

Charter Schools

No. 60 • April 2006

Charter Public Schools and Academic Accountability

Criticism: “The MTA [Massachusetts Teachers Association] further believes that charter schools must contain procedures for regular periodic assessment and evaluation both fiscal and academic.”
—Resolution of the MTA, February 18, 2003, www.massteacher.org.

Basic facts about charter schools

Charter schools are **public schools, free of charge to all students, with enrollment determined by a lottery.** Their aim is to give parents more choices in how their children are educated. Charter schools have the following characteristics:

1. **They serve more than one million students nationwide.** Since the first charter school opened in 1992, the movement has grown to now encompass 3,625 public schools operating in 40 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, and serving over one million students nationwide.¹ Charter public schools are often founded by educators, parents, or community groups who want to tailor an academically rigorous public education to the needs of the students and the communities that they serve. In Massachusetts there are currently 57 charter public schools serving 20,555 students, or two percent of public school students.² In addition, there were 15,823 students on waiting lists for charter public schools in the 2005–06 school year.³
2. **They give educators flexibility to meet students’ needs.** Leaders of semi-autonomous public schools are empowered to innovate. Each school is managed by a board of trustees and has the freedom to adopt and implement a core academic theme, mission, instructional method, curriculum, and educational philosophy. Unlike traditional public schools, charter public schools make their own decisions regarding financial operations and employment choices.
3. **They are held to a higher standard of accountability than district schools.** In Massachusetts, charter public schools operate under a five-year charter granted by the Board of Education.⁴ The charter serves as a written contract between the school founders and the state, and

details how the school will be organized and managed, what students will be taught and expected to achieve, how success will be measured, and, how the school will be held both academically and financially accountable. In exchange for independence, a charter school must produce positive academic results by the end of its five-year contract or risk being closed. Massachusetts ranks first in the nation for the rigor of its charter approval process and is one of six states receiving an “A” for the quality of its charter school law.⁵

The charter school approval process

The Massachusetts charter school law states that any person, group, or entity may apply for a public school charter, with the exception of for-profit companies and private schools. In applying for a charter, the school’s founders must submit an application detailing why the school should be granted a charter. The application details must include the school’s vision, educational philosophy, curriculum, assessment plans, structure, governance, management, facilities, transportation, and student population, including its plans for serving special student groups.⁶ The final application is followed by intensive reviews from a state panel and the local school district, as well as public hearings and interviews with the applicants and the school’s proposed board of trustees. After gathering feedback and documentation from all parties, the Commissioner of Education makes recommendations to the Board of Education, which makes the final decision.

The process for gaining charter approval in Massachusetts is nationally recognized as being extremely rigorous. The state’s charter approval process is one of several reasons why, despite heavy demand from parents, there are only 57 charter public schools operating in the state. The Center for Education Reform’s annual report on the strength of charter school laws ranks Massachusetts sixth out of 41. In 2003, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute published a comprehensive study on the quality of states’ charter authorization processes, in which

www.pioneerinstitute.org

85 Devonshire St., 8th floor
Boston, MA 02109
617-723-2277 | Tel
617-723-1880 | Fax

Massachusetts' authorization process was ranked first in the nation: "Massachusetts has in place comprehensive application review and oversight processes. For new schools, it now involves an approval cycle that lasts nearly two years from initial application to school opening."⁷

Holding charter public schools accountable for academic performance

Charter public schools must follow the same state educational standards, administer the same state tests, and abide by the same laws and regulations as other public schools in the Commonwealth. A charter school application itself serves as the first stage of public accountability, as it is used to determine if the school has been faithful to the charter, particularly with respect to its core mission, academic programs, financial integrity, and record of student achievement. The record on the accountability of Massachusetts charter public schools is strong (and stronger than that of district schools).

