

## A Vision for Boston: Questions for the 2009 Mayoral Candidates

### DAY 5: CHARTER SCHOOLS

***President Obama and Governor Patrick favor expanding charter public schools, and three mayoral candidates have come out for expanding some form of them in Boston. What is your position on charter schools and their possible expansion? Do you believe charter school funding should be modified?***

Boston's charter public schools have generally outperformed the district's schools on achievement tests. A recent Harvard/MIT study for The Boston Foundation found that academic gains from one year in several of the City's Commonwealth charter schools made up the equivalent of half the achievement gap between African-American and white students on middle school math and high school English language arts MCAS exams.

In addition, many students in Boston's charter schools consistently score "proficient" and "advanced" on MCAS exams, placing their schools among the highest scoring in the state. The MATCH Charter High School was the only high school in Boston that made the top 100 on *Newsweek's* recent list of the nation's best public high schools. (To provide context, Boston Latin School made the list at 165.)

Currently, fourteen Commonwealth charter schools operate in Boston. These schools are run independent of Boston Public Schools (BPS) and union contract rules. Over 5,200 Boston students attend them, which is equivalent to 9% of the BPS enrollment. They are funded based on the cost of educating each student by program and grade level. State education aid follows the student, which means that Boston's state aid is allocated to the charter schools attended by Boston students. The state reimburses BPS on a declining scale for the first three years a student attends a charter school. The net loss to BPS in fiscal 2009 was \$47 million.

Boston also has two Horace Mann charter schools, in-district charter schools approved by the School Committee and Boston Teachers Union. They are funded through the BPS budget but operate with much of the same autonomy as Commonwealth charter schools.

Charter school proponents point to that autonomy and resultant flexibility, and to the schools' structured curricula, as keys to their success. They also point out that charter public schools serve higher percentages of minorities and low-income students than district schools, and therefore are a model to address persistent achievement gaps. Proponents consider charter schools an important option for students and parents and note that over 8,500 Boston students are on waiting lists for them.

Conversely, opponents claim that charter public schools skim the best students from district schools and deplete the BPS of state funding. Opponents also argue that charter schools don't serve the same levels of special education and English Language Learner students, and have different student retention policies, accounting for what they see as artificially high standardized test scores.

Currently, the state is not authorizing new Commonwealth charter schools in Boston. The BPS has, practically speaking, reached the state cap that prevents more than 9% of district spending from being transferred to charter schools.

***What role should Commonwealth charter schools play in serving students and parents in Boston? Should the existing cap on Commonwealth charters be lifted in Boston? If you support a charter school-style structure other than Commonwealth charters, what is its advantage over the current system? Do you think the current funding mechanism for Commonwealth charter schools should be modified and if so, how?***

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