

# Charter school foes lose wiggle room

By Charles D. Chieppo

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One by one, the arguments used by charter school opponents are systematically proven false. But like snakes shedding their skin, they move on to the next specious argument without skipping a beat.

The first argument was that charter schools — independently managed public schools that are accountable directly to the state — would impoverish the districts in which they operate. When a student chooses to attend a charter school, the average per-pupil expenditure is deducted from the sending district's funding and allocated to the charter school in which the student is enrolled.

Unfortunately for charter school opponents, a Pioneer Institute study found that due to the unprecedented infusion of new money pumped into public education by the commonwealth's 1993 Education Reform Act, per-pupil funding actually increased for every school district in which a charter school was located.

Next came the claim that children from wealthier, better-educated families would be disproportionately represented in charter schools. Despite the fact that students are chosen by lot since virtually every charter school is oversubscribed, the theory was that disadvantaged parents — many of them minorities — would be less likely to take advantage of the options available for their children.

Wrong again. An Opinion Dynamics survey of parents in six Massachusetts cities found that, on average, charter school parents had less education and lower incomes than district school parents from the same districts.

Now comes a study from Citizens for Public Schools (CPS) that claims charter schools will cost Massachusetts taxpayers \$175 million in fiscal 2002. But a closer look shows that the majority of that \$175 million funds the public education of the very same students it would regardless of the existence of charter schools. It simply represents money that follows a student from a district school to the

charter school he or she attends and doesn't affect a district's per-pupil funding in any way.

What is disturbing is that almost \$33 million of the \$175 million pays for reimbursements to school districts that have lost students to charter schools. Prior to the opening of the first Massachusetts charter schools in 1995, the Legislature caved to pressure from teachers unions and other special interests and amended the original legislation to reimburse districts for students who leave to attend charter schools. Today, a school district is reimbursed for three years — at 100 percent, 60 percent, and 40 percent — for students they lose to charter schools.

The report then goes on to claim that overall spending on charter schools is about \$13,000 per student, nearly double district school spending. But that number also includes reimbursements to school districts for students they no longer educate. The facts tell a very different story.

In charter schools, the same per-pupil funding that districts use solely for operating costs must stretch to finance a building to house the school and pay for pencils, books, and other capitalized expense items. District schools are either given school buildings or new ones are constructed for them and paid for through an archaic and overly generous School Building Assistance Program. Charter schools operate in storefronts, former auto parts stores, and strip malls and are ineligible for SBA.

The methodology of the Citizens for Public Schools report is also interesting, to say the least. Turns out it consists of interviews with public school administrators and municipal officials. That's kind of like asking your neighborhood dry cleaner if they'd like a competing dry cleaner to move in next door.

The group has never understood the concept of competition. They blame charter schools for everything from larger class sizes, to deferred school building maintenance and property tax increases. But the energizing effect of competition is partly responsible for the encouraging increase in MCAS scores this year.

As for charter schools' responsibility for district school financial woes, those districts have received an additional \$7 billion since 1993 and districts that host charter schools have the additional advantage of three years of reimbursements for departed students.

Meanwhile, underfunded, start-up charter schools located in storefronts, auto parts stores, and strip malls have outperformed their host districts every year the MCAS exam has been administered.

Citizens for Public Schools is right; the current system is unjust. It's time to end reimbursements to districts that lose students to charter schools and provide a mechanism to fund charter school capital costs.

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