

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

CHARTER SCHOOL BATTLE HEATS UP

As these privately run, publicly funded schools expand, traditional ones are feeling threatened

By Jennifer Levitz
October 11, 2015

Natasha Brown spent five years trying to get her 14-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son into one of this state's 80 charter schools. After entering at least 25 lotteries, she secured slots for them this fall.

Those tough odds have sparked a dispute in the state. At least 37,000 families are on waiting lists for charter schools statewide, with 13,000 of them seeking spots in Boston alone, according to data reported to the state.

In coming days, legislators at the Massachusetts State House will begin holding hearings on whether to expand or limit the number of charter schools in the state.

More than two decades since charter schools first appeared in the U.S. as an experiment, they are poised to become mainstream in many parts of the country. About 2.5 million, or 5.1 percent of public-school students, were enrolled in charter schools in the 2013-2014 school year, up from 300,000, or 0.7 percent, in 1999-2000, according to federal statistics.

Nearly every major city has charters, challenging the traditional public-school model as parents increasingly send their children to these privately run but publicly funded institutions and politicians allocate more tax dollars.

The dispute in Boston and similar clashes in Baltimore, Philadelphia and Los Angeles are surfacing as local charter schools reach or surpass a 15 percent to 20 percent market share in those cities.

"The tension is, 'What's the end game here?' Is this a model to replace the traditional public school model?" said Matthew Chingos, a senior fellow who studies education at the Urban Institute, a nonpartisan policy research group.

"Once students start to leave" public schools for charter schools "in large numbers, that's where you see a lot of the tensions," said Nina Rees, president and chief executive of the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, a pro-charter nonprofit.

The charter movement offers more school choice, alternatives to lagging public schools and more autonomy from bureaucracy to try new learning approaches. Challenges have included regulating quality at charter schools, making them accessible to more students and transferring successful practices from charters to traditional classrooms.

Critics contend that charters draw more motivated families, leaving districts with fewer resources to educate the neediest students.

"They've turned it into a separate and markedly not equal system," Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president of the National Education Association, the largest U.S. teachers union, said in an interview.

Supporters argue that charters are a proven, good alternative for many children from disadvantaged families and underperforming school districts.

Charter schools are exempt from many school-district rules in return for meeting accountability regulations set out in individual school charters. Most are non-union and can set their own rules, such as longer school days.

Charter schools have bipartisan support, including from the Obama administration. The Education Department on Sept. 28 announced \$157 million in grants to create and expand charter schools—boosting to \$3 billion the total amount it has awarded to charter schools since 1995.

District spending per pupil generally follows students to charters, although formulas vary because districts, for instance, may determine that traditional schools have expenses charters don't. Private dollars also are raised to help cover costs.

Education Department officials noted a March 2015 study by researchers at the Center for Research on Education Outcomes at Stanford University that found on average urban charter schools across 41 regions had better success in reading and math than traditional public schools. National performance has been mixed, however.

The agency also sent a letter to states, stressing the importance of financial oversight of charters receiving federal funds.

"Although many charter schools are managed effectively and demonstrating positive results," the department's Office of Inspector General identified examples fiscal and management problems at others, the letter said.

New Orleans had the greatest percentage, 92 percent, of students in charter school, according to the most recent data available.

In Washington, where the charter school movement is just gaining a foothold, the state's highest court recently ruled that the state's 2012 voter-approved charter law is unconstitutional.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has 101,060, or about 16 percent, of its 643,493 K-through-12 students enrolled in charter schools. The teachers union recently protested and the school district has been on the defensive.

The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and other charter advocates have discussed funding enough charter schools to get market share to 50 percent in the district. A Broad spokeswoman said the foundation "has begun working with others to explore ways to dramatically increase the number of high-quality public schools available to families."

In Baltimore, where 16 percent of students in the city's school district are enrolled in charters that are unionized, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake has stepped in to help settle a dispute between the district and charter schools—including some that have sued over how much money charters should get for each student who leaves traditional schools.

"The recent level of hostility and tension between the school system administration and some of these charter schools does not do anything to help our children learn," Ms. Rawlings-Blake wrote in a public statement, saying she had tapped former Mayor Kurt Schmoke to help the two sides renegotiate.

In Massachusetts, where the nation's first public high school opened in Boston in 1821, ties to traditional schools are strong, but 15 percent of Boston's students are enrolled in independently run charter schools.

Gov. Charlie Baker filed legislation Thursday that effectively would lift a charter school spending cap in the state's lowest-performing districts, including Boston and several other districts. His bill would allow charter schools to use a lottery system that gives added weight to high-need and low-income students.

"I just know that charters have proven to be a big success for kids who deserve better than they are getting," said Mr. Baker, a Republican. Boston Mayor Martin Walsh also supports expanding charter schools, but the Democrat has put forth his own proposal.

Studies reporting academic success have fueled the push to raise the Massachusetts cap, which now allows low-performing school districts to direct only up to 18 percent of school spending to charters. The Stanford study found that Boston charter schools led the nation in gains over traditional school peers.

The state's largest teachers union and other critics say charter schools should be studied further before the cap is lifted. The Stanford study found room for improvement in Boston's charters, such as fewer English-language learners, although state officials say they have made progress enrolling more of those students.

"We're moving these wheels way too fast," said Angelina Camacho, who sits on a parent council for Boston's traditional schools, where her son is enrolled.

A pro-charter coalition has launched a signature drive to put the question of lifting the cap on the 2016 ballot. Moreover, in September, three Boston law firms filed a class-action lawsuit, on behalf of five students who were denied spots at charter schools, saying the cap is unconstitutional.

Ms. Brown said she already notices a promising difference: longer school days, more discipline and heavier workloads that she believes will give her children a better future. "People are realizing that charters are doing something that the public schools aren't making the mark on," she said.