

Introduction

Massachusetts public schools are a study in contrasts, with a striking range of accomplishments, disappointments, and opportunities. This range of contrasts is even more striking when one looks at their geographic proximity. Consider the following.

In 2006–07, MATCH Charter School notched its the fourth consecutive school year in which every graduating senior received an acceptance letter from a four-year college. Its performance on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) ranked among the best in the state: all of its tenth graders scored advanced or proficient in math, and 83 percent scored equally well in language arts. With a population that includes 96 percent students of color and 70 percent of students live at or below the poverty level, MATCH has achieved exemplary results. It has received accolades as one of the country's top one hundred public high schools by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Just a short distance away, a Boston public high school that is about the same size as MATCH and has about 80 percent students of color achieves MCAS scores that are consistently among the lowest in Massachusetts. In 2006-07, just 17 percent of its students scored at proficient or advanced levels on tenth-grade English language arts and 15 percent scored at proficient or advanced levels in mathematics. In the 2006-07 school year, this district high school reported an annual adjusted dropout rate of 18 percent, while MATCH reported a dropout rate of just under 2 percent.¹ Additionally, 60 percent of MATCH students who enroll as ninth graders graduate from the school in four years, while just 44 percent of the students who enroll at this Boston high school as ninth graders graduate in the same amount of time. Self-reported postgraduation plans indicate that fewer than 40 percent of the students in this district high school intend to attend four-year colleges.

Do these two schools have different kids in terms of race, ethnicity, or class? Not really. Kids from different parts of the city? No. Maybe it's that one is a charter school and the other is a traditional public school? Well, no. Consider this.

Another Boston charter school, Roxbury Prep, educates 100 percent students of color. In 2007, 86 percent of their seventh graders scored at proficient or advanced levels in English language arts and 72 percent did so in mathematics. Yet, less than a mile away, another charter school that has been in existence longer than Roxbury Prep earned seventh-grade MCAS scores of 54 percent proficient or advanced in English language arts and 32 percent proficient or advanced in mathematics.

Are the differences between these two schools any greater than the first two? Not really; in fact, the differences are fewer, in that both are charter schools established by the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993. So, what gives?

Some may attribute these test-score differences to chance or blind luck. After all, with nearly two thousand public schools in Massachusetts, it is a statistical certainty that some schools will outperform others. Yet, upon closer examination, a much more complex picture emerges. This book aims to make this complex picture comprehensible to readers by exploring the intricate workings of five consistently high-performing charter schools in urban areas in Massachusetts—four in Boston and one in Lawrence. These schools, while unique in important ways, also share several common practices and approaches to educating children that may hold important keys to providing a first-rate public education for all students, whether in traditional public, charter, private, or parochial schools.

This book offers an opportunity for readers to examine, with a thoroughness often unseen in charter school literature (Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, & Booker, 2007), the inner workings of these institutions and to consider what makes these schools tick. Like fine Swiss watches, these schools operate on multiple levels. On the outside, a watch seems to effortlessly produce the intended outcome: accurate timekeeping. Swiss watch designs may differ, but once the face of a timepiece is removed, a symphony of wheels, dials, gears, levers, and springs appears, each part working in harmony with the others to achieve the intended outcome. And so it is with the charter schools featured in this book. The organization of these schools, like the inner workings of a Swiss watch, is strikingly coordinated and coherent. Within these schools, every person, program, system, structure, and decision has a special role and works in concert toward the fulfillment of clear, widely embraced goals related to academic achievement. The unrelenting passion and commitment of a school's many stakeholders fuel this process, but it is the thoughtful coordination of all of the school's activities—its *coherence* with regard to purpose, people, and planning—that channels the passion and commitment into consistently outstanding results.

Charter Schools

The charter schools featured in this book, like the other four thousand charter schools across the country, are similar to traditional public schools in several regards: they receive government funds to operate, they may not engage in religious instruction, and they are open to all interested students. These schools are state-level entities created by state legislatures and therefore subject to state-level performance requirements, state curricular frameworks, and the federal requirements outlined under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). The similarities they have to traditional public schools stimulate a quest to determine which elements of these schools are transferable to all schools.

