Hollywood and hip-hop have discovered charter schools. In June, A-list stars including Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and Jon Stewart performed at a fundraiser for a New York City charter school sponsored by the Robin Hood Foundation, whose board includes actress Gwyneth Paltrow. Singer Alicia Keys performed last year at the Betty Shabazz International Charter School in Chicago, where actor Danny Glover has also made an appearance. Rapper 50 (“Fiddy”) Cent recently helped launch a Houston charter school for Katrina victims, and actor Robin Williams, singer John Mayer, and TV’s Dr. Phil McGraw aided tennis star Andre Agassi in raising money for the Nevada charter school Agassi founded.

What is the allure of charter schools for celebrities? For one, the schools need the money; a report last year from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute showed that the average charter school receives 80 cents on the dollar compared to traditional public schools.

The immense interest indicated by web searches translated into serious benefits for KIPP, as Steve Mancini, KIPP’s spokesperson, explained. “Oprah has a large and loyal national audience. Student enrollment jumped up at many KIPP schools after Oprah’s TV profile because parents saw elements of KIPP that excited them—articulate students, inspired and dedicated teachers, and a nationwide track record of results with kids.” Teacher applications and volunteer offers also accelerated after the show.

Apparently it was positive print coverage that first led the Oprah folks to KIPP. Do news stories also translate into greater public interest, at least as measured by Internet searches? In October 2005, the New York Times ran a column by David Brooks that mentioned KIPP, and in June 2006 it ran a news story featuring the program. Yet, on these dates, the Google Trends data show nary a blip. And in May 2004, KIPP was featured on the CBS Early Show. That appearance didn’t lead to much new interest, either.

What’s the lesson? If charter school networks and other retail-level education reforms want to attract the attention of potential clients, teachers, or donors, nothing beats the glitz and reach of talk and entertainment shows—and no one is bigger than Oprah. News stories—in print or on the air—might occasionally pave the way for TV appearances, but their reliable value is in reaching elite audiences such as editorial writers and policymakers.

Long-term charter school success will require both growing consumer demand for individual schools and support in principle from governors and legislatures. Even if some standout charters find themselves on television, that alone is unlikely to translate into greater support for charters as a reform idea. Take the Oprah episode. Famously, no one articulated the words “charter school” on the show—the term is much too wonky for Oprah’s audience. There was no spike in Google searches for “charter schools” (the bottom line in the graph) after the show aired, even though KIPP and most of the other schools featured were charters.

As long as celebrity attention brings cash and publicity to star charters like KIPP, it’s all good. But hangin’ with the stars is no substitute for the hard work of ed reform; Fiddy and his posse are unlikely to start rapping about better charter-school policy anytime soon.