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U.S. Cutting Back on Details in Data About Charter Schools

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 27 - The Department of Education is sharply cutting back on the information it collects about charter schools for a periodic report that provides a detailed national profile of public, private and charter schools.

Confirmation of the change, originally relayed in an e-mail message to a university professor, came on Wednesday from a spokeswoman for the Education Department. Last week, the first national comparison of test scores showed students in charter schools largely trailing comparable students in traditional public schools.

The federal report, known as the Schools and Staffing Survey, provides a wealth of information about charter schools, including the location and number of such schools, their share of low-income students, the qualifications of principals and teachers and the ratio of teachers to students.

In the future, however, the National Center for Education Statistics, which conducts the survey, will cover only a random sample of about 300 charter schools.

In an e-mail message, Susan Aspey, a spokeswoman for the Education Department, said the decision to switch to a random sample had been made in the first year of the Bush administration "for technical reasons."

"There is nothing sinister or untoward about this," Ms. Aspey wrote, adding, "We are absolutely not cutting back on collecting information on charter schools."

Education researchers who focus on charter schools, some of whom rely on the survey for their work, said the change would limit what they could learn about charter schools at a pivotal moment in their growth.

"If we're going to get to the bottom of the lower performance of charter students, we need to understand how the quality of charters differs from public schools," said Bruce Fuller, an education professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

Charters are self-governed schools that operate independent of local school boards, but with public money. They vary widely in style, focus and performance, including some that emphasize music or art, foreign languages, or rigorous academic programs.

The most recent survey, published in 2002, provides profiles of all 1,010 charter schools that federal researchers found operating for the two academic years ending in spring 2000. With it, researchers have been able to analyze types of charter schools, comparing the qualifications of teachers at urban charter schools, for example, with those at regular public schools or at other charters in the suburbs.

But in an e-mail message to Dr. Fuller, Kerry Gruber, the author, wrote that for the next survey, researchers had canvassed a random sample of about 10 percent of about 3,000 charter schools. Doing so allows for national comparisons, she said, but not for more extended analyses of specific types of charters.

In explaining the change, Ms. Gruber wrote that a government-financed telephone survey that researchers used to locate charter schools had not been updated since 1997. The national center also switched its methodology to include visiting each charter school in the sample. The "cost of going to the full universe of charter schools was exorbitant," she wrote.

The change does not affect data for traditional public and private schools, which have always been surveyed using a random sample.

While charter schools currently account for a sliver of the nation's 88,000 public schools, they are likely to grow tremendously under the federal No Child Left Behind Education Act, which prescribes conversion to charters as a remedy for chronically failing traditional schools.

Helen Ladd, a professor of public policy studies at Duke University, used the federal survey for a study that found that parents of children in charters were generally more involved in school activities than were parents of students in other public schools. "Having the full sample of charter schools was essential for that type of work," Dr. Ladd said.

Dr. Ladd said that the Education Department might have sound practical reasons for no longer surveying all schools, but that given its support for charter schools, "we need to learn as much as we can about them, and for that we need good data."

Last week, Rod Paige, the education secretary, challenged the latest results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which showed students in charter schools

behind those in regular public schools. Dr. Paige contended that charters were not monolithic and said the results should be analyzed in greater detail.

Other advocates of charter schools say that those schools take in children who are below average academically to begin with, and that the national assessment offered only a snapshot of achievement at one point in time.