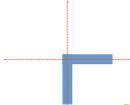


# Hopes, Fears, & Reality

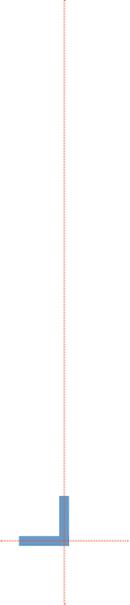


A BALANCED LOOK AT AMERICAN  
CHARTER SCHOOLS IN **2009**

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## CHAPTER 3

# High-Performing Charter Schools: Serving Two Masters?

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*“It must be remembered that the purpose of education is not to fill the minds of students with facts . . . it is to teach them to think.”*

Robert Hutchins

In today’s super-charged, often contentious debates about charter school performance, few refer explicitly to the actual practice of teaching in charter schools. However, if teaching has something to do with student performance, then describing how instructional practice plays a role in high-performing charter schools is important.

Even though much of the current rhetoric about school reform stresses the importance of instruction (as one Boston Public School educator wryly stated, the secret to improving student performance is about three things: “Instruction, Instruction, and Instruction”), it is surprising that instruction does not appear to be the only magic ingredient in high-performing charter schools. Some charter schools achieve impressive results by paying significant attention to factors other than instructional practice. For example, when asked about the instructional practices of teachers, a leader of a high-performing charter school stated,

*Our philosophy is [that] . . . our culture allows fifty-six minutes of learning to really be fifty-six minutes . . . It’s not like we have unique, amazing ideas of how to teach math . . . We don’t have an overarching philosophy of “How to actually teach,” “How to actually instruct.” It’s more of making sure that there is no time wasted. And how to use that time is up to you.<sup>1</sup>*

*Instruction does not appear to be the only magic ingredient in high-performing charter schools.*

Indeed, a recent study confirms the importance of school culture. In 2009, the Chartering Practice Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education published the results of a two-year qualitative study of five high-performing charter schools in Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> This study found that these schools achieve strong results not because of particularly innovative instructional practices, but because of coherent, schoolwide cultures focused on hard work and student outcomes. Findings from the study documented several essential elements that contributed to the academic success of these schools:

- a clear sense of mission and a broadly shared institutional culture;
- purposefully chosen teachers and administrators who “fit” the organization’s culture;
- organizational structures designed to support student learning; and
- behavioral systems and codes of conduct that enforce a “No Excuses” commitment to hard work and a palpable sense of urgency.

*Five high-performing charter schools in Massachusetts achieve strong results not because of particularly innovative instructional practices, but because of coherent, schoolwide cultures focused on hard work and student outcomes.*

The study suggests that these five schools are paragons of nonprofit organizational coherence. In many ways, they are like finely honed machines, highly motivated and carefully designed to achieve better student outcomes than traditional schools on the common measure used to compare schools in this *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) era: statewide high-stakes tests. These schools engage in the same activities as their rivals: serving breakfast and lunch, enforcing disciplinary codes, collecting homework, and teaching students to respect the possessions of others. Yet, using the metric of high-stakes tests (in Massachusetts it is called the MCAS—Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) that require that all students be tested, the schools in the study produce impressive results with children who are often “left behind” in traditional public schools. For example, in 2009, the three charter high schools in the study achieved the highest scores on the MCAS tenth grade verbal and math tests of any public high school in the state.<sup>3</sup>

*These five schools are like finely honed machines, highly motivated and carefully designed to achieve better student outcomes than traditional schools on the statewide high-stakes tests.*

At the same time, however, these three high schools are achieving less impressive results on college entrance exams, raising questions about whether policymakers and leaders of the charter movement are asking charter schools to serve two masters—high achievement on state basic competency measures and outstanding results on college readiness tests. Clearly, college entrance measures like the SAT and high-stakes state tests assess different attributes and have different purposes: the MCAS is intended to provide

information on whether the state standards were mastered, while the SAT “assesses the critical thinking skills students need for academic success in college—skills that students learned in high school.”<sup>4</sup> If charter schools are held accountable by these two differing accountability systems, then instructional practices within the schools may need some adjusting in order to meet the demands of multiple measures.

## EXTERNAL STRUCTURES THAT GUIDE INSTRUCTION IN HIGH-PERFORMING CHARTER SCHOOLS

Observations in over 70 classrooms over multiple days uncovered a remarkable similarity and coherence in the external structures that guide classroom interactions between teachers and students in high-performing charter schools. Classes in these schools often start in a similar way, with a short “Do Now” exercise that focuses students on prior work and sets up instruction for the day. In all classes, a common blackboard configuration presents the objectives for the lesson, an outline of the day’s activities, and homework assignments. The routine is very familiar to teachers and students.

