
Students face tough odds to get charter school seats

By Akilah Johnson

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Latisha Boykin ran her finger down the long list of names taped to the back wall of a classroom at the Edward W. Brooke Charter School. She hoped her daughter's name would be high enough to guarantee her a seat in the expanding school's new fifth-grade class, for which there were 48 openings.

And there it was: No. 47.

"She got a spot!" Boykin whispered to her mother before exchanging high-fives with her daughter, and peppering school codirector Jon Clark with questions about sibling preference and the school schedule. Her kindergartner is on the wait list for first grade.

"This is, like, my third time trying to get her in," Boykin, of the South End, said of the school with longer days and an extended year. "I'm so happy. I had already decided that she wouldn't go back to public school, so it was charter or a parochial school."

Last night was lottery night for many of Boston's 14 independently run charter schools as well as the six new schools opening this fall. Enrollment is determined by chance, with schools drawing names from fish bowls, hats, and boxes.

According to the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, about half of the schools reported having 8,000 applicants for 1,000 open seats. And so with applicants far outnumbering available seats last night, emotions ran high for parents hoping to enroll their children at a charter school, seen as an alternative in a city with too many low-performing schools.

"We definitely do not try to make a big production of it," Clark said at the Roslindale school, where hundreds of parents gathered with the hope of winning seats. "For every person who is ecstatic in here, there are going to be 10 people who are going to be devastated. And if not devastated, upset."

The Brooke School was inundated with about 3,000 applications for 228 open seats — a few at the existing campus and the rest at the new site.

The school will open its second kindergarten through eighth-grade school in August, but expansion will start slowly, with only kindergarten, first-, and fifth-grade classes opening next school year.

At the existing school, kindergarten is the only grade with open seats. There is space for 60 kindergartners, but the siblings of enrolled students have filled about half of the seats, Clark said.

Once the seats fill up, students' names go on a waiting list. Which is why each of the 3,000 slips of paper were pulled from clear plastic boxes, read out loud, and then taped to oversized paper.

"You feel this knot in your stomach. You're just waiting for that next card to be the one when they say it's the last one for a guaranteed spot," said Gandhi Sanchez of Dorchester, as she and her 5-year-old daughter, Amerie, left the gymnasium.

And after Amerie's name was not called, Sanchez said: "I want to apologize to her. With the education issues going on now, charter schools are basically the best opportunity for kids."

Charter schools, authorized under the 1993 Education Reform Act, are tuition-free public schools, created through a contract or charter with the state that authorizes the school and allows it to operate with more autonomy than a traditional school.

This year, 63 charter schools enrolled more than 27,000 students, about 20 percent of which are in Boston.

But a new state law was passed last year allowing school districts with the lowest scores on standardized tests to have significantly more charter school seats.

The state Board of Education last month approved 16 new charter schools. The vote added more than 7,000 charter school seats to districts statewide; about 70 percent of those seats will be in Boston.

And while the new schools mean there are more chances for children to enroll at a charter school, there are not nearly enough seats to meet demand, according to the association.

At MATCH Community Day Charter Public School, for example, more than 450 applied for 100 open seats at the school, which is still looking for a location.

The school, which will focus on educating students still learning English, will serve pre-kindergarten and second-graders next year when it opens but plans to expand to 700 students, kindergarten through 12th grade.

“Frankly, I look forward to the day when we don’t have to do a lottery and parents can choose whatever school is in their neighborhood,” principal Kate Carpenter Bernier said in a phone interview last night, occasionally interrupted by parents as they left.

“Congratulations. Thanks so much for coming,” she said to those on the list. For those who didn’t make it, there were words of comfort: “Don’t get discouraged,” and apply again next year.

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