

2004 Legislative Priority

CHARTER SCHOOL MORATORIUM



The current practice of approving new and expanded Commonwealth Charter Schools threatens the financial stability of every Massachusetts public school system during one of the worst economic crises in recent memory. Commonwealth Charter Schools (unlike Horace Mann Charters) do not require local approval and are not part of the local school district, but they drain money right out of your state aid allocation. Commonwealth Charter Schools operate independently and do not answer to any elected or other local officials in your or any other community.

Charter schools divert dollars from school districts to programs that are not accountable to the taxpayers in your community. They have not proven, in many cases, to be more effective or better than your own public schools. Action at the soonest possible moment by the legislature will prevent further hemorrhaging of Chapter 70 state aid from many cities and towns that are struggling under a growing list of state and federal mandates.

MASC urges the legislature to enact a moratorium on new and expanded Commonwealth Charter School enrollment until:

1. A more fair and equitable funding system is created so that communities are not crippled by the diversion of dollars.

Charter schools get a payment from the state equal to the Department of Education's calculation of the "average per pupil cost" of a student in the district from which that student comes. That payment is based on costs that you must bear but that charter schools don't have. And that payment is deducted directly from the "sending" district's state aid.

Originally, the legislature approved a three-year transition funding program to assist communities in absorbing the loss of funds, but that budget item was slashed dramatically and only represents less than one-third of necessary replacement funds.

Projected charter school tuition rates show that Lynn will lose \$8,697 every time a student departs for a charter school; Framingham will lose \$9,186; North Adams \$7,722; Salem \$8,054; and Cambridge \$16,010 per student. These payments are far more than it takes to operate a charter school, and thanks to the formula, charter schools, including ones operated by for-profit companies, have been able to amass hefty cash reserves on their balance sheets.

To learn how your district could be impacted based on the calculated per-pupil amount, visit http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/schfin/charter/charter_rate04_dec.aspx.



2. The Board of Education is required to consider the impact upon a community or region before imposing a charter school in the district.

Several communities – from one end of the state to the other - have been severely damaged financially when their already-tight budgets were hit by the withdrawing of state funds to support a charter school.

Overwhelming opposition in places like North Adams, Framingham, Lynn, Marlborough, and Cambridge was ignored as state administrators pushed through approvals of new charter schools.

3. The state investigates whether charter schools are, in fact, simply ways to resegregate students, or why some charters enroll significantly lower numbers of students who are economically disadvantaged; racial and linguistic minorities; or in need of special education services.

Charter schools across the state enroll a significantly lower number of students who are considered at-risk – especially students with special needs, or who are economically disadvantaged. The state must investigate whether charter schools truly recruit, welcome, and keep all students and enroll a representative cross-section of their communities.

4 Further investigations are conducted to determine if students who are nominally enrolled in charter schools are, in fact, really enrolled in them.

Several problems have been identified where charters have received funding for students who are not or who are no longer enrolled. MASC has urged district attorneys and the state to investigate the potentially fraudulent practice of accepting state funds for students who are not enrolled, or who have returned to their community public school.

5. Objective research can be completed to study just how effective charter schools really are.

We know that many students do well in charter schools. Their counterparts do well in mainstream public schools, too. What no one will discuss is whether successful charter school students actually do better than if they had remained in their original schools, or, if the charter simply allows high achieving students or economically privileged young people to regroup in schools where they will not need to share class space with others.

6. Further investigation is completed to assess the involvement of charter school boards of trustees to ensure that they comply with the provisions of the state's accountability systems, Open Meeting laws, Ethics and Conflict of Interest statutes, and Public Records requirements.

You're accountable to the voters in your communities for how well your schools are doing. Commonwealth Charter Schools do not report to any locally elected officials. They are governed by boards of trustees, some of which rarely meet. There has been little research into whether charters use their generous per-pupil payments to support teachers rather than administrators, or whether student achievement is attributable to the programs charter school operators promised when they began.

7. Analysis of why some poorly performing charter schools are not held to account. There also needs to be documentation of whether the innovative and alternative models that some charters are supposed to explore for others to replicate are, in fact, taking place, resulting in higher achievement, or ideas being shared.

Charter schools are supposed to be laboratories of innovation, but several schools have disastrous test scores and rank among the state's lowest achievers.

Questions about Charter Schools

1. Do MCAS scores prove that charter schools are a success?

Some charter schools do well, others don't. The Benjamin Banneker Charter School in Cambridge and the Abbey Kelly Foster Charter School in Worcester tested significantly below the sending district. The Lowell Community Charter School had 0% students scoring in advanced or proficient categories. Numerous studies by independent researchers show that many, if not most, charter schools across the nation do not perform as well as the regular public schools. Of course there are high-performing charter schools as well as high-performing public schools.

Rating the success of the charter program as a whole is difficult because it may require comparing an entire school district of many students to a charter school with less than 200 students. Statistically charter school students are more economically advantaged than students in corresponding districts.

