

Are Charter Schools a Plausible Remedy for the Achievement Gap?

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Summary. The current Education Reform bill seeks to address the achievement gap by lifting the cap on charter schools. Yet current charters substantially underserve student groups most likely to be struggling.

Statements in the popular press and elsewhere frequently claim that charters enroll at-risk students at or above the rate seen in traditional public schools. The confusion arises from comparing charters to public schools statewide. The appropriate comparison involves charters and schools in the same locale. In that comparison, charters are far behind nearby traditional public schools in serving students most at-risk.

Charters Don't Serve the Average Students in Their Communities

Questions about charters, and how to find answers. Do charter schools select kids with special needs at the same rate as the local public schools? Do they select more minorities than the traditional schools? Such questions are crucial for understanding the likely impact of current legislation aimed at closing the achievement gap by opening more charter schools.

Many commentators have failed to see how to answer these questions. For example, Jim Stergios, of the Pioneer Institute (2009), writes that “...*charters still enroll far higher percentages of the Commonwealth’s neediest and minority students.*” While literally true, this statement is misleading and irrelevant to evaluating the current Education Reform Bill.

To understand how students are selected by the charter school enrollment process, we need to look at students who live in the vicinity of charter schools. Only by comparing the characteristics of these local students with those enrolled in charters can we understand whether charter schools are serving their share of students who are academically at risk.

Table 1. Charter vs. Traditional School Enrollment of Selected Student Groups

	CHARTER SCHOOLS	TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS IN THE CHARTER’S HOST DISTRICT	ALL TRADITIONAL SCHOOLS STATEWIDE
First language not English	16.5%	33.5%	15.4%
Limited English Proficiency (LEP)	4.1%	14.7%	5.9%
Low income	46.9%	60.3%	30.7%
Free lunch	37.5%	51.8%	25.2%
Special Education (SPED)	11.9%	19.6%	17.1%
African American + Hispanic	51.8%	50.3%	22.5%

Based on DESE data, 2008-09.

Correct comparisons dispel confusion. Table 1 displays the results of comparing the profiles of charter school students to that of traditional school students *in the district where the charter is sited (the “host district”)*. The first two numeric columns display the appropriate comparisons.

Table 1 shows that public school districts hosting charters enroll many times more English deficient students than do the charter schools. Furthermore, traditional schools enroll substantially more low income kids than do charter schools.

Moreover, compared to charter schools, public district hosts serve nearly double the rate of SPED students, a group that requires costly services.

Finally, do minorities enroll in charters at a greater rate than they enroll in nearby traditional schools? Table 1 provides a clear answer: no, the data demonstrate that minorities are almost identically represented in charters and in traditional host districts.

Are these results controversial? The pattern is clear: charters underserve special needs groups in minority communities. Why are contrary statements sometimes found in commentary at the Pioneer Institute and elsewhere?

The confusion is explained by looking at the last column in Table 1. These numbers show the enrollment rate among special student groups throughout the state, including districts with charters and those without. In this comparison, charters seem to be serving more than their share of special needs students.

But the use of statewide figures shows only that charters are located in communities that differ from the "average". Put another way, districts that host charters serve much higher rates of special needs and minority students than does the average district. Yet charters in these host districts don't share in the work: Table 1 shows that *charters neglect the enrollment of students in their locale most likely to struggle with academic achievement.*

Boston Charters: Leaving Special Needs Kids Behind?

The pattern is even clearer in Boston. As shown in Table 2, compared to Boston charters, traditional public schools in Boston carry a larger share of kids in every special needs category, excepting minorities.

Table 2. Charter vs. Traditional School Enrollment of Selected Student Groups in Boston

	BOSTON CHARTER SCHOOLS	TRADITIONAL BOSTON SCHOOLS
First language not English	17.1%	38.1%
Limited English Proficiency (LEP)	1.4%	18.9%
Low income	70.9%	74.3%
Free lunch	54.4%	65.3%
Special Education (SPED)	13.2%	20.5%
African American + Hispanic	84.3%	76.0%

DESE data for Boston Schools, 2008-09.

In the case of LEP, Boston charters take on virtually none of the challenge, leaving it entirely to the traditional Boston schools. These are sobering numbers: Boston traditional schools are responsible for over 10,000 LEP kids. Charter schools in Boston are responsible for 93.

Are Charter Schools Prepared to Start Serving Special Needs Students?

Table 3 (see below) shows special student enrollment figures for all charter schools in Massachusetts organized by hosting district, along with the comparable host district figures, allowing for ready comparison of charter vs. host district enrollment rates. (These numbers are the basis for Table 1 and 2.)

Table 3 shows one Boston charter school where enrollment of special needs runs counter to the prevailing pattern. Uphams Corner Charter enrolled both SPED and low income students at rates above those found in Boston Public Schools. Yet Uphams was unable to cope with the resulting challenges, leading it to lose its charter earlier this year.

The Uphams Corner Charter example raises a question: if all charter schools were compelled to follow this charter's example and provide for the distribution of students served in their host districts, how many charters would still be operating? And would there then be a bill advocating for charter school expansion?

Is the Education Reform Bill Aimed at the Right Students?

Much has been made in the Boston Globe and other pro-charter organizations about the promise of charter schools in closing the achievement gap. Yet as these data demonstrate, charter schools do not so much address as side-step achievement gaps: charters leave it to the local public schools to try and close the gap among the students whose circumstances put them at academic risk.

Irony of charter finance. The data show that it is traditional public schools in the vicinity of charter schools, not charter schools, that most intensively engage with students handicapped by poverty and limited English proficiency. These host districts are *de facto* tasked with serving the most resource intensive students. At the same time, these districts are required to transfer tuition payments to the local charter schools in proportion to district per pupil expenditures.

The rationale for this transfer is that charters and local district schools serve the same mix of students. Yet the data tell us this rationale is false, and that charters serve a substantially less challenging—and less costly—segment of the district's students. Thus, ironically, the bill to expand charter schools counters the administration's stated intention of more forcefully addressing the achievement gap.

Education reform bill: Who gets the benefits? The education reform bill now before the legislature effectively provides expanded educational resources for those students in a district that are most ready to learn. At the same time, the bill diverts revenue away from traditional schools that serve more challenging students in the districts.

To genuinely address the achievement gap, the legislature should ensure that resources are directed at the classrooms most engaged in serving students most at risk—the traditional public school classrooms in districts that surround charter schools.