



Benefits of Charters for Massachusetts School Districts

Charter public schools have produced a number of benefits for school districts across Massachusetts. Some are the result of competition from charters, while others have grown out of collaborations between charter and district schools.

Benefits from Competition

Pilot Schools

Charter school enabling legislation was included in the Commonwealth's 1993 Education Reform Act. In 1995, to compete with new charter public schools, Boston opened its first in-district charters, known as pilot schools. The schools have more autonomy than traditional schools when it comes to staff, budget, curriculum and assessments, and calendar, which allows them more flexibility to address student needs. Teaching in a pilot school is voluntary. Teachers are exempt from many union work rules, but they retain union salary, benefits and seniority. Pilots must be approved by both the Boston School Committee and a two-thirds vote of teachers at the school.

Fitchburg opened its first pilot school in 2006. The following year, pilot status was approved as one option for chronically underperforming schools.

Innovation Schools

Charter public schools served as the model for Innovation Schools, which are the centerpiece of Governor Patrick's agenda for public education. These new schools, which were created by the Legislature in 2009, are approved by local districts and operate under their control, but they have greater autonomy than a traditional district school.

Extended Learning Time

While districts generally operate on a 6.5 hour per day, 180-day per year schedule, Massachusetts charter public schools are in session an average of eight hours a day and 186 days per year. The result is 318 hours, or 49 days per year, of additional learning time. Mass 2020's Extended Learning Time Initiative is attempting to replicate this charter public school success. They began in 2006 by providing about two additional hours per day in 10 public schools. The program is now in 26 schools that serve 13,500 students across 12 districts.

Alternative Teacher Certification

The freedom to hire teachers who have not gone through what was once a rigid state certification process is another reason for charter public schools' success. As a result, the Commonwealth has moved to create several non-traditional routes to certification that make it easier for talented individuals to transition from another field into teaching.

School-Based Management

In Barnstable, district leaders have given the town's 10 traditional schools powers and responsibilities similar to its two Horace Mann charter public schools. As a result, individual school leaders have authority over 80 cents out of every education dollar spent.

Black Students in Massachusetts Charters Overtaking Regular School Peers

A four-year study done by the Massachusetts Department of Education examined charter public school students' performance on state tests. When the study found a significant performance difference between a charter public school and its sending district, it more likely favored charter public schools. Although that pattern existed for all student subgroups, it was most prevalent for Blacks, Hispanics, and low-income students.

According to the study, Black students at 33 percent of charter public schools performed significantly higher in 2002 than their sending district counterparts in English. By 2005, that number was 43 percent.

Moreover, no Black subgroup performed significantly lower than their sending district counterpart between 2003 and 2005. In other words, Black students at almost half of the state's charter public schools performed significantly better in English than their district peers, with the Black students at the other schools performing at a comparable level as their district peers. In math, Black students at 25 percent of Massachusetts charter public schools performed significantly higher than their sending district counterparts in 2001. In 2005, that number had grown to 38 percent. In addition, no more than one Black subgroup per year performed significantly lower than their sending district peers in math. To put it another way, Black students at over a third of the state's charter public schools performed significantly better than their district peers, with the Black students at all but one of the other schools performing about the same as their district peers.

(National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, "Massachusetts charter public school Achievement Comparison Study: An Analysis of 2001-2005 MCAS Performance," Boston, MA: Massachusetts)

National Achievement Gap Study

In a national comparison of student achievement in charter public schools and regular public schools on 4th grade reading and math state tests, the average charter public school had a "proficiency advantage" – the difference in the percentage of students who are proficient on state tests in charters versus non-charters – of 4.2 percentage points in reading and 2.1 percentage points in math. Charter public schools located in areas where a high percentage of students are Black had a proficiency advantage over regular public schools of 4.5 percentage points in reading and 2.6 percentage points in math.

(Caroline M. Hoxby, "Achievement in charter public schools and Regular Public Schools in the United States: Understanding the Differences," December 2004.)

Other States

Massachusetts isn't the only state in which competition from charter public schools has been a catalyst for school district improvement. The samples of research findings and anecdotal data below show that charters have had a similar impact elsewhere.

Texas

Researchers from Amherst College and Stanford University found a positive correlation between competition and public school performance. Their research also suggests that competition improves teacher quality and improves the overall quality of education.

Using an eight-year panel of data on individual test scores for public school students in Texas to evaluate the achievement impact of charter public schools, Texas A&M and University of Tennessee researchers found "a positive and significant relationship between charter public school penetration and traditional public school student outcomes." They also found evidence of "positive differential effects" of charter public school penetration on the performance of African-American and Hispanic students, as well as students in low-performing schools.

Michigan

A Harvard study found a noticeable improvement in school district student achievement once charter competition got to the point where it was easily discernible from normal fluctuations in enrollment.

("School Choice and School Productivity, or Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats, Caroline Hoxby, Harvard University)

Michigan State University researchers found that districts implemented a number of changes in response to increased school choice:

- All-day kindergarten
- Vocational-technical, magnet and other specialized programs
- Closer alignment of curriculum with state standards to boost test scores
- Increased expenditures on technology

Arizona

The same Harvard study that looked at achievement gains in Michigan showed similar improvements in district school achievement in Arizona. Arizona's public schools had a positive productivity response once charter competition reached approximately three percent of local enrollment. The positive productivity response was even higher when charter public schools could successfully compete for six to ten percent of local enrollment.

("School Choice and School Productivity, or Could School Choice Be a Tide that Lifts All Boats, Caroline Hoxby, Harvard University)

Benefits of Charters for Massachusetts School Districts Continued

A separate study of Arizona's charter and district schools found that competition improves education for all students, including the vast majority who remain in district schools.

(Robert Maranto, 21st Century Chair in Leadership at the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas)

As part of the study, the researchers conducted a survey in the spring of 1998 asking long serving teachers to rate their schools on a number of criteria in the spring of 1998 compared with the spring of 1995 (immediately before charter public schools opened in Arizona). The results showed clear perceptions of improvement since the advent of charter competition, with the greatest gains in the districts with the most charter public schools.

Districts across the state implemented a number of improvements as a direct result of competition from charter public schools. A number of districts opened magnet schools, district-sponsored charter schools and gifted programs.

The Mesa Unified School District, the state's largest, opened a Benjamin Franklin Magnet School to address parent demands for a back-to-basics curriculum. When the demand outstripped the school's capacity, the district at first refused to expand to meet the demand. But the district changed its tune when some parents organized their own charter public school to compete with Ben Franklin. It has now opened five additional Benjamin Franklin Magnet Schools that feature the curriculum.

In Mesa, Queen Creek, and several smaller districts around the state, the spread of charters forced district schools to conduct in-service teacher training in phonics or Saxon math, curricula that local charter public schools were providing.

The Mesa, Kyrene, Tempe, and Madison school districts developed active advertising campaigns aimed at enticing students from charter public schools and from other school districts. All the district officials interviewed felt that charter public schools had forced district schools to do a better job of communicating their strengths to the public. As one put it: "In some cases, the charters are terrific. In other cases there is not a lot of substance but the advertising is there. It may be that we in the [district] schools have substance but are not very good at advertising. Maybe now we will get better at it."

There are also several examples of districts improving customer service as a result of charter public school competition.

- An inner-city district in Phoenix wrote letters to charter public school parents asking why they left and explaining how the district would serve them better
- Teachers and administrators in a nearby district began visiting parents at home
- Mesa Unified expanded all-day kindergarten, provided staff with customer service training and developed a "Red Carpet Treatment" for reintegrating charter parents into district schools