The classrooms in these high-performing urban charter schools also exude a palpable urgency that communicates that the work is important—not a minute will be wasted. Behavioral codes focusing on conduct and decorum as well as a clear culture of working hard—all the time and for everyone—leave no doubt about the seriousness of the task at hand.

These successful charter schools also work to tightly align the content of their lessons to state curriculum documents through careful planning and explicit attention to state standards. This work may begin in the summer before students arrive, but it also continues on an ongoing basis throughout the year using student performance data. Some schools produce documents such as “curriculum alignment templates” and “curriculum calendars” to assist teacher planning. These materials act as year-long pacing guides in addition to content outlines that ensure a tight connection to state standards. What happens if students do not keep up with the pre-determined pacing guide? Students must come after school or on Saturdays to receive massive doses of tutoring and extra help to avoid falling behind. One teacher answered this question as if talking to a student: “If you’re not going to move at this pace, then you know what? You’re going to be doing it after school with somebody.”

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*Instructional practices within the schools may need some adjusting in order to meet the demands of multiple measures.*

Another common element in these high-performing schools is that all students experience frequent formative assessments that mirror high-stakes test conditions and items. In some high schools, students spend one day per month taking practice exams that mimic the MCAS or the SAT. Through such exposure, students learn both the format and the likely content of high-stakes tests so that there are few surprises when the tests actually count.

Observations of classrooms in these successful charter schools found an emphasis on elements external to the actual classroom interactions between teachers and students in the presence of content. Factors such as communication about objectives or assignments, student attention and decorum, curricular planning, and test awareness were highly consistent both across and within these high-performing schools. However, as successful charter schools raise their sights beyond state performance measures to college access and completion measures, a more intense focus on the academic tasks and cognitive demand made of students by teachers will become critical if schools are to meet multiple performance expectations.

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## TEACHER AND STUDENT INTERACTIONS AROUND CONTENT

Data from *Inside Urban Charter Schools* suggest that despite school leaders' awareness and monitoring of instructional practices, substantial variation in academic tasks and cognitive demand exists across classrooms within individual schools.<sup>5</sup> For example, observations documented instructional tasks in mathematics ranging from repetitive practice of procedures and drill and rote memory exercises to asking students to find and present two possible solutions to an unfamiliar problem. The range of academic tasks and cognitive demand in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms was also large; students might spend class time finding facts from a short passage, while in another class they could work on something as challenging as emulating an author's style. Further, the data show that instances of lower cognitive demand were more frequent in the classrooms than instances of higher cognitive demand.

While variation in teaching practice across classrooms is not unusual in schools, the finding surprised the researchers because these schools are so coherent and consistent across every other dimension of the organization. The finding also suggests that the significant success that these charter schools experience may derive more from the combined impact of the purposeful alignment of school culture, structures, systems, and the

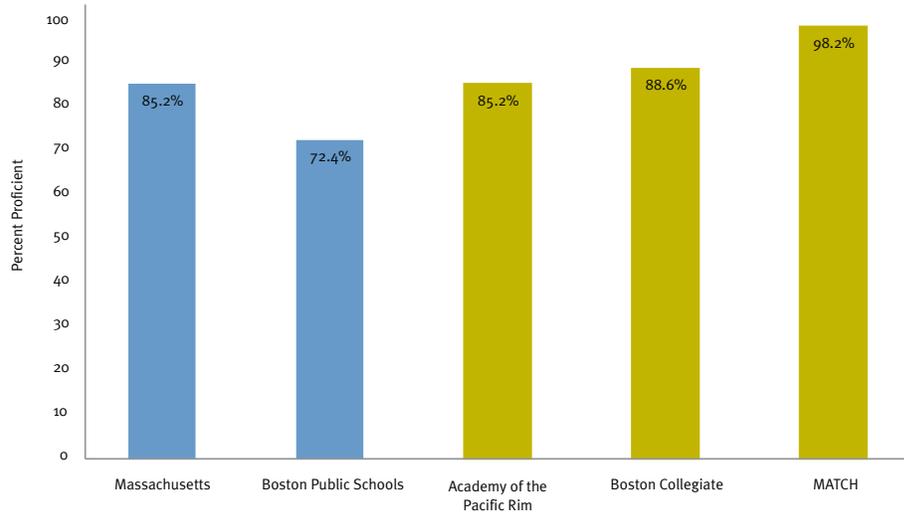
right people than the presence of consistently high-level, across-the-board instructional tasks. Indeed the combined impact of the non-instructional factors appears to trump variation in the classroom practice.

