

Charter schools can be role model

By Paul S. Grogan | Monday, November 15, 2010 | <http://www.bostonherald.com> | [Op-Ed](#)

The hue and cry over Superintendent Carol Johnson's plan to close a handful of Boston public schools is a painful reminder of the consequences of declining enrollment in Boston. Since 2001, the BPS has dropped from 63,024 students to 55,371, a loss of more than 12 percent.

Contrast this situation with the charter school movement. Charters enroll almost 5,000 students in Boston today, almost 28,000 statewide. And there will continue to be more growth, because last January's education reform legislation doubles charter seats in cities where the demand for charters is strongest.

Boston has some of the best charter schools in the nation, and the Department of Education already has proposals requesting 7,600 new slots, far exceeding the 5,000 or so the new law authorizes. The draw is no mystery. What these charters are achieving with a largely low-income, minority population is beyond stunning.

Boston Collegiate and Boston Preparatory tied for the highest MCAS math scores in the state among 10th-graders with Boston Latin, surpassing their suburban peers. One Boston charter school, the Edward Brooke, earned top state MCAS honors in both math and English for eighth-grade students.

The new law also gives the regular urban public schools new mechanisms and resources to compete with charters.

What are the prospects for this part of the legislation in Boston? Far less clear because of the fierce resistance to change by the leadership of the Boston Teachers Union.

The union has a chance to show some pragmatism in its negotiation for a new Boston teachers' contract, which expired in August. The old contract is a 253-page tome, with a 40-page appendix, the perfect symbol of the rule-bound, command-and-control dinosaur the school system has become.

In the traditional system, between the dictates of the central bureaucracy and the prescriptions of the teachers' contract, precious few decisions are made by the educators in the school who actually have the direct contact with the children. Charters by contrast control staffing, budget, curriculum and the length of the school day and year. Nowhere is the difference starker than in the length of the school day. The average charter school day is over two hours longer than the prescribed day (one of the shortest in the country) in the regular Boston public schools.

Boston needs a contract that allows the district to speedily introduce "charter-like" practices, such as a much longer school day.

Is success within the district possible? Absolutely, and the blueprint can be glimpsed at schools like the Clarence Edwards Middle School in Charlestown. Given charter-like autonomy, the

school added 300 hours to each student's school year, which means more instruction in English and math as well as time for the arts and athletics.

The results have been dramatic. The Edwards School has reduced the achievement gap with the state average by 80 percent in English and by two-thirds in science, and families have responded. In 2006, a mere 17 rising sixth-graders chose Edwards Middle School as their first choice. In 2009, that number had soared to over 500 - creating a waiting list of families seeking to join this renewed school.

The success of the Edwards School and the inevitable growth of the city's charter schools summarize the great opportunity before the leadership of the Boston school department and the Boston Teachers Union. They can use this historic moment to make transformational change a reality and reclaim a central role in Boston education, or they can watch continued decline as greater numbers of families and students understandably seek alternatives. For BTU President Richard Stutman, Boston Superintendent Carol Johnson and Mayor Tom Menino, this will be a defining choice.

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