

STUDY CHARTER SCHOOLS OUTPACE COUNTERPARTS IN CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAP

By Gintautas Dumcius
STATE HOUSE NEWS SERVICE

STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MAY 13, 2007...Citing an analysis employing MCAS scores from 2006, charter public school advocates say students at the schools are outpacing their public school district counterparts when it comes to closing the achievement gap among minority and low-income students.

The study comes as Gov. Deval Patrick and his advisors are planning a sweeping reform of the state's education superstructure, a plan that will likely feature education financing changes. On the campaign trail, Patrick opposed lifting the cap - set at 120 and with about 60 already in existence - on charter schools until the funding formula, a constant source of tension between public charter and traditional public schools, is fixed.

The issue of charter schools has been controversial since they first surfaced 14 years ago as part of a major state education reform effort. Proponents, who say the schools allow for choice and innovation, and opponents, who charge that charter schools drain funds from the public school districts, often harshly criticize each other.

Drawing on state Department of Education data, the analysis by a non-profit group with aims to promote charter schools shows 49.7% of African-American students score as "proficient" and "advanced" in English versus 35.1% of African-American students in public school districts. In math, African-American students in charter schools score 30.2 % compared to 18.9% in the district.

Among Hispanics, 41 percent score "proficient" and advanced" in English versus 29.2 % of those in public school districts, according to the **Community Partners Initiative (CPI), a group formed by the Community Day Charter Public School based in Lawrence**. In math, almost 30% of Hispanic students in charter schools scored in the two top categories, compared to 17% among traditional public school attendees.

"What it's showing is charter schools overall are outperforming sending districts," said Marc Kenen, executive director of Massachusetts Charter Public School Association.

"Charter schools create cultures in their schools that focus on leaving no child behind by providing support systems for every student, making sure every student is known in the school," Kenen said.

Low-income and special education students also fare better, according to the analysis, scoring in the top two categories in English at a 44.8% clip versus 34% in the district and 26.7% against 15.7% in the district, respectively.

Charter school critics, noting the analysis was done by charter school proponents, say the

average student census in a charter school isn't representative of the larger community the children are in.

"It's comparing Macintosh to Cortland apples," said Glenn Koocher, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees.

Charter school critics also point to a recent Worcester Polytechnic Study, which draws on state Department of Education enrollment data, that says, "[i]n particular, Special Education (SPED) and Limited English Proficient (LEP) students are underrepresented in the charter school system."

"Whether intentionally or unintentionally, charter schools appear to disproportionately enroll certain types of students, as compared with the school districts the charter school serves," the study says.

Charter school proponents, who note the WPI study as commissioned by two school superintendents hostile to charter schools, maintain comparing the same "apples to apples" is exactly what their analysis of the achievement gap does.

"The numbers, generally, across the state, are pretty similar," Kenen said, acknowledging that some charter schools have higher special education populations, and some have lower ones.

It is also impossible to control who they get as students, he added, due to the lottery system method of assigning students, and with 17,000 students on waiting lists for charters.

Paul Reville, who said he hasn't seen the CPI study and considers himself an agnostic on the subject of charter schools and the relationship with the public schools, said it's difficult to generalize about the charters.

"They're all quite different and their styles are different," with the range of performance paralleling the public schools', the president of the independent Rennie Center for Education Research and Policy said.

"The jury's still out as far as I'm concerned," he said. "It's an experiment that's ripening, but it's very difficult to make any generalities."

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