Several reasons help explain both the variation and the observation of lower-level tasks in these classrooms. First, charter schools, both in Massachusetts and nationally, are being held accountable to statewide performance measures, often called high-stakes tests. While several have suggested that the MCAS is one of the more demanding state-level tests, it nonetheless is a paper-and-pencil metric that includes multiple choice, short answer, and open response items.<sup>6</sup> Creating and implementing measures of higher cognitive thinking (tests that measure problem solving, decisionmaking, and creative thinking as well as habits of mind) are notoriously hard to design, expensive to develop, and beyond the scope of most state-level performance measures. Therefore, charter schools understandably peg their instruction to state-specific accountability systems and tests. No one should blame charter schools for targeting instruction to these external measures of performance; after all, if they do not meet these standards, their charters can be quickly revoked.

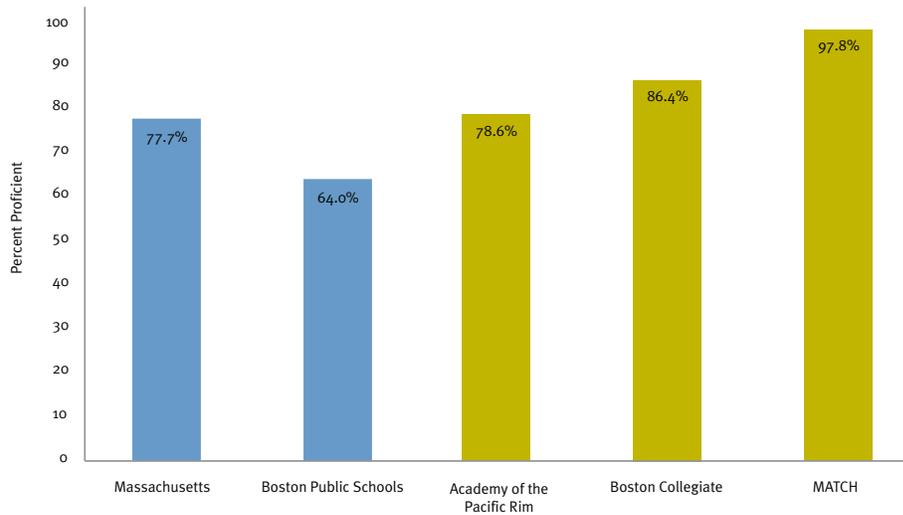
A second reason for variation and a presence of lower-level cognitive tasks and drill-based instruction is that many students enter charter schools well below grade level. Therefore, the belief is that the first task of a school must be to build a strong, skill-based foundation. Get the basics down first, the argument goes, and investigate, create, analyze, and explore later. Thus, if the performance measure is state-level, high-stakes tests, charter schools can be and are successful in meeting these challenges, as individual schools and networks such as Achievement First, the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), and Uncommon Schools demonstrate. Evidence of the success of schools in this study is included in figures 1 and 2.<sup>7</sup> In both ELA and math, tenth graders in these three charter high schools are on a par with and generally surpass all other tenth graders in Massachusetts.

*The combined impact of the non-instructional factors appears to trump variation in the classroom practice.*

**FIGURE 1. TENTH GRADE MCAS ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS RESULTS 2008**

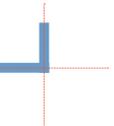


**FIGURE 2. TENTH GRADE MCAS MATHEMATICS RESULTS 2008**



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## ARE HIGH MCAS SCORES SUFFICIENT TO SATISFY EXPANDING COLLEGE MISSIONS?

Many secondary charter schools now embrace the additional goals of college entrance and success. For example, KIPP states that it is “helping all students climb the mountain to college,” while Achievement First promises to provide “all of our students with the academic and character skills they need to graduate from top colleges, to succeed in a competitive world, and to serve as the next generation of leaders of their communities.” In the Boston area, Boston Collegiate Charter School (BCCS) offers a mission “to prepare each student for college,” while the MATCH Charter Public High School “prepares Boston students to succeed in college and beyond.”

