



## MCAS results settle charter debate

By Charles D. Chioppo

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Anyone with even a passing interest in politics is aware that substance is well down on the list of factors that determine the fate of policy initiatives. In spite of that sad fact, it's hard not to be influenced by how charter schools performed on the most recent MCAS exams.

It's been a long row to hoe since language allowing for the creation of charter schools was included in the commonwealth's 1993 Education Reform Act. At first, opponents claimed that mostly educated, affluent parents would take advantage of the charter school option. As a result, charter schools would educate fewer minority students than their district school counterparts.

Within a few years, research showed that charter school minority enrollments were well above statewide averages. A 1998 survey of parents in six Massachusetts cities found that charter school parents actually earned less and were less educated than those who kept their children in district schools.

With that pretext gone, the debate got down to charter school opponents' real concern: money. When a student chooses to attend a charter school, the average per-pupil funding of the district from which the student comes is transferred from the district to the charter school.

Prior to the opening of the first charter schools in 1995, opponents succeeded in passing legislation to reimburse districts for their losses to charter schools. In recent years, districts were reimbursed 100, 60, and 40 percent each of the first three years a student left for a charter school, shielding districts from the competition that the original legislation was designed to create.

Amid the years of controversy surrounding charter schools comes this new set of MCAS results. Overall, charter schools outperformed the districts from which their students are drawn by an average of 3.7 points on the exams, which are scored on a 200-to-280 scale.

In Boston, five of the top seven performers in terms of combined 10<sup>th</sup> English and math scores were charter schools, with Academy of the Pacific Rim and South Boston Harbor Academy Charter Schools ranking first and second. South Boston Harbor Academy turned up again as top scorer on the 6<sup>th</sup> grade math exam.

The story was much the same in Springfield, where the Sabis International Charter School was the top-scoring high school, outscoring its closest competitor by 25 points on combined 10<sup>th</sup> grade English and math results.

In Lawrence, Community Day and Lawrence Family Development Charter Schools were the highest performers among the city's 11 middle schools on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade math exam.

Lawrence Community Day represents a truly amazing charter school success story. Located in one of the commonwealth's most educationally disadvantaged cities, its 8<sup>th</sup> grade math scores tied for fourth best in the entire state.

Several charter schools earned scores that were second to none. Newburyport's River Valley Charter School and the Hilltown Cooperative Charter School in Williamsburg outperformed all Massachusetts districts on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade English exam, while the Benjamin Franklin Classical Charter School in Franklin had the state's best 4<sup>th</sup> grade math scores.

What makes their performance even more striking is that charter schools achieved these results with fewer taxpayer dollars. Although they receive the same per pupil

funding, charter schools must stretch that revenue to finance a building. District school facilities are paid for out of a separate account and use their funds only for operating expenses.

Earlier this year, a group of legislators attempted to use the current fiscal crisis as a pretext for placing a moratorium on the opening of new charter schools – a curious move, since the only major cost associated with charter schools was the reimbursements to sending school districts. The effort failed, and this summer the reimbursements themselves became a victim of the commonwealth's budget shortfall.

If results matter, these latest MCAS results would spell the end of efforts to kill charter schools. But for charter school opponents, the real issue has always been about money. With the elimination of district reimbursements, the battle may soon be joined once again.

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