



House should OK more charter schools

By James A. Peyser

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When the first charter schools opened their doors in 1995, virtually no one in Massachusetts even knew what a charter school was. Since then, charter school enrollment has grown from 2,500 to 12,500, and there is now evidence that the success of this fledgling school reform effort has generated widespread public support.

According to a telephone survey of 500 people conducted last month by Opinion Dynamics Corporation, 60 percent of Massachusetts residents favor increasing the number of charter schools. The poll also shows that charter school supporters outnumber opponents by two-to-one.

The survey's findings are important and timely, because the Massachusetts House of Representatives is preparing to take up a bill that would almost double the number of charter schools over the next five years.

Charter schools are independently managed public schools, authorized by the state Board of Education, that are free of local bureaucratic restrictions and union work rules that plague district schools. Current law caps the number of so-called Commonwealth charters at 37, all of which have already been granted. Last year the State Senate approved legislation that would increase the cap by seven charter schools per year over a five-year period.

The level of statewide support for charter schools is impressive, but of equal importance is how consistent this support is across different segments of the population. A solid majority of those polled in each region of the state favored more charter schools. Support for charter schools among liberals and conservatives was virtually identical. Charter school support was strong among adults with school-age children and adults without school-age children. Across the spectrum of income, race, and religion, charter school supporters overwhelmed opponents. Charter schools even came out ahead among people who are in a labor union or who are related to a union member.

According to the survey, among the strongest supporters of more charter schools were Boston residents (72 percent in favor) and people with family income below \$35,000 per year (67 percent in favor). These figures are telling, because they confirm who benefits most from charter schools. About two-thirds of charter school students live in cities and almost 40 percent come from low-income families.

Charter schools offer options for many poor, urban parents who can't afford private school tuition or a house in the suburbs. These new public schools are not exclusive enclaves for the state's elite. To the contrary, they represent meaningful educational options for people who would otherwise have none.

Definitive data on aggregate charter school performance are not yet in. Results of the first two administrations of MCAS, the statewide assessment of student achievement, show charter school students with a slight performance edge over their district counterparts. But the difference is modest and it is too early to identify any meaningful trends. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence of high academic performance at many charter schools to warrant a moderate expansion of the program.

Why do we need more charter schools? There are several reasons. First, there is a large and growing demand among parents for more and better school options. When the first charter schools opened in 1995, there were two applicants for every available seat. Now that ratio is five-to-one.

Second, it is in everyone's best interests to continue to offer opportunities for credible people with fresh ideas to enrich the public education system. To improve student outcomes we need to consistently attract new talent with a commitment to educational excellence. One way to do this is to remove obstacles that deter bright people from becoming teachers or school leaders within the existing system. Another way, is to provide opportunities for talented, committed people to start new schools.

Finally, one of the great benefits of charter schools is the stimulus for change they provide to the larger system of public schools. Unfortunately, the power of charter schools to drive broader reform depends on their ability to gather momentum. If charter schools become static they will be too easy to dismiss or ignore as the larger system adjusts to a slightly modified status quo. It is only through their potential for growth that their dynamic effect can be fully realized.

The House has an opportunity to keep the Commonwealth in the forefront of innovative school reform by voting to raise the cap on charter schools. An overwhelming majority of Massachusetts citizens are hoping they will do just that.

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