

# Chieppo: Charters are succeeding: Why we should expand, not limit them

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Apr. 11, 2016 

Massachusetts’ charter school debate has reached a fever pitch. Legislation proposed by Gov. Charlie Baker would allow more charters in poor-performing school districts, a similar question may appear on the statewide ballot this fall, and a group of prominent Boston attorneys has filed a lawsuit claiming the civil rights of students on charter school waitlists are being violated.

The House of Representatives appears ready to approve more charter schools, but legislation recently unveiled by the Senate makes it clear they have no interest in doing so. For years, charter public schools in Massachusetts have dramatically outperformed their district counterparts. But rather than making traditional schools more like charters, the Senate bill tries to do exactly the opposite, and responds to opponents’ bogus claims with provisions that micromanage school suspension policies and even who serves on charter school boards.

Among critics’ favorite accusations is that charter schools’ success is due to somehow managing to educate fewer special education (SPED) students and English language learners (ELLs). But a recent study by MIT researcher Elizabeth Setren finds that ELL and SPED students, who like everyone in oversubscribed charters were selected by lottery, score better on MCAS and are more likely to meet high school graduation requirements and earn state merit scholarships than their peers who entered charter lotteries but weren’t lucky enough to be chosen.

Statewide, charter ELL students achieve better English proficiency than their peers, and Boston charter schools have closed nearly 90 percent of the achievement gap that exists between ELLs and native English speakers in the Boston Public Schools (BPS). Basing these conclusions on comparisons between charter students and those who entered lotteries but weren’t selected isolates the impact of charter schools.

Charter gains extend even to students who entered the lottery with the lowest English proficiency and more extensive special education needs.

What about the claim that charter schools perform as well as they do because they encourage lower-performing students to transfer out? The MIT study debunks that one, too. Overall, the report finds no statistically significant difference in the attrition rate of SPED students in Boston charters and BPS students who entered charter lotteries (the rate is lower in elementary and middle schools and higher in high school).

As for attrition among ELLs, those in charter elementary and middle schools are less likely to switch than their counterparts who remain in district schools, while the rate is similar among high school students.

The study’s findings reinforce other research about charter school performance. Last year a Stanford University study found that Boston charter schools are doing more to eliminate the achievement gap between richer and poorer students than any other group of public schools in the country.

Critics who claim charters simply create the illusion of success by drilling students to do well on MCAS should look at another MIT study that was published this year. It finds that Boston charter school students have significantly higher SAT scores and are more likely to take Advanced Placement tests and attend four-year colleges than are their counterparts who entered charter lotteries but were not selected.

On 2014 MCAS tests 18 charter schools – many of them urban – finished first in all of Massachusetts, which has the best-performing K-12 public schools in the country. It should come as no surprise that 34,000 students are on charter school waitlists, which Gov. Baker has called “a disgrace.”

As with so many issues, the charter debate comes down to money. When a student chooses to leave for a charter school, so does the per-pupil funding associated with that student. But the nation’s most generous reimbursements give districts more than two years of funding even after a student has departed. Gov. Baker has proposed adding another $20 million to the reimbursement pot this year.

Over two decades since the first Massachusetts charter school opened, opponents have hurled a steady stream of criticisms at the schools. As state leaders contemplate lifting the charter cap, an MIT study demonstrates that claims of charters somehow avoiding English language learners and special needs students are the latest in a long line of inaccurate attacks.

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