is hard to imagine what will. True, NAEP does not measure growth, which, according to the U.S. Secretary of Education and CER, for example, renders NAEP scientifically suspect when it reports on charter schools but not apparently when it reports on other public schools, which it has been doing since 1969. But if charter schools produced higher achievement growth, we would expect that students in charter schools that were in operation the longest to perform better than their peers in newer charter schools, and they did not on NAEP. Moreover, Helen Ladd and Robert Bifulco's comprehensive study of charter schools in North Carolina did directly measure growth by tracking the same children over time, and, if anything, its results deal a bigger blow to charter school claims than NAEP does.⁷

When Chester Finn learned the unofficial NAEP charter school results from the *New York Times* prior to their publication in the newspaper, he reacted to the findings by commenting that charter schools needed a dose of tough love. That is still sound advice.

According to CER, there are about a million youngsters in charter schools. The evidence is strong that far too many of them are paying a heavy price for policymakers having dropped the ball on charter school oversight. While no doubt there are some outstanding charter schools, the evidence indicates that most charter schools are doing worse than our much-maligned regular public schools. If charter schools are supposed to “rescue” children trapped in so-called failing public schools, who will rescue the children trapped in demonstrably more failing charter schools?

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⁷ “Student Achievement in Charter Schools,” <http://www.pubpol.duke.edu/people/faculty/ladd>.