



A big chill on school accountability

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By Jamie Gass

Autumn means back-to-school time in the Bay State -- except, perhaps, for the charter school students at Frederick Douglass, Lynn Community, Renaissance Middle, and Roxbury Charter High Public School. In recent years, these charter schools' struggle to stay open wasn't due to the fall cold, but rather, their low performance and the state's selective application of school accountability.

Charter schools are supposed to (and often do) meet higher standards. So, what did these small, experimental schools of a few hundred students do to prompt the Department of Education, the State Board of Education and the Attorney General's office to "non-renew" their charters?

The major failings of these embattled charter schools were that they suffered from low performance across a number of areas: operational budget deficits, governance issues, low enrollment, poor student achievement. These charter schools' failings do not distinguish them from dozens of other public schools and districts in the commonwealth. Yet, the latter remain in operation without consequence.

It seems that two separate and unequal state standards for educational accountability have emerged. Low-performing charters are closed at their five-year renewal period. Meanwhile, large urban districts with a variety of chronically low-performing schools get state funding and technical assistance.

Further, the passing rates on the 2005 MCAS test for charter schools in Boston that have been closed or are in jeopardy of being closed, such as Frederick Douglass and Roxbury Charter High, met or exceeded the passing rates of the Boston Public Schools. In 2005, 63 schools in Boston, 23 in Worcester and 29 in Springfield were placed on the federal No Child Left Behind "watch" list. Curiously, none of these districts has even been declared "underperforming" by the state, yet the number of charter schools in Massachusetts is capped.

Given the state's track record in larger districts, the type of school accountability that animates state officials appears arbitrary. The Springfield Public Schools, which do not even have a districtwide curriculum, received \$1.2 billion in state aid between fiscal 2000 and fiscal 2005. The Worcester Public Schools received \$882 million in state aid between fiscal 2000 and fiscal 2005, while nearly half of its schools were on the federal watch list. Let's not forget the Boston Public Schools, where state examiners recently reported, "Often, the level of the work was considered inappropriate for a particular grade level ... (such as) using 'Charlotte's Web' as a piece of literature in a Grade 10 ELA class."

Can't we agree that greater accountability based on academic achievement is necessary for all public schools and districts in the state? There's an urgent need for rigorous state accountability in every school in Massachusetts, not just for a few fledgling charter schools.

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