

# Charter Schools

No. 63 • April 2006

## Charter Public Schools Meeting Community Needs

**Criticism:** "Cities and towns have no control (or oversight) over the establishment of these [charter] schools in their communities... As a result, localities end up footing the bill for these schools whether they wish them housed in their communities or not."  
—Massachusetts Teachers Association, *Just the Facts*, <http://www.massteacher.org/advocating/facts/charters.pdf>.

### Charter schools make educational opportunities more accessible

In Massachusetts, one of the main motivations for the creation of charter public schools was to give families in neighborhoods with low-performing public schools an alternative public school for their children. At least three charters approved each year must be granted for schools located in districts where overall student performance on the MCAS test is at or below the statewide average.

For generations, families dissatisfied with the quality of their local public schools have relocated to areas with better schools or sent their children to private schools. However, children whose families lack the necessary resources also deserve a quality education. In areas where families with limited financial resources feel trapped by low-performing schools, parents, educators, and invested community members can use charter schools to target the needs of their own children and increase academic achievement. Charter schools give all parents the same right to vote with their feet as wealthier families have always had. Not only are parents free to enroll their children in charter schools, but they are also free to withdraw them should the program fail their expectations.

Those who criticize the level of local involvement forget that charters were created to be *independent* of the local school district. Communities have a say in the chartering process through the public hearing process, but they do not control the final decision. This gives parents the power to choose where their children go to school and how their tax money is allocated.

### Charter public schools reflect their communities

Founders and sponsors of charter public schools develop and authorize schools that are likely to best serve the needs of the students in a particular community. In most states, including Massachusetts, this intent is legally binding as part of the accountability plans for charter public schools: the schools' charters describe how they will serve an underserved population and their

accountability plans detail their academic goals and subsequent achievements. Like other states, most charter public schools in Massachusetts are located in urban areas. In fact, **20 of the 57 charter public schools currently operating in Massachusetts enroll a significant number of students from Boston Public Schools alone**, and others focus on students in Springfield, Worcester, and Cambridge. Across the state, charter public school parents report lower income and education levels than district public school parents, and their students are more racially and economically diverse than their counterparts in district public schools. Overall, **51 percent of students enrolled in charter public schools are students of color, compared to 26 percent in their district counterparts**. Charter public schools also have a higher percentage of students on free or reduced lunch: **43 percent of students in charter public schools are enrolled in the free/reduced lunch program compared with 26 percent in their district counterparts**.<sup>1</sup>

Because enrollment in charter public schools is open to any student in the Commonwealth, students of all backgrounds and educational abilities have an equal opportunity to attend a charter public school. Should enrollment applications exceed the school's capacity, a public lottery is conducted to determine enrollment. By law, schools must give preference to students who have a sibling already attending the school as well as to students who live in the town where the school is located, primarily because charter public schools are established to serve the community in which they are located and provide educational options not otherwise available to those families. Charter public schools cannot discriminate in admissions on the basis of academic performance, athletic ability, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, the presence of special needs, or English language proficiency. Once admitted, students who are special needs or limited English proficient (LEP) must be appropriately identified, assessed, and served in accordance with federal and state requirements. The charter school is responsible for funding the necessary special education teachers, resource rooms, English immersion programs, and other support systems.

### The demand for charter public schools

Parent demand for quality education has driven a substantial increase in the number of students enrolled in charter public schools nationwide. In Massachusetts, the number of charter

[www.pioneerinstitute.org](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org)

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

schools has grown in the last 10 years from 15 to 57, and the number of districts in which parents send their children to charter schools from 152 to 236. Enrollment in Massachusetts charter schools grew from 14,013 in fall 2002 to 20,555 in fall 2005. However, demand still far exceeds supply, as witnessed by the current waiting list of 15,823 students.

## Paving the way for additional educational opportunities

While there has never been any guarantee that a charter public school will be better than a traditional public school, charter public schools in Massachusetts do have academic accountability goals to meet each and every year. Some charter public schools have been more successful than others, but their existence has created opportunities for families to access better educational options not only in the present, but also in the future. Successful charter public schools bring innovative and rigorous programs to their current students and prepare those students to be competitive applicants to elite high schools and colleges. The following are some examples of their success:

### *Academy of the Pacific Rim (APR) Charter Public School: College Acceptance*<sup>2</sup>

- The college-counseling program has resulted in every student earning acceptance to at least one college.
- In 2004, the average student graduating from APR earned four acceptances to colleges and universities across the nation.
- In 2003, the first graduating class of 11 students earned over \$500,000 in scholarships.

