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## Tests show charter schools are earning passing grades

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It seems as though the better charter schools perform, the more intensely they are attacked.

In every corner of the state, otherwise intelligent people, some of them alleged experts, still claim that charter schools are a threat to quality education. That the best way to improve the lot of Massachusetts students is to put a lid on them or, better yet, get rid of them all.

They still contend that charter schools siphon money away from public schools, skim the brightest students and are totally unaccountable to the public.

Sure.

If you believe even a bit of that and have an open mind on the subject, take a look at the latest MCAS results.

In Lawrence, which still features some of the lowest scores in the state, students in the two local charter schools are performing better than those in the mainstream schools. The numbers at the Community Day Charter School were right up there with Andover. While some scores at the Lawrence Family Development Charter School declined since last year, students still outperformed the rest of the district.

The story is the same elsewhere, in Boston, Lowell, Springfield -- in short, all the places with high rates of poverty and minority students whose primary language is not English.

And across the state, charter school students scored in the Advanced/Proficient category at rates 5 percent to 10 percent better than the statewide average.

So, could everybody who claims to be "for the children" please acknowledge the obvious: Charter schools are good for the children. There should be more of them, not fewer.

While they're at it, they should also acknowledge that their criticisms of charter schools are demonstrably false.

Charter schools do not siphon money away from public schools. Charter schools are

public schools. And for at least the first year, students who choose a charter school are a financial boon to the mainstream school they left behind. The state gives them about a third of the money they would have had if the student had stayed. In other words, if anybody is siphoning money, it is the schools who get the bucks without having to educate the kid.

Charter schools do not skim the best students. They can't. They're not allowed to admit on merit. Students are selected by lottery. That's one of the reasons why the waiting list for the Community Day Charter School is around 600. And its student demographics are just about exactly those of the mainstream schools in Lawrence. The kids are overwhelmingly poor and minority. In many cases they come from single-parent homes.

Finally, who is really unaccountable to the public? Consider this: If a charter school doesn't meet standards, it is shut down. Look no further than Lynn for evidence of that. If a mainstream school doesn't meet standards, it gets more money. That one should be easy to figure out.

These falsehoods are all just a veil anyway, for what the critics really can't stand. It's not that charter schools are unaccountable to the public; it's that they are not as "accountable" to unions as mainstream schools. They actually have the flexibility to make decisions and set policies with the kids, rather than those on the payroll, as the priority.

If the charter school critics are really for the children, the recent MCAS scores are yet more evidence that they should move from confrontation to what they say they preach: Cooperation. Some of that exists, among the many good teachers and staff on both sides of the divide, but that attitude needs to spread.

The self-described protectors of mainstream schools ought to be looking at what makes charters successful. They ought to figure out why there is a waiting list to get into charter schools, while kids are dropping out of mainstream schools. Sure, class size matters. But what seems to matter more are things like parental involvement and discipline -- even to the point of dress codes.

Those things, far from crushing the spirit of kids, are giving them choices and freedom

for the future -- things they might never have without firm direction and high standards that carry both rewards and consequences.

The MCAS measures the achievement of schools as well as students. And it is clear that charter schools are passing.

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