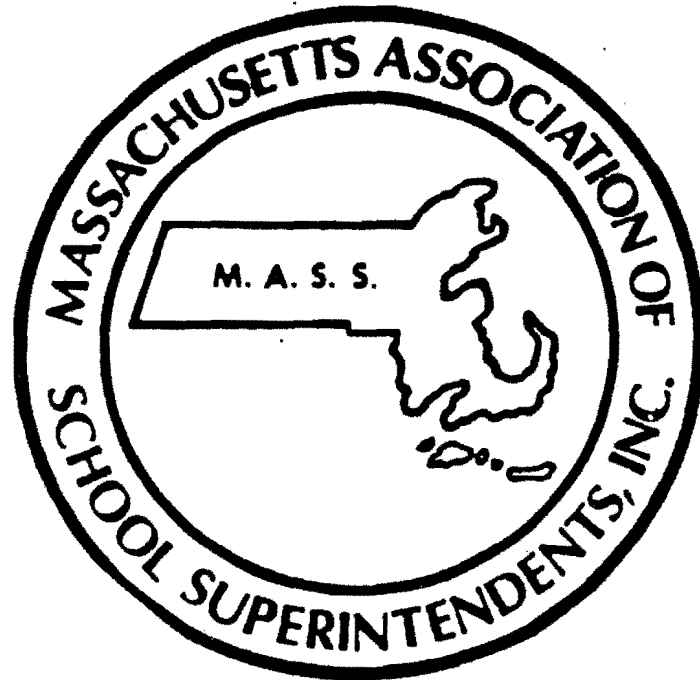


CHARTER SCHOOLS



A POSITION PAPER OF THE MASSACHUSETTS ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENTS

132 Lincoln Street, Suite 6L
Boston, MA 02111

617-451-1151

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This position paper was prepared by the Charter Schools Sub-Committee of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents'. The following individuals participated in the development of the paper:

Isa K. Zimmerman, Superintendent of Schools, Acton-Boxborough (Ch.)

Irwin Blumer, Superintendent of Schools, Newton

James Caradonio, Deputy Superintendent, Worcester

Charles Ferris, Superintendent of Schools, Harwich

Matthew King, Superintendent of Schools, Lincoln-Sudbury

John MacLean, Superintendent of Schools, Hull

Arthur Steller, Deputy Superintendent, Boston

Peter R. Finn, Executive Director

Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents

INTRODUCTION

Charting change in our schools is a fundamental continuous enterprise. Schools are enriched by embracing new visions, new ideas, new practices and new opportunities. Massachusetts public schools enjoy a long history of developing innovative programs and practices. Reform is woven into the tapestry of our diverse public school systems.

The Charter Schools established under the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Education Reform Act emanate from the Commonwealth's traditional commitment to educational change. Charter Schools seek to "stimulate the development of innovative programs within public education; to provide opportunities for innovative learning and assessments; to provide parents and students with greater options in choosing schools within and outside their districts; to provide teachers with a vehicle for establishing schools with alternative, innovative methods of educational instruction and school structure and management; to encourage performance-based educational programs; and to hold teachers and school administrators accountable for students' educational outcomes." The prospect of enhanced innovation, increased parental involvement, and improved methods of instruction holds much promise. Charter Schools aim to accelerate the pace of progress by creating separate experimental public/private hybrids. While they are similar to the successful innovative pilot programs in existence in school districts throughout the Commonwealth, Massachusetts Charter Schools are independent of local public school authority, entitled to local public school funding, exempt from several state regulations, and empowered to set student selection criteria.

THE ISSUES

At most, Massachusetts Charter Schools will reach a small fraction of the school population. Because the State will continue to educate between 75% and 85% of the student population in the Commonwealth in the public schools, MASS is concerned about several issues which need to be addressed.

The first area of concern is that the Charter Schools do not have to comply with Sections 41 and 42 of Chapter 71 of the Massachusetts General Laws, sections which deal with tenure and dismissal rights for teachers and administrators. Charter Schools also do not have elected (or mayorally appointed) school committees; the boards of trustees are self-selected by those who plan the Charter School and thus not similarly accountable to the public. Charter Schools may also hire uncertified teachers without recourse to the waiver process. This is of concern to us because it creates an uneven playing field. If public schools could be released from those restrictions, there might not be a perceived need for Charter Schools. We also do not embrace the bureaucracy that exists in many public schools, but much of that bureaucracy comes from state regulations and mandated reports and activities. It is true that Charter Schools can be established within a public school system. But not much encouragement has come from the state for that kind of alternative.

Second is the general category of "losses" from the public school systems. These losses take the form of money, students, and teachers.