Charter schools have a poor record of enrolling a true cross section of their communities. For example, according to October 2002 enrollment data, only 10% of Boston charter school students require special education services and 0% are limited in English proficiency, but for the city's students as a whole, the number is 19% for special education and 24% for limited English proficiency.

Charter schools have almost twice the teacher turnover of regular public schools. Many charters have difficulty keeping principals. The lack of continuity is a key reason for lower charter school performance.

2. Do charter schools provide a stronger, more vigorous curriculum?

Some charter schools seem to have no curriculum in place, while others do have a very strong standards-referenced curriculum. Like the MCAS comparison, it is not appropriate to generalize in this area. There is much variation in the quality of curriculum in charter schools.

3. Is it true that charter schools provide competition and public schools don't like competition?

Public schools thrive under competition and have always competed with private and parochial schools. The School Choice program allows parents to enroll children in schools outside town boundaries. However, competition only works on a level playing field. Currently many charter school student populations don't reflect the districts they serve nor incur the cost for many at-risk students, even though they still get the "average per pupil cost" of the district as a whole. That's not a level playing field and it isn't competition!

4. Are charter schools the only way to provide choice to parents?

Public schools provide lots of choice, and there are plenty of great examples. Worcester offers magnet schools; Framingham offers a choice of eight elementary schools and three middle schools. Many districts provide intra-district school choice. Across the state, other examples of choice include pilot schools, competitive exam and laboratory schools (UMASS Lowell Demonstration School). Regional technical schools are very successful and popular options. The Metco Program provides choice for many families.

Many communities participate in School Choice to neighboring communities at only \$5,000 per student. The Federal No Child Left Behind Act further expands parent choice. (However charter schools do not participate in the federal school choice as required by NCLB, because they are exempt from this section of the law.)

Many districts provide lots of internal options among their course offerings, programs, and alternative schools.

5. Are charter schools the best approach for students who face extraordinary life challenges and require a different educational approach in order to succeed?

Many school districts offer programs for students who need a different approach. An excellent model is the Framingham Resiliency for Life Program and Thayer Campus Alternative High School, programs that address the needs of students who require a different approach to learning due to domestic abuse, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and other hurdles, which may stand in the way of success.

6. Are charter schools the only way to provide education in a less restrictive environment? Some say that unions do not allow public schools to try innovative approaches to education such as a longer school day and longer school year?

Don't let the "union bashing" argument divert attention from the truth. Public schools throughout the state are laboratories of experimental education. For example, the Saltonstall School in Salem provides a longer school year and longer school day.

7. Does a charter school receive a dollar amount equal to what the public schools spend per pupil for each student? Is that fair?

No, it isn't fair because the per pupil amount that is siphoned off to a charter school from your Chapter 70 funds includes many costs charter schools don't have such as a fair apportionment of expenses for low income and special education students, vocational programs, long term debt, retiree costs, and dollars above the required foundation level that many districts have voted to commit to their schools voluntarily. It can be very high as well. Examples: Tisbury -- \$14,468, Cambridge -- \$16,010, Framingham -- \$9,100, Salem -- \$8,054, and Northampton -- \$7,297.

8. Is it true that charter schools save money and are more cost efficient?

No. By opening an additional building the charter school forces districts to allocate their available funds more thinly even though the student population has not increased. Charters destroy the economy of scale. Also, fluctuating enrollment issues associated with charters make it difficult for a district to estimate the financial impact. The charter school program is one of the most expensive programs in the state. And, at the end of the year, charters do not have to return all the unused funds to their communities.

9. Do charter schools improve the quality of public schools?

There is no evidence that decreasing funding to public schools leads to an improvement in quality. Loss of funding leads to reduction in services, larger class sizes, closed school buildings, teacher layoffs and an increased likelihood of fees for sports, bussing and other activities.

10. Are charter schools public schools?

Charter schools might be more appropriately called State Schools because they do not address needs of the majority of local school children and the taxpayers. Charter school payments are garnished from a municipality's local aid account without appropriation or review by Town Meeting or City Council.

Public schools must serve all students and accept everyone at any time of the year. Public schools cannot screen enrollment, discriminate against students, or discourage them from enrolling. Charter schools are allowed to limit their enrollment, are not required to take students midway through the year, and are not required to support students who require out-of-district placements. Communities like Worcester have tracked a history of special education students being referred back to the local schools after the charter school lottery system randomly admitted them to their rosters.

11. Why are School Committees struggling so hard with the charter school funding issue?

School Committee members want to improve the quality of life in their community and recognize their responsibility for the next generation of citizens. They take the job seriously. They cannot fulfill their duties to their students and taxpayers if the checks and balances of the budget process are thrown off by the loss of resources commandeered by a charter school. MASC and school committees advocate for funding that is fair to every student and accountability that the public demands. By contrast, charter school board members are not publicly elected. In many cases the Director of the charter school recruits them. They may not even live in the community.