

Charter Schools Passing the Test of Time

Acceptance rises, enrollments swell as parents search for new options, different models

By Steven Rosenberg
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A decade ago, it might have been difficult to find a parent in the state who understood the concept of a charter school.

Those days are over.

With an increased emphasis on academic achievement, SAT and MCAS scores, and college acceptance rates, charter schools — which are publicly funded but operated independently of municipalities and school districts — are gaining favor among parents searching for rigorous academic workloads and curriculums tailored for the individual, which many traditional school districts can't provide.



The charter school Innovation Academy is set on a 200-acre campus in Tyngsborough. (Mark Wilson for The Boston Globe)

Those who are skeptical of charter schools — which adhere to state educational frameworks but have the flexibility to create theme-oriented curriculums, such as art or technology — say they drain state funding that would otherwise bolster traditional schools.

The latest numbers released by the state reveal a trend of mostly urban families embracing charter schools. Across the Commonwealth, charter school enrollment more than doubled in the last decade, rising from 12,518 to 27,484 this year.

During the last 10 years, seven of the top 10 enrollment percentage increases have been in charter schools. During that time, six new charter schools have been established, bringing their total to 17 in the region.

Innovation Academy Charter School in Tyngsborough has had the largest percentage increase of all schools north of Boston — either traditional public or charter — in the last decade, rising 175 percent, from 195 students in 2000 to 536 last year.

“I think charter schools provide an option for parents and families who are looking for something different,” said Walter Landberg, executive director of Innovation Academy Charter School, which has students in grades 5 through 12.

The state earlier this year passed legislation that would double the number of charter school students in the lowest-performing school districts. In February the newest group of charters — which now total 63 — will be announced. Proposed schools in Chelsea, Lawrence, Lynn, and Salem are being considered.

Earlier this week, workers broke ground on a new \$26 million school that KIPP Academy Lynn plans to complete in July 2012. KIPP, which opened as a middle school in 2004, is adding a high school that will open next fall. The school has also applied for an additional charter to add grades K-4. The school opened with 81 fifth-graders seven years ago; enrollment reached 352 by the 2009-2010 school year.



Rendering of KIPP Academy Lynn’s new building

KIPP’s student population and academic achievement refutes arguments from some educators who have accused charter schools of choosing elite students, said Josh Zoia, the school’s executive director.

“We’re not skimming,” he said. “What we’re doing is the opposite of skimming. We’re working with some of the most challenging students.”

Zoia said the school has a retention rate of 97.2 percent, which ranks highest among charter schools in the state. More than 80 percent of KIPP’s students are minority, more than 80 percent live at or below the poverty line, and more than 90 percent come from single-parent households, according to Zoia. On average, when they enroll at the school, students perform two grades below their age level, he said. Still, the school’s philosophy of structure, discipline, 10-hour days, 11-month calendar years, and policy of making sure that every perk — from recess to attending school trips — is earned has delivered academic scores that consistently outperform other schools in Lynn. In 2009, the school was ranked 12th out of 466 middle schools across the state for its seventh-grade math MCAS scores, Zoia said.

In Malden, Mystic Valley Regional Charter School grew by 107 percent in the last decade, ranking second for the highest percentage increase in school enrollment north of Boston. Joseph R. McCleary, the school’s superintendent and director, said he believes longer classroom hours, mandatory school uniforms, and the idea of school choice has helped popularize charter schools.

The Malden school also boasts strong academic scores. This year, all Mystic Valley 10th graders passed the math MCAS test, making it just one of seven schools in the state to earn that distinction, McCleary said. Its rigorous academic curriculum also has been singled out by national publications, such as Newsweek, which ranked its high school in the top 1 percent in the country two out of the last three years. Also, 97 percent of its graduating seniors were accepted to four-year colleges, according to McCleary.

While charter schools are growing, urban districts such as Haverhill, Gloucester, Lowell, and Somerville have seen a marked decrease in student population in the last decade.

“The real story is that there are a number of school options that people have for their children today,” said James Scully, Haverhill interim superintendent. Haverhill’s student population has decreased by 20 percent in the last 10 years, and the city is now spending more than \$1 million each year to pay for children who opt to attend another school district.

Scully said one of his goals this year will be to reassess why so many children have left the Haverhill district, where the high school drop-out rate is 18 percent and students’ MCAS warning/failure rate was higher than the state average in every grade last year. He said the options presented to parents — such as sending children to other school districts, private schools, or charter schools — will make districts like Haverhill more accountable and produce higher academic achievement.

“I think the competition is good,” said Scully, who noted that the district just received an \$800,000 grant to help create a curriculum to address its high drop-out rate.

In Gloucester, the state’s most controversial charter school opened in September — three weeks late because its temporary classrooms did not meet city code. The school, which was approved by the state in 2009 — despite a Department of Education recommendation against allowing it — is now on probation and will have its charter reviewed next month.

Despite its rocky start, the charter school’s insistence on increasing student achievement has played a role in the city school district’s curriculum and overall academic review, said Mayor Carolyn Kirk. Like Haverhill, Gloucester saw an exodus of 20 percent of its students in the last 10 years and has budgeted \$1.1 million this year for Gloucester children who attend nearby schools in Rockport, Manchester, Essex, and Ipswich.

“The microscope of having a charter school in our community has been a contributing factor to having people reevaluate what we’re doing right and wrong,” said Kirk.