Taking money through the per pupil allocation from the public schools for students who may be the least expensive to educate does not allow those public schools to "improve or move to a higher standard" whatever that standard might be. It also negatively impacts the financial status of smaller and poorer school districts. Furthermore, the charter school formula essentially acts as a *voucher* for students currently attending private and parochial schools. Presently public schools do not receive per pupil allocations for those students. Under the Charter School arrangement, public schools will have to pay for these students to attend a Charter School even though they are not enrolled in the public schools.

The public school's foundation budget also will be reduced and there will be loss of the per pupil aid. This is a multiple cost to the school district. It is also not clear what the per pupil figure is going to be. For example, will it be the school district's per pupil allocation based on pre-Kindergarten to grade 12 costs, or will it be based on the costs for identical grades or student populations? And, how will transportation costs be treated?

Public schools are mandated to teach all of the children of the community, the long-standing mission of public education. Charter Schools, on the other hand, are targeted to specific groups of students whose absence from public schools will be felt. The students who remain are likely to be more expensive to educate because they may require a greater percentage of additional services. There will likely be less diversity, and less ethnic and socioeconomic balance in public schools.

Innovative staff have long enriched public school education. Diverting some of our risk-taking teachers, a likely outcome of Charter Schools, may remove from the public schools some of the energy and inspiration as well as slow the changes which are underway in the public schools of Massachusetts.

A third area of concern is the question of evaluation. Who will ensure the Charter Schools meet their targets? What kind of measurement will be fair and authentic? Who will be authorized to adjudicate disputes?

A fourth area of concern is the issue of successful innovation in Charter Schools and how these innovations will transfer to public schools. Successful innovation needs to demonstrate that it can occur in the public schools. There are many examples in the last two decades of individual schools, supported by various federal government titles and private foundations, which have been extremely successful but whose achievements have never become adopted on a large scale. Unless a mechanism is established from the beginning which ensures dissemination and adoption, Charter Schools will simply repeat history, at the expense of public schools and their students and parents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations center around six areas: finances, students, teachers, replication of innovations, evaluation and local school district innovation.

1. The best way to solve the financing dilemma of Charter Schools is to have the state fully fund the schools. The state could establish grant programs for Charter Schools, perhaps requiring that the school match the funds from fund-raising efforts. With state funding of charter Schools there would be no impact on local districts for students who were previously attending parochial or private schools. With full state funding, the cost to the local school districts would be borne by a reduction in the districts' foundation budget and per pupil education aid only, rather than absorbing those reductions in addition to a per pupil assessment to the Charter School. If the Commonwealth wishes to promote a specific means of innovation, it should pay for it. It presents an enormous problem to public schools to have to pay tuition for Charter School attendees from the operating budget after that budget has been approved.
2. Remove the possibility for selective admission of students. If the Charter Schools are to develop innovations which can be replicated in a heterogeneous public school population, then the Charter School itself must have heterogeneous population. To increase the likelihood of such a population, Charter Schools' admission could be based upon open enrollment and selections by lottery if the number who apply exceed the number of spaces available per grade level, or the Charter School could design a selection process which guarantees that the Charter School will have the same diversity as the other schools in the district in which it is located. If the Charter School is in a district which has an approved desegregation plan or draws students from a district which has an approved plan, (either voluntary or involuntary), then the Charter School's admissions procedures and enrollments should comply with the procedures and parameters of the desegregating school system.
3. Limit the leave of absence for teachers to teach in a Charter School to two years. If teachers wish to stay in the Charter School, then they should resign from their positions so that the school system can hire teachers who are committed to the system and who can acquire professional teacher status in the system.
4. Establish immediately a task force or panel to design a fair and authentic evaluation process so that there will be base line data from the inception of the Charter Schools, and valid means to measure the success of Charter Schools.
5. Provide effective mechanisms and assistance for local school districts to adopt innovations from Charter Schools. If schools are to adopt the innovations of Charter Schools, then they should do so under the same conditions, primarily relief from restrictive state laws and regulations. In addition, state funding and consultation would be necessary.

6. Finally, encourage local school districts to establish innovative programs within existing schools or with entire schools with the same incentives provided through Charter Schools. Allow school districts to establish partnerships with individuals or corporations without losing control - a true partnership, i.e., develop a mechanism for local school district schools and faculties to innovate without having to opt out of local school committee control to become a Charter School.

Finally, our concerns about Charter Schools are not about competition. Many of us deal with competition every day in our school systems. Rather, we are concerned about unequal opportunities and restrictions. What we ask is that the State give public schools the same freedoms that have been given to Charter Schools.

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