

Charter Schools

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Leaders, Teachers, and Innovations in Charter Public Schools

Criticism: “The MTA [Massachusetts Teachers Association] believes that Commonwealth Charter Schools negatively impact the regular public education program.”
—Resolution of the MTA, February 18, 2003, www.massteacher.org.

Who leads charter public schools?

Autonomy is the most distinctive feature of charter public schools compared to traditional public schools. Charter public school principals and directors are given control over many aspects of school management, including

teacher hiring and firing, budgeting, curriculum design, and scheduling. Charter public school leaders come from a wide variety of professional backgrounds and bring credentials and experiences that are rare to public education.

A study of Massachusetts charter public schools conducted by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that their principals most often cited the freedom from unnecessary regulation as the best part of running a charter school. According to one principal, charter schools allow leaders to be “part of a vibrant education community where all your colleagues are striving toward excellence and providing excellent education to students who have historically not received excellent education.” Another said that leading a charter public school allows him the “ability to effect positive student change without being part of a district that discourages being entrepreneurial and being innovative.” Yet another respondent declared that, “students become a member of a community, and it’s magic—many schools are way too large and they are run from the top down and people aren’t invested in them.”¹

- Charter public school leaders in Massachusetts hold degrees from, among others, Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Columbia, Williams, and Amherst.

- Charter public school leaders in Massachusetts have professional backgrounds in law, management consulting, business, banking, non-profit management, strategic planning, journalism, public school administration, and teaching.

Who teaches at charter public schools?

Massachusetts charter public schools are granted by law the freedom to find and hire teachers who suit the missions, cultures, and needs of their schools. School leaders can hire applicants, with or without certification or prior teaching experience, and without the long bureaucratic processes found in traditional public schools. Quality teachers from diverse backgrounds with a wide variety of talents and experiences can be hired immediately. Some charter principals feel that the absence of certification requirements is one of the most important features of the state’s charter law. For example, being able to hire uncertified teachers enabled one school to hire a local artist to be an art teacher, and another school two social workers to become special education teachers.² With no requirement for certification, school leaders can hire teachers with graduate degrees in areas, such as art history, literature, physics, economics, and various foreign languages. This high level of subject matter knowledge substantially contributes to the academic rigor found in charter public schools. Likewise, school leaders can hire individuals from a multitude of professional backgrounds, such as law, business, science, and finance. The skills and knowledge gained in these types of careers can be valuable to raising expectations and increasing academic achievement.

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Here are some facts about Massachusetts charter public school teachers:

1. The ratio of students to teachers in charter public schools is 11.8 to 1, compared to a statewide average of 13.3 to 1;
2. Eighty-five percent of charter public school teachers teach in core academic areas, compared to 78 percent statewide.³
3. Charter public school teachers are graduates of prestigious universities, such as Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Brown, University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Amherst, Williams, Georgetown, Tufts, Colby, Wellesley, Bates, and Northwestern.

How are charter public schools innovators in education?

According to the Massachusetts charter law, the first two stated purposes of charter public schools are “to stimulate the development of innovative programs within public education” and “to provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessment.” The majority of charter public schools have taken advantage of the freedom over academic programming and instructional practice by implementing innovative elements into their school design. At some charter schools, innovation takes the shape of a longer school day; at others, it is in the teaching pedagogy or scheduling configuration. While such practices may have been developed and tried in other places across the country, charter schools, because of the freedom they have from bureaucratic restraints, are able to adopt and implement these ideas and practices much more quickly than traditional schools.

Charter public schools often focus on a particular academic theme or mission, while placing a priority on core academic areas. In Massachusetts, several schools, especially in urban areas, maintain academically rigorous programs focusing on college admissions. Some schools focus on math, science, and technology; others focus on music and performing arts. Still others structure their programs around leadership and citizenship. Charter schools have adopted a diverse number of academic specializations such as math, science, and technology; college preparatory program; Coalition of Essential Schools philosophy; Montessori philosophy; and performing arts.

How are charter public schools’ innovations disseminated and replicated?

Since 1999, the Massachusetts Department of Education has awarded competitive grants to Massachusetts charter schools for the purpose of disseminating innovations and best practices. The grants are funded by through an award from the United States Department of Education Charter School Program and are integral to promoting the sharing of effective practices. Dissemination Grants ensure practices that have been designed, developed, tested, and proven to be effective in Massachusetts charter schools are shared with other educators and school leaders. Below are some examples of dissemination projects generated by charter public schools.

The following are examples of **Massachusetts Charter Public Schools Dissemination Projects**:⁴

1. **Media and Technology Charter High School:** Unique and intensive urban tutoring model
2. **Codman Academy:** Utilizing intranet technology to increase parent involvement
3. **Academy of Strategic Learning:** A model for serving at-risk youth
4. **Conservatory Lab Charter School:** Sharing best practices in group learning
5. **Murdoch Middle:** Best teaching practices in a project-based learning environment
6. **River Valley Charter School:** Toolsets created by the school to measure improved student achievement realized by the Montessori method
7. **Roxbury Preparatory:** Literacy Notebook containing instruction, homework, and assessment materials that form the core of their most effective literacy practices
8. **Sturgis Charter Public School:** Workshop series on the functioning and development of boards
9. **Academy of Strategic Learning Charter School:** Documenting best practices for serving students at risk of dropping out of school
10. **Neighborhood House Charter School:** Best practices for effective boards, managing school operations effectively, and motivating and supporting faculty and staff

Notes

1. Triant, Bill, “Autonomy and Innovation: How Do Massachusetts Charter School Principals Use Their Freedom?” Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December, 2001, <http://www.edexcellence.net>.
2. Ibid.

3. Data from Massachusetts Department of Education, “2004-2005 Teacher Data Report,” <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/teacherdata.aspx>.
4. Massachusetts Department of Education, Massachusetts Charter School Dissemination Grant Program, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/dissemination/descrip.asp>