At the same time, however, charters have several characteristics that distinguish them from traditional public schools. For example, a group of private individuals may open and govern a charter school, in contrast to traditional schools, which are typically governed by a publicly elected board or by individuals appointed by an elected official. Another distinguishing characteristic of charters is that the leaders of these organizations may be individuals with little or no formal training or experience in education. In effect, many charter school founders are nonprofit entrepreneurs who are indirectly accountable to the taxpaying public through the state-level authorizing agency (in this case, the Massachusetts Department of Education). Finally, and perhaps most important, these are schools of choice: parents, students, teachers, and administrators all exercise personal choice in agreeing to attend and work in these schools

This book examines five Massachusetts charter schools that met selection criteria determined by the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association. The criteria were:

- Being located in a Massachusetts district that falls within the top 10 percent of state districts with the highest proportions of children in poverty (according to 2003 U.S. Census figures)
- Significantly outscoring the local district in which the school is located on the state assessment system—the MCAS—in both aggregate scores and the low-income subgroup
- Achieving adequate yearly progress status in 2006 (as defined by NCLB)
- Having received at least one successful charter renewal from the Massachusetts Department of Education

Although these measures are somewhat arbitrary and would result in a different sample of “successful schools” had they been taken in different years,²

these selection criteria identified five “high-performing” charter schools in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They are:

- Academy of the Pacific Rim (in Boston)
- Boston Collegiate Charter School (in Boston)
- Community Day Charter Public School (in Lawrence)
- MATCH Charter Public High School (in Boston)
- Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (in Boston)

Demographic information for these schools, as well as other important data, including grade levels and per-pupil expenditures, follow in tables I.1 and I.2 and figures I.1 through I.5.

Methodology

After receiving the names of the schools selected for the study, the authors spent eighteen months, from January 2007 to June 2008, conducting over ninety interviews with school personnel, observing for more than fifty days in the schools and in nearly 140 classrooms, speaking with parents in focus groups, examining documents and state reports, and reflecting as a team—and with others—about the findings. This work is unique in its depth and qualitative research design. A detailed description of the study’s methodology is available in appendix I.A.

Context for This Work

To place the findings of this book in an appropriate context, it is important to address briefly some of the most compelling, frequently cited concerns about charter schools. For example, several researchers argue that charter schools enjoy unfair advantages over traditional public schools with their sometimes smaller special education, low-income, and English-language learner populations (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2005; Rothstein, 2004; UCLA Charter School Study, 1998; Zollers & Ramanathan, 1998).

Indeed, there is some truth to these arguments. Tables I.1 and I.2 show that most of these schools do have slightly lower percentages of special education and low-income students than the districts in which they are located, with larger discrepancies in non-native English speakers. Other differences, such as the influence of parental choice, may be more difficult to quantify; perhaps charter schools attract unusually motivated children and families, eager

TABLE I.1
Demographic Data for the Boston (Mass.) Public Schools
and the Study Schools Located in Boston

School	Academy of the Pacific Rim (Boston)	Boston Collegiate Charter School (Boston)	MATCH Charter Public High School (Boston)	Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (Boston)	All Boston Public Schools
Founded	1997	1998	2000	1999	N/A
Grades	5–12	5–12	9–12	6–8	N/A
Total enrollment	472	412	222	198	N/A
Race/Ethnicity	57% African American; 23% White; 16% Hispanic; 3% Asian; 1% multiracial, non-Hispanic	64% White; 27% African American; 6% Hispanic; 2% Asian; 1% multiracial, non-Hispanic	62% African American; 30% Hispanic; 4% White; 2% Asian; 2% multi-racial non-Hispanic	61% African American; 33% Hispanic; 2% Native American; 5% multiracial, non-Hispanic	39% African American; 37% Hispanic; 13% White; 9% Asian; 2% multiracial, non-Hispanic
Free/reduced-price lunch (low-income)	52%	42%	71%	70%	71%
Special education	13%	17%	11%	12%	20%
First language not English	12%	4%	14%	27%	38%
Limited English proficient	1%	0%	0%	1%	19%
Per-pupil expenditures (2006-07)	\$13,464	\$11,356	\$16,643	\$14,879	\$16,467*

Note: All figures are from the 2007-08 school year unless otherwise noted.

