

Blended Learning

OPINION: Here's a choice for Massachusetts' public schools - study top charters' practices to help underserved students

A new look at the evidence

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As students across Massachusetts await another school year, some will enter their new classrooms full years ahead in learning compared to their peers.

Massachusetts [ranks first](#) in the nation in student achievement, but has one of the largest poverty-based achievement gaps.

While schools alone are not responsible for these gaps, we do know that the best schools can help students from disadvantaged backgrounds catch up to their more advantaged peers, while disadvantaged students in lower quality schools fall further behind.

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Ensuring that all students in Massachusetts have access to high quality schools was at the heart of the recent debate over Question 2, the [proposed charter school expansion](#) initiative. Now that the debate on Question 2 has been decided for the foreseeable future — the ballot initiative was defeated, meaning that the current cap on charter schools will remain in place — it's time to shift the focus to how we can improve opportunities for all Massachusetts students, whether they attend charters or traditional public schools.

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At [J-PAL North America](#), a research center at MIT that aims to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence, we recently [synthesized the evidence](#) on charter schools, in order to understand which schools are effective and help us identify potential strategies for improving the performance of traditional public schools.

Related: [Students scramble as application season races down to the wire](#)

Just like public schools, charter schools by law must be open to any student residing in a given district, so when more students apply than there are seats available, the school holds a lottery to decide who gets in.

“Overcoming entrenched inequality in education will take a broad array of tools.”

These lotteries provide a unique opportunity for researchers, who have used them to uncover charter schools’ effect on the students who apply across a wide range of outcomes. Lottery studies can only estimate impacts for students who apply to charter schools that are oversubscribed, but research using these lotteries has a key advantage relative to other methods of evaluation.

Because the students who win charter school lotteries are the same, on average, as the students who don’t, we can be confident that any differences in outcomes between the two groups are the result of gaining access to a charter school, and not the other factors that influence a student’s educational experience.

In Massachusetts, [researchers found](#) that lottery winners for charter schools located in urban areas did substantially better than lottery losers. However, in rural and suburban areas, students who won acceptance to charter schools fared about the same, or somewhat worse, compared to those who didn’t. Black, Hispanic, and

previously poor-performing students gained the most by attending charter schools.

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Some studies in both [Massachusetts](#) and [New York City](#) have found that a “No Excuses” educational approach — characterized by mandated intensive tutoring, longer instruction times, frequent teacher feedback, strict disciplinary policies, and high expectations for students — is a common feature among charter schools with the biggest positive effects (however, the most effective of these schools are located in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, making it difficult to disentangle whether this is due to the No Excuses approach or sub-par public school alternatives).

Mandated, intensive tutoring particularly stands out as a common feature among effective schools.

No Excuses schools in [Boston](#) and [New York City](#) have also been shown to increase enrollment in four-year colleges and reduce teen pregnancy and incarceration rates.

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Researchers have also tested whether applying strategies that are frequently used in the most effective charter schools can boost performance in traditional public schools — and the evidence suggests it can.

In Houston, implementing a set of charter school “best practices” in traditional public schools led students to earn [higher math test scores](#). A randomized study in Chicago also found large gains in math test scores from implementing [mandated, intensive tutoring](#).

Overcoming entrenched inequality in education will take a broad array of tools. Learning from what works in charter schools provides an example of how we can rely on evidence to make decisions that can have real impacts on students. Doing so will help us make greater progress on the goal at the heart of the issue — not whether we should expand charter schools, but how we can provide the best opportunities for Massachusetts’ kids.

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