Are charter schools really 'laboratories of innovation'?

DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Khamara Cleaves taught a dance class for 6th grade students at the Brooke Charter School in Mattapan.

By James Vaznis | GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 12, 2016

For decades, charter schools have been billed as "laboratories of innovation," conjuring up images of teachers and administrators brainstorming and testing cutting-edge instruction that — if proven successful — could deliver salvation to urban education.

But the track record of Massachusetts charter schools on innovation is mixed. While some charters are innovative, others simply strive to build high-quality schools using existing methods and do not necessarily invent new practices.

In the end, charter school practices have been adopted only sporadically in other schools, and many educators in traditional districts say the innovations touted by charters are not really very innovative. Consequently, opponents argue that voters should reject Question 2 on the November ballot, which would authorize up to 12 new charter schools or enrollment expansions in existing charter schools.

But charter school operators, who support passage of the measure, argue that charters have been innovative and are influencing the course of public education for the better.

Match Charter School in Boston has come up with an intensive tutoring program that has gained national attention and has been replicated in such school systems as Lawrence. Phoenix Academy in Chelsea has created a

college preparatory program for a most unlikely student population — those at risk of quitting high school — and has since partnered with Lawrence on a high school initiative.

Should Mass. lift the charter school cap?

Question 2 on the Nov. 8 ballot would allow some charter schools to expand and some new schools to open.

Conservatory Lab Charter School in Dorchester infuses music into its regular classroom lessons. And students at Parker Charter Essential School in Devens take part in exhibitions to demonstrate their knowledge instead of sitting down for standardized tests.

Yet one of the most defining features of charter schools — the extended school day — remains hotly disputed as one of their innovations. That's because some traditional schools, such as the Timilty Middle School in Roxbury, have had a longer day well before the first charter schools opened in the 1990s.

Several state educational leaders write off that earlier experiment as a novelty in a handful of schools that often fell victim to budget cutting. They say that districts, such as Boston, didn't push for widescale adoption until a growing body of research highlighted longer school days as a component of charter success.

Many education specialists say the subjective nature of the word "innovation" will always make it difficult to assess whether charter schools are truly education pioneers.

"Innovation is in the eye of the beholder," said Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education at the University of Washington, which has done research on charter schools. But she added, "If people are looking for radically different approaches, I think that is a narrow definition of innovation."

Lake said what makes charter schools stand apart is their freedom to repackage existing practices into new combinations that best suit their students' needs.

Innovation is at the heart of Massachusetts' charter school law, passed as part of the 1993 Education Reform Act. It called for establishing the independently run public schools "to stimulate the development of innovative programs within public education" and went on to use the words "innovative" or "innovation" nearly a dozen times.

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Pencil in hand, Jamai Morton attended a 4th grade math class at the Brooke Charter School in Mattapan.

But the law and resulting regulations never defined innovation, leaving it open to interpretation.

A 2014 state auditor's report, which examined the state Education Department's oversight of charter schools, found widespread disagreement among charter schools over what constituted innovation. The report suggested some were claiming "innovations" commonly found in traditional schools: community service, internships, and teacher-generated curriculums.

It also knocked the Education Department for not sharing charter-school innovations with traditional schools in a systematic way, and urged the department to take corrective action against charter schools that don't create innovative approaches that can be replicated.

Auditor Suzanne Bump said her office undertook the audit in part to explore the question of what charter schools have innovated and was surprised the state never defined innovation.

"I thought when we started this audit that we would be able to pull together the information that would help resolve some of this lingering debate, but in fact we found we couldn't," Bump said.

So much confusion exists over "innovation" that the state Education Department avoids the term.

For example, the state asks charter-school applicants to explain how their design elements are "unique and distinct" instead of using the language in state law that instructs applicants to explain what "innovative methods" they intend to use.

In fact, the only time the word innovation appears in the 66-page guidelines for charter-school applicants is in quoting state law.

Even the state's final review documents of charter school proposals, which the state education board relies on in voting on recommendations, rarely mentions innovation. The words innovation or innovative appeared in only a handful of those documents over the last five years, according to a Globe analysis of more than two dozen proposals.

Cliff Chuang, a senior associate education commissioner who oversees the charter school office, said the phrase “unique and distinct” is more effective in getting responses that show what is innovative.

“To say something is innovative doesn’t tell you much,” Chuang said. “Innovation is a buzzword.”

Chuang said the department’s primary goal is to identify proposals that are “high quality.”

Some Massachusetts charter schools unabashedly embrace the quest for new ideas. Boston’s Match Charter Public School touts itself as the “engine of discovery and applied innovation in education.”

Under its intensive tutoring model, recent college graduates tutor small groups of students and often serve as mentors. In the early days, the tutors lived on the top floor of Match’s high school and many of them developed a love for tutoring.

That, in turn, prompted Match to create its own graduate school of education — an unheard of move for a public school — so its tutors could become teachers.

Other charter schools are motivated less by innovation.

During a school tour in August, Jon Clark, a codirector of the Brooke Charter Schools in Boston, almost cringed at the mention of the word “innovative,” even though its school year starts in early August, saying instead the school’s approach is simply common sense.

"I'm much less concerned about our program being innovative than ensuring every one of our black and Latino kids have access to a quality education," Clark said.

Advocates of traditional schools point out that traditional schools have pursued new ideas for generations. Those efforts include the creation of dual-language schools and the teaching of students with disabilities in regular classrooms.

"There are innovative practices taking place every day in public schools," said Barbara Madeloni, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

Charter school advocates argue that the mere structure of such schools is innovative. They operate independently of local school systems and rarely employ union teachers.

The approach paved the way for similar structures within traditional school systems, such as Boston's pilot schools, which began in the 1990s to compete with charter schools. State policy makers eventually replicated the pilot-school model statewide, calling them innovation schools, which local systems can open without state approval.

Cara Stillings Candal, a Boston University adjunct professor who has conducted research on charter schools for the right-leaning Pioneer Institute in Boston, said innovations in the charter sector have been hamstrung since a 2010 change in state law restricted the opening of new charter schools in underperforming districts to operators with proven records.

"We haven't left any room to try new ideas," Candal said. "It's not in the broad interest of a charter school applicant to propose a radical idea when there's a likelihood that it will be shot down."

Question 2

What would the charter ballot initiative do?

IF MEASURE PASSES

If voters pass the ballot measure the state's board of education could approve 12 new or expanded charter schools per year. If there are more than 12 applications in a given year, the board would give preference to proposals in districts that fall in the bottom 25 percent on state tests. Approval of the measure could mean significant additions, over time, to the current stock of 78 charter schools statewide.

IF MEASURE FAILS

The state will maintain current limits on the number of charter schools that can open.

SOURCE: Secretary of Massachusetts

JAMES VAZNIS, JAMES ABUNDIS / GLOBE STAFF

James Vaznis can be reached at jvaznis@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter

@globevaznis.

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