1. **Like all public schools in the Commonwealth, charter public schools must administer the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests.** Most charter public schools supplement MCAS test performance data with results from other nationally recognized standardized tests, such as the SAT 10, ITBS, or TerraNova. Results from all assessments are used in the charter school accountability process and are central in evaluating whether a school is an academic success.
2. **Charter schools must submit an Accountability Plan** that establishes "specific five-year performance objectives to measure the school's progress and success in raising student achievement, establishing a viable organization, and fulfilling the terms of its charter."⁸ *No such plan is currently required of traditional district schools unless they are 'underperforming.'*
3. **The DOE conducts annual site visits and requires annual reports.** In addition, after the conclusion of each academic year, a charter school must submit a publicly released Annual Report to the Department of Education that documents the school's most recent activities. This document specifically reports the school's performance record in accordance with the objectives and methods of measuring achievement found in its Accountability Plan. Both of these documents, the Accountability Plan and the Annual Report, are unique to charter public schools and are not required of traditional public schools in the state.

4. **When charter schools do not perform to expectations, they are closed.** So far, three charter schools have been closed by the Department of Education—the Roxbury Charter High School (charter revoked), Frederick Douglas Charter School (charter not renewed), and Lynn Community Charter School (charter not renewed).

Are Massachusetts charter public schools an academic success?

Like traditional public schools, the academic strength and student achievement varies in charter schools. There are two ways to gauge success: parental demand and achievement. The more than 15,000 students on the waiting list for charter schools is a strong indication of the demand in Massachusetts. Below are a few examples of the academic success of charter schools in Massachusetts.

1. **In 2005, a higher percentage of students in charter public schools scored proficient or advanced on all 10 MCAS tests compared with their districts—9.2 percent, 8.7 percent, and 8.3 percent higher in English, math, and science, respectively.**
2. **The gains were in most instances significantly larger in the larger urban school districts:**
 - In Boston, 15 percent, 12 percent, and 12 percent more students achieved proficiency in English, math, and science, respectively, in charter schools than in district schools.
 - In Worcester, 16 percent, 8.5 percent, and 7.5 percent more students achieved proficiency in English, math, and science, respectively, in charter schools than in district schools.
 - In Springfield, 19 percent, 26 percent, and 6 percent more students achieved proficiency in English, math, and science, respectively, in charter schools than in district schools.
3. **Many urban charter public schools ranked among the best in the state on the 2005 MCAS test:**
 - Neighborhood House Charter School ranked **1st** in 7th grade English.
 - Community Day Charter School ranked **2nd** in 6th and 8th grade math.
 - Media and Technology Charter High School ranked **4th** in 10th grade math.
 - Roxbury Preparatory Charter School ranked **9th** in 8th grade math.⁹

Notes

1. Center for Education Reform, "Charter Schools by the Numbers," <http://www.edreform.com>.
2. Massachusetts Department of Education, "State Profile," <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state.asp>.
3. Ibid., "Charter School Pre-Enrollment for the 2005-2006 School Year, by Charter School" <http://finance1.doe.mass.edu>.
4. Massachusetts has two types of charter schools, Commonwealth charter schools and Horace Mann charter schools. The main differences are that Horace Mann charter schools must also have their charters approved by the local school committee and the local teacher's union, and their employees remain members of the local collective bargaining unit.

5. Gau, Rebecca and Louann Bierlein Palmer, "Charter School Authorizing: Are States Making the Grade?" Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 5, 2003.
6. The full application itself is submitted on an invitation-only basis from the Commissioner of Education. To receive an invitation, applicant groups must first submit a letter of intent followed by a detailed prospectus. A review panel considers each prospectus and invites selected applicant groups to submit a full application. Massachusetts Department of Education, "Application for a Massachusetts Public Charter School, 2005-2006," <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/app/full.pdf#toc>.
7. Ibid., "Charter School Authorizing: Are States Making the Grade?" Thomas B. Fordham Institute, June 5, 2003.
8. (603 CMR 1.05(g)) cited in: Massachusetts Department of Education, "Guidelines for Writing Charter School Accountability Plans."
9. Slowey, Dominic, "Charter Public School Successes on 2005 MCAS test," Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, 2005.