**Should West Contra Costa Unified School District try to get more charter schools?**

**Background information**

Charter schools are elementary or secondary schools in the United States that receive public money from taxpayers but have been freed from some of the rules that apply to other public schools in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results. While charter schools provide an alternative to other public schools, they are part of the public education system and are not allowed to charge tuition. If space at a charter school is limited, if more people want to attend the school than there are spots, admission is allocated by lottery. Some charter schools provide a curriculum that specializes in a certain field-- e.g. arts, mathematics, etc. Others simply seek to provide a better and more efficient general education than nearby public schools.

**YES**

"Compared with students in traditional schools, charter school students are doing significantly better in math and English, according to the analysis by researchers from Harvard and MIT."

In some grades, the results of the study - which compares students who won a charter school spot in the student-selection lotteries used by oversubscribed charters with those who lost out - are dramatic.

The magnitude of improvement jumps out when students who got a lottery slot for the sixth grade are compared with those who did not. Both groups began at the same performance point, slightly above the Boston public school average.

"By eighth grade, though, the lottery winners on average were scoring well above the average performance of most Boston public school students in math," says study leader Thomas Kane, professor of education and economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "But the lottery losers, who mostly went back to the traditional public schools in Boston, were still only slightly above the Boston public school average."

The charter results weren't as pronounced at all grade levels, but they were consistently strong.

The research team also compared students in the traditional public schools with those of similar backgrounds who went to charters, an observational method that showed significant gains as well.

"[W]e generally find large positive learning effects for Charter Schools, at both the middle school and high school levels," the authors write.

**NO**

The charter school movement began with the tantalizing promise that independently operated schools would outperform their traditional counterparts — if they could only be freed from state regulations while receiving public money. It hasn't quite worked out that way. With about 40 states having charter schools, and with thousands of charter schools up and running, the problem has turned out to be too little state oversight, not too much.

Even states with disastrously low-performing charter systems can point to a handful of outstanding schools. But several studies have shown that on the whole, charter schools perform no better than other public schools. Beyond that, some states have opened so many charter programs so quickly that they can barely count them, let alone monitor student performance. Where charters have clearly failed, the states often lack a process for closing them down.

So far, the national experience with charter schools shows that they are not a magical solution to the problem of low levels of student achievement. The only way to improve public schooling is to provide well-trained teachers and orderly schools, and to monitor them to make sure that the students are actually learning. To save the charter movement, the states will need to abandon the strategy that consists largely of giving public money to what are basically private schools and then looking the other way.