*http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/schfin/statistics/function_3yr_detail.aspx?ID=035

TABLE I.2
Demographic Data for the Lawrence (Mass.) Public Schools
and the Study Schools Located in Lawrence

School	Community Day Charter Public School (Lawrence)	All Lawrence Public Schools
Founded	1995	N/A
Grades	K–8	N/A
Total enrollment	330	N/A
Race/Ethnicity	87% Hispanic; 9% White; 2% African American; 1% Asian; 1% multiracial, non-Hispanic	88% Hispanic; 7% White; 3% Asian; 2% African-American
Free/reduced-price lunch (low-income)	64%	83%
Special education	18%	19%
First language not English	80%	82%
Limited English proficient	29%	24%
Per-pupil expenditures	\$13,917 (2006-07)	\$12,039* (FY07)

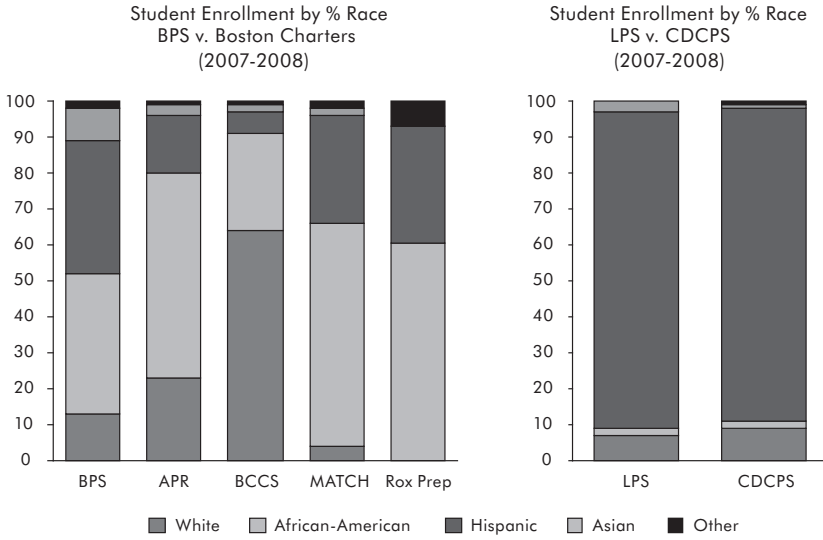
Note: All figures are from the 2007-08 school year unless otherwise noted.

*http://finance1.doe.mass.edu/schfin/statistics/function_3yr_detail.aspx?ID=149

teachers, and engaged parents. Finally, choice opens some doors and closes others. Since these particular schools seek to provide their graduates with a choice of secondary school or college, a reasonable question to consider is whether these goals subtly exclude certain students who are not interested in higher education.

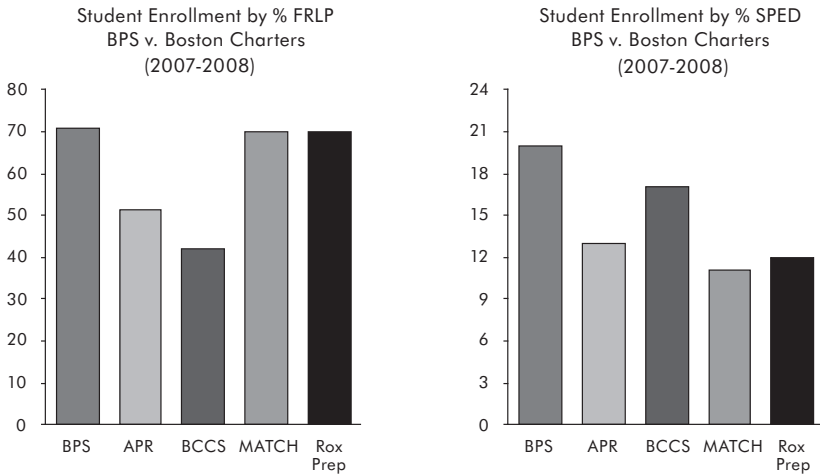
At the same time, however, these charter schools must overcome some inherent disadvantages. For example, tables I.1 and I.2 show that three out of the five schools in this study spend considerably less money per pupil than their local districts; certainly some of this money is lost in the need to acquire

