Massachusetts Charter Public Schools Myths and Realities

Myth
Charter schools are private schools that drain money away from funds for public education.

Reality
Charter schools are public schools. In fact, many people refer to them as “charter public schools.”

Myth
Charter schools receive more state money than district public schools.

Reality
Charter schools receive what other schools in their district receive to educate their students. Commonwealth charter schools receive a tuition amount from the state equal to a per-pupil amount calculated by the state Department of Education. The state then deducts the same amount from the sending school district’s state aid account. (The sending district is the one in which the student resides.) Horace Mann charter schools receive their funding directly from the school district in which they are located through a memorandum of understanding with the district.

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

Myth
Charter schools pick and choose their students, which is what accounts for their high marks on student performance.

Reality
Charter schools do not engage in selective admissions policies—they are open to all children. When enrollment requests exceed the number of seats, charter schools are required to hold a public lottery to determine who will attend. Application and enrollment is free of charge. Charter schools offer school choice to families who cannot afford other options.

Myth
Charter schools don’t serve as many poor children or children of color as traditional public schools.

Reality
According to a recent Stanford University* study, charter public schools in Massachusetts serve more children who live in poverty, with 47 percent eligible for free or reduced-price lunches (a proxy for low income) during the six years covered by the study. (This school year, 37 percent of students statewide were eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.) The study also found that charters serve a higher percentage of black and Hispanic students and significantly fewer white students than the state’s public school population as a whole.

Myth
Charter public schools don’t educate special needs students.

Reality
Again, charter schools are public schools and, as such, are under the same obligation as district schools to provide in-school special education services. It is true that 12 percent of charter school students are special
education students, compared to 16 percent in district schools. The Stanford study suggests that charters and school districts may differ in how they determine who needs special education services.

**Myth**
Charter schools are exciting and glitzy, but the students don’t perform any better in them.

**Reality**
This myth has been forever shattered with the Stanford study, which showed that the typical student in a Massachusetts charter school gains more learning in a year than students in district public schools, amounting to about one and a half months of additional gains in reading and two and a half months in math. Most outpace their traditional counterparts: 44 percent of charter students outpace their peers in reading and 56 percent do so in math. Only a few charter schools have results that are worse than district public schools.

**Myth**
Charter schools are bad places for teachers.

**Reality**
Many argue that teachers in charters are younger, paid less and have a higher turnover rate than teachers in district schools. While starting salaries of teachers in charters and districts are often close, it is true that teachers in charters typically earn less than teachers in districts and work on average two more hours per day. Teachers in charter schools cite curricular freedom and support from administrators as reasons to work there. Likewise, they talk about having a shared vision between the faculty and the leadership of the school.

**Myth**
Charter schools aren’t held to the same accountability standards as public schools.

**Reality**
One of the reasons behind the success of Massachusetts charter schools is that they are held to high standards by the state’s Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, which grants the charter and oversees their performance. Charters must demonstrate good results within the first five years of its charter or it can be closed or not renewed by the state. When considering whether to renew or close a charter, the Board asks:

- Is the school’s academic program a success?
- Is the school a viable organization?
- Is the school faithful to the terms of its charter?

Charters that do not meet expectations are reviewed and can be placed on probation or closed. Six operating schools have been closed or not renewed since 1994.

Massachusetts’s accountability system includes five different levels for schools—Level 1 is the highest performing level. For a school to be classified as Level 1, schools need to demonstrate progress and strong performance for all of its students, and its high needs students. It should be noted that 56 percent of charters statewide are Level 1 schools, a designation that only 31 percent of schools statewide now hold.