### *Roxbury Preparatory (RP) Charter School: Placement Results*<sup>3</sup>

- In 2005, **45 percent** of RP's eighth grade class was admitted to college preparatory independent and parochial schools.
- These students **earned over \$300,000** in scholarships and financial aid.
- **41 percent** of the graduating class earned admission to at least one of Boston's three Exam Schools based on their grades and entrance exam results.
- **100 percent** of graduating eighth grade students enrolled in high schools that have explicit college preparatory missions.

### *The Media and Technology Charter High School (MATCH): College Acceptance*<sup>4</sup>

- **All members** of the first two graduating classes—2004 and 2005—were accepted into four-year colleges.
- Together they received approximately **\$2 million** in four-year need-based grants.

### *Boston Collegiate Charter School: Exam School and College Acceptance*<sup>5</sup>

- In 2005, **100 percent** of Boston Collegiate's senior class was accepted into college for the second year in a row.
- The 18 members of the class of 2005 received a total of **118** acceptances and **\$585,000** in merit scholarships.

## *Boston Collegiate 6th Grade Boston Exam School Acceptance Rates*<sup>6</sup>

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
<b>Total applied</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>45</b>
Total # 6th Grade	40	42	46	66	88
Total accepted	15	17	22	24	30
<i>Boston Latin</i>	11	12	12	7	17
<i>Latin Academy</i>	4	3	15	15	12
<i>O'Bryant School</i>	0	2	5	2	1
<b>Acceptance rate</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>81%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>67%</b>

## Building bridges

Building bridges with the surrounding community is an integral part of a charter public school's success, which is another way that charter schools differ from traditional public schools. This is true for three primary reasons. First, parent satisfaction in charter public schools is paramount because they are schools of choice and dissatisfied consumers can leave at any time. Second, charter public schools are all managed by a board of directors that usually consists of local business leaders, public officials, educators, and parents in the community. Only two charter schools are managed by for-profit management companies. Many charter public school founders and leaders rely on their board for guidance and technical advice, and for direction to resources and supportive parties in the community. Third, almost all charter schools need philanthropic support in order to secure a facility, and implement all their innovations and supportive programs. The sponsorship of local businesses is one of the best ways to overcome the hurdle of facility financing. Below are some examples of ways that Massachusetts public charter schools have built relationships with their surrounding communities.<sup>7</sup>

- **Abbey Kelley Foster Charter School** in Worcester hosts a summer arts program for all children in the local community. They also host Camp Invention, a nation-wide program, for all children in the Worcester community.
- **The Benjamin Banneker Charter Public School** in Cambridge maintains strong relationships with the University of Massachusetts Boston, Lesley University, and the nationally renowned Technical Education Research Center (TERC) by operating regular professional development opportunities for teachers.
- **Boston Renaissance Charter Public School** in Boston has operated a Parent Center since 1999. During the 2003-04 school year, more than 40 percent of the schools' parents contributed over 3,800 hours of community service at the school, spending time in classrooms, the library, the Parent Center, and on field trips. Renaissance has also developed a community network called Crossroads for Kids, which includes partnerships with more than 50 different businesses and organizations.
- **The Neighborhood House Charter School** in Dorchester launched the Project for School Innovation in 2000 as a way for educators from all types of public schools to share best practices and successful models.

## Notes

1. Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, "Myths and Realities about Massachusetts Charter Public Schools," <http://www.masscharter-schools.org/schools/myths.html>.
2. Academy of the Pacific Rim, <http://www.pacrim.org/results.htm>.
3. Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, <http://www.roxburyprep.org/docs/placementresults.htm>.

4. The Media and Technology Charter High School, <http://www.matcheschool.org>.

5. Boston Collegiate Charter School, (formerly South Boston Harbor Academy Charter School), "2002-2003 Annual Report," <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/reports/2003/annual/0449.pdf>.

6. Ibid.

7. Examples taken from Charter School Annual Reports, Massachusetts Department of Education, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/reports>.