FIGURE I.1 Student Demographics by Race



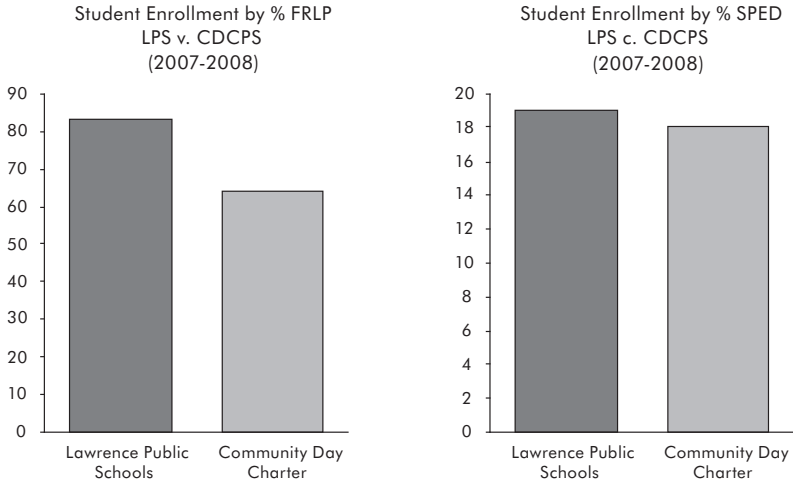
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

FIGURE I.2 Student Demographics: Boston Public Schools vs. Boston Charters



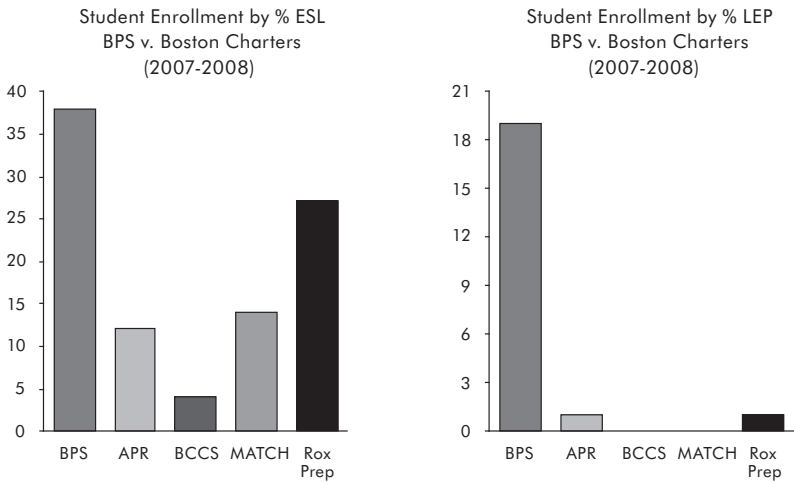
Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