Embracing success in college is clearly desirable, but it introduces greater complexity and a new set of standards for charter schools that reach beyond state competency skills. For example, the Knowledge and Skills for University Success (KSUS) project developed by the Association of American Universities outlines the habits of mind, cognitive skills, general principles and concepts, and specific content knowledge deemed important for college success. A sample of suggested cognitive skills and habits of mind from KSUS are:

- analytical and critical thinking;
- problem solving;
- the ability to discern the relative importance and credibility of information; and
- the ability to draw inferences and reach conclusions independently.<sup>8</sup>

These skills are different and obviously more demanding than basic skills and rank at the higher end of commonly used cognitive demand continua.<sup>9</sup>

Assessing such forms of thinking and aptitude for college is difficult. One commonly used proxy for college readiness is the SAT. Table 1 presents data on the performance of the three high-performing Massachusetts charter high schools on the verbal and mathematics portions of the SAT test for 2007 and 2008.<sup>10</sup> The table outlines average scores for these schools as well as participation rates for Boston Public Schools, Massachusetts, and the nation. (Readers should note that these are raw averages and do not consider the various factors that can affect test scores.)

*Embracing the goals of college entrance introduces greater complexity and a new set of standards for charter schools that reach beyond state competency skills.*

TABLE 1. BOSTON PUBLIC (AND CHARTER) SCHOOLS PERFORMANCE ON THE SAT IN 2007 AND 2008

	Entity	Year	SAT verbal	SAT mathematics	Percent taking test
Reference group	United States	2008	502	515	45%
		2007	502	515	48%
	Massachusetts	2008	514	525	83%
		2007	513	522	85%
	Boston Public Schools	2008	438	457	64%
		2007	432	449	67%
Selected Charter Schools	Academy of the Pacific Rim	2008	not reported	not reported	
		2007	442	462	~100%
	Boston Collegiate (BCCS)	2008	494	545	~100%
		2007	460	464	~100%
	MATCH	2008	430	490	~100%
		2007	470	490	~100%

Average SAT scores remained steady nationally from 2007 to 2008 at 1017 (combined verbal and mathematics) but improved somewhat in Massachusetts (+4 points) and the Boston Public Schools (+14 points). However, among the two high-performing charter schools for which data were available (repeated attempts to gain 2008 SAT data from Academy of the Pacific Rim failed), only BCCS shows a year-over-year improvement (an impressive 115 points), while MATCH dropped more than 40 points. However, of particular note for years where data are available, all three charter schools outperform the Boston Public Schools on average, which is a significant achievement since Boston tests only 64 percent of their students (presumably those interested in college), while nearly 100 percent of charter school students take the SAT.

What might explain the apparent gap between the stellar performance of these charter high schools on the MCAS and their less impressive results on the college entrance SAT measure? Why, for example, do MATCH and BCCS rank in the top 20 high schools in the state on the MCAS scores in the spring of 2008, testing 100 percent of their tenth graders, while in the following fall of 2008 they receive combined SAT math and verbal scores of 920 (MATCH) and 1039 (BCCS)?

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These different results are intriguing, even though there are limits to their generalizability for policymakers. This is because the MCAS and the SAT are different exams, normed to different populations and on different scales. In order to complete a fair comparison between these tests, it would be necessary to conduct an item-by-item analysis and then look at scale scores and standardize them to reach a common scale. However, the MCAS scoring system will not permit such a comparison. Thus, readers can be left to ponder possible explanations for these test score differences.

Two possibilities are worth mentioning. First, it may be that these charter schools are stressing classroom activities that are more consistent with the types of questions and items found on the MCAS than on the SAT or ACT. Classroom observations in these schools documented far fewer instances of tasks at the higher end of the cognitive continua, and thus students may receive less preparation for SAT-type questions that ask students to understand and analyze written material, reason quantitatively, solve problems, and interpret data, all higher-order cognitive tasks.

Second, the differences may suggest that charter schools that try to serve two masters—the state-level proficiency tests (upon which they are evaluated) and the SAT college readiness indicator (to which their students aspire)—may be particularly challenged, especially in secondary schools of only four grades. Moving underperforming students to a level of proficiency on state tests is a critically important and ambitious goal; however, helping students gain the skills and habits of mind to enter and succeed in college may be quite another. The policy question is, can charter schools do both?

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS: THE 21ST CENTURY AND CHARTERS

These findings suggest a number of issues, not simply for charter schools but for state and national leaders as well. First, it seems clear that the sort of focused, no-nonsense approach exhibited by these highly successful Massachusetts charter schools can produce impressive results on high-stakes state assessments. An important lesson is that the means by which these schools produce these results—focused mission, committed adults, purposeful and carefully designed structures and systems—are well within the grasp of all schools, charter or non-charter.