FIGURE I.3 Student Demographics: Lawrence Public Schools vs. Community Day

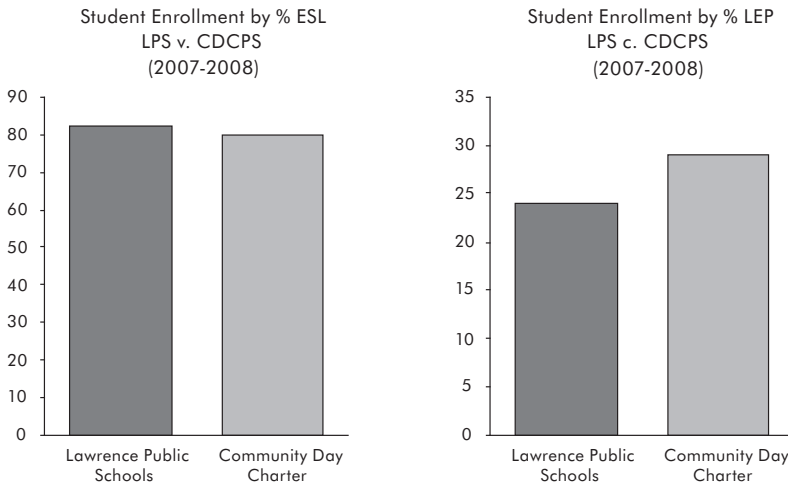


Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

FIGURE I.4 Student Demographics: Boston Public Schools vs. Boston Charters



Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

FIGURE I.5 Student Demographics: Lawrence Public Schools vs. Community Day

Source: Massachusetts Department of Education

support for facilities not provided by the state. The extent to which these differences influence test scores is impossible to establish with certainty, yet the performance gaps between these schools and their local districts—and many similarly constituted charter schools—are so vast and consistent that these “advantages” are unlikely to fully account for their impressive results. There must be something these schools are doing that merits documentation and replication.

Passionate arguments for and against charter schooling have created a contentious—and unfortunate—context for this book. While not ignoring this debate altogether, the authors wish to largely sidestep ideological positions and exchanges. Therefore, rather than defending or condemning charter schools or charter school policy, the book offers rich qualitative findings that often are lacking in ideological conversations about charter schools. The results of this research offer those interested in school reform a nuanced and careful analysis of the factors that likely contribute to the outstanding academic performance of these five schools. Clearly, generalizations beyond these five schools are beyond the scope of the qualitative data in this book. Nevertheless, the authors believe many important aspects of these schools will inform anyone interested in improving the condition of K–12 education.

Book Structure

The book has four parts: this overview of the work and the charter school debate; a series of ethnographic case studies of each of the five schools; a collection of cross-case chapters that examine common elements across the schools; and a conclusion that raises questions for charter school advocates and detractors alike.

Specific details about each chapter follow:

- Introduction—Provides an introduction to the purpose and content of the book.
- Chapters 1–5: School Profiles—Offer qualitative case studies of each school, bringing the schools and their cultures alive for the reader, introducing a variety of practices in context, and conveying the deliberate coherence and purposefulness of these organizations. Each portrait begins with a descriptive account of life at one school and concludes with an analysis of several factors identified by school personnel as most responsible for the school's success.
- Chapter 6: Theoretical Framework—Provides a unique conceptual framework for the analysis of the school practices by reviewing the effective schools literature and the literature of successful nonprofit organizations. The chapter links these two literatures and delves into research that legitimizes the work of these schools. The chapter frames several themes that catalyze the key elements of success in these schools.
- Chapters 7–10: Cross-Case Chapters—Organize the practices of these five schools into four categories of practice that contribute to success: culture, mission, people, structures, and systems. These elements are integral and unique to the coherent operation of these schools.
- Chapter 11: Stepping Back and Looking Forward—Explores next steps for these charter schools and for the movement at large. The chapter considers several tensions inherent in these schools, and indeed in all schools, and the likely need to focus on instruction to achieve results at the next level.

Cultures of Coherence: Purpose, People, and Planning

These five schools are not without challenges, blemishes, or shortcomings, yet each has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to produce impressive MCAS results with students who normally would attend schools in a high-need urban district. Each has also expressed an eagerness to share its insights with other school leaders, academics, and policymakers in hopes of improving the

opportunities students will have beyond their own school walls. Whether one applies elements of systems theory (e.g., Deming, 2000), the advice of management gurus (e.g., Collins, 2005; Drucker, 1990), or concepts of organizational congruence (Tushman & O'Reilly, 2002; Nadler & Tushman, 1980), a central element of high-performing organizations that is evident in these charter schools is the power of coherence. Within these schools, the intense focus on the purpose of their work, the dedication and coordination of people within the organization, and the detailed attention to planning all operate in a coherent fashion at every level. Little stands alone, aloof, or separate. The Oliver Wyman Group (2003), while talking about nonprofits, may as well have been describing these five schools when they stated:

The organization's performance rests upon the alignment of each of the components—the work, people, structure, and culture—with all of the others. *The tighter the fit—or put another way, the greater the congruence—the higher the performance.* (italics added, p. 9)

The first step in understanding the operation of these schools requires a detailed glimpse into the classrooms and corridors of the school buildings. The next five chapters present the schools one by one in order to give the reader a taste of the life inside each one, and to begin dissecting the organizational elements that make each school a unique educational institution—one whose students are prepared to achieve strong standardized test results.