Second, the evidence presented here suggests that state accountability systems may be good policy as far as they go, but they may not encourage the kinds of conceptual,

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higher-order thinking skills that intellectual work in college (or on the job) requires. This is a troubling finding in a policy environment that insists that the United States needs to dramatically increase, if not double, the proportion of young Americans who complete at least an associate's degree.<sup>11</sup> States with high-stakes exams need to revisit the extent to which their tests are defeating the larger purpose of producing graduates who can think for a living. This lesson should not be lost in the current efforts to develop national standards in language and mathematics by the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association.

Finally, the intersection between lower-level state assessments and assessments of high-level cognitive skills suggests an intriguing potential role for charter schools as laboratories. Charter schools that have consistently demonstrated overall effectiveness on existing state assessments might be given an additional charter: the privilege of ignoring high-stakes state assessments to concentrate on demanding academic work that provides high school students with the intellectual skills required to do well in college. To retain this special charter, schools would be measured by their graduates' successful college completion, not simply their entry to college.

Will charter schools be able to serve two masters? Because task predicts performance, high-performing charter schools may need increased awareness and policy support to ensure the college success of their students. With their purposeful organizations, potential for innovation, and relative freedom, charter schools should be encouraged to move in this direction and focus more directly on classroom interactions that develop skills of critical thinking, problem solving, and the ability to sort through the masses of information available today. In so doing, these schools may become exemplars for all schools in how to prepare students not only for state-level and college entrance exams, but also for a future that no one can predict or define with certainty.

*The means by which these schools produce these results—focused mission, committed adults, purposeful and carefully designed structures and systems—are well within the grasp of all schools, charter or non-charter.*

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## NOTES

1. Interview with the author.
2. Katherine Merseth et al., *Inside Urban Charter Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2009).
3. *The Boston Globe*, "Top-Ranked 10th Grade Districts," [http://www.boston.com/news/special/education/mcas/scores09/10th\\_top\\_districts.htm](http://www.boston.com/news/special/education/mcas/scores09/10th_top_districts.htm) (accessed October 4, 2009).
4. <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/SATI.html> (accessed October 4, 2009).

5. Cognitive demand describes the “kind and level of *thinking* required of students in order to successfully engage and solve the task.” Mary Kay Stein et al., *Implementing Standards-Based Mathematic Instruction: A Casebook for Professional Development* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000), 11. See also Walter Doyle, “Academic Work,” *Review of Educational Research* 53, no. 2 (1983): 159–99; Andrew Porter, “Curriculum Assessment,” in *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research*, ed. Judith Green, Gregory Camille, and Patricia Elmore (Washington, DC: American Education Research Association, 2006), 141–59.
6. On the 10th grade MCAS in mathematics, for example, there are 42 items: 32 multiple choice, 4 short answer, and 6 open response.
7. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/> (accessed July 25, 2009). Note that these results reflect unadjusted averages, and could be due in part to factors (e.g., student background and prior achievement levels) other than the school climate and instructional program.
8. David Conley, *College Knowledge* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
9. Benjamin Bloom et al., *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* (New York: David Kay Co. Inc., 1956); Robert Marzano and John Kendall, *The New Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2007).
10. Postsecondary Education Commission, “SAT Scores and Participation Rate,” <http://www.cpec.ca.gov/StudentData/50StateSATScores.asp>; Boston Public Schools, “SAT Reasoning Test Report,” <http://bostonpublicschools.org/files/2008%20SAT%20Summary%20Report%20-%20final20080910.pdf> (accessed July 25, 2009); Academy of the Pacific Rim Annual Report, 2007–2008; Boston Collegiate Charter Public School Annual Report, 2007–08 and 2008–09; MATCH Charter Public School Annual Report, 2007–08 and 2008–09.
11. See Commission on Access, Success, and Admissions in Higher Education, *Coming to Our Senses: Education and the American Future* (New York: College Board, 2008); Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, “Postsecondary Education Program Plans,” November 2008, <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/postsecondaryeducation/Pages/default.aspx> (accessed August 13, 2009); and “Remarks of the President on the Economy,” delivered August 5, 2009, in Wakarusa, Indiana, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-Economy-in-Wakarusa-Indiana/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-the-Economy-in-Wakarusa-Indiana/) (accessed August 13, 2009).