

# **MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS BEST PRACTICES SERVING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years many charter public schools in Massachusetts have increased the number of English language learners (ELLs) that they enroll. A 2010 amendment to the charter school law has made it easier for charter schools to recruit English language learners. The success that many charter schools have had with this subset of students defies critics who claim that charter schools “cream” students, attracting and retaining only those who are “easiest to teach.” In fact, some high performing charter schools are turning the conversation about learners with special language needs on its head; they are proving that this population is not “more difficult” to teach but that many ELLs have not had the same academic opportunities and access to rigorous curricula as their English speaking counterparts.

Case studies of high-achieving charter schools with large and sometimes culturally and linguistically diverse populations of English language learners reveal common best practices. These practices include but are not limited to: individually tailored curricula that emphasize inclusive teaching practices; intentional and continuous use of high-quality formative assessments; language-enriched learning environments; recruitment and retention of teachers with knowledge of the communities that the school serves; and efforts to engage parents and community that are attuned to relevant cultural and linguistic contexts.

The following report highlights three high-performing charter schools, detailing the common best practices that they continue to use and refine and highlighting the subtle but important ways each school caters to its specific student population. The case studies make clear that the autonomies that these schools enjoy because of their charter status allow them to be nimble in serving a changing student population. The same autonomies also enable these schools to design and refine approaches to serving English language learners that enhance student learning and achievement.



## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Charter schools were first proposed in the late 1980s and Massachusetts was one of the first states to adopt legislation enabling them. Since that time charter schools nationwide, but especially in Massachusetts, have helped students to achieve academic outcomes that surpass those of their peers in traditional public schools. Recent studies show that Massachusetts has some of the strongest charter schools in the nation and that many Boston charters, in particular, are extremely effective.

“The magnitude of the gains that charter school students in Boston received compared to their traditional public school counterparts is the largest we see in any area of the country we have studied.”<sup>1</sup>—Margaret Raymond, Director, Center for Research on Education Outcomes, Stanford University.

Despite such findings, which are increasingly common and rooted in rigorous research,<sup>2</sup> charter detractors in Massachusetts still question the effectiveness of these schools. Among other things, they claim that charter schools do not enroll as many English language learners (ELLs) or as many students with special educational needs (SPED) as other public schools. This, they say, enables success because charter students are “the cream of the crop,” or easier to educate.<sup>3</sup>

Not only does the suggestion of “creaming” unfairly portray students with different needs as less able or less motivated than their peers, it also fails to capture changing charter school demographics. While it is true that charters once recruited and retained SPED and ELL students

at rates much lower than their traditional public school counterparts, an important change to Massachusetts law in 2010, coupled with an increase in new charter schools with an explicit mission to serve special populations of students, has ensured that more and more charter schools are serving percentages of SPED and ELL students similar to their district peers.

When families enroll students in the public school system they are often unaware of the various options available to them. For this reason, charter schools work hard to recruit students to enter their lotteries.<sup>4</sup> Prior to 2010<sup>5</sup> traditional public schools could make it difficult for charters to recruit any students, let alone those in need of additional supports, because they were not required to share student information. With the passage of new legislation in 2010, the Commonwealth required traditional public school districts to share student data, including home addresses of enrolled students, with charter schools. Since that time, charters have been able to recruit families more directly and using more accurate information.<sup>6</sup> The result has been a sizeable increase in the number of ELL and SPED students enrolling in charter schools.

In Boston, the city with the greatest concentration of charter schools in the state, the percentage of SPED students enrolled in charter schools is near parity with the surrounding district, and the percentage of ELL students enrolled in charter schools has increased from about 2.5 percent to 12 percent in just four years.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, as charter schools increase the number of SPED and ELL students that they

**TABLE 1. MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER SCHOOLS 2014-2015 DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>7</sup>**

	Charter Schools	State
First Language Not English	23.8%	18.5%
Limited English Proficient*	10%	8.5%
Special Education	14%	17.1%
Economically Disadvantaged	34%	26%

\* Referred to in this paper as ELL

serve, they continue to defy critics who would anticipate a corresponding decrease in student outcomes.

While the percentage of ELL students in Boston, in particular, is still not at parity with Boston Public Schools, ELL enrollment is trending upward. This is in part because some individual charters and charter school networks have set out to serve ELL students and/or have missions that are otherwise attractive to families that do not speak English at home. One charter school of this type has a student population that is 82 percent ELL.<sup>9</sup>

Looking closely at charter schools that are effectively recruiting ELL students and helping them to achieve comparatively high academic growth is important for two reasons: First, it will continue to apply positive pressure to the already strong charter school movement to actively recruit students of diverse backgrounds. Second, it can continue to push all public schools, charters included, to think about best practices for ELL students.

This report describes how two charter school networks and one individual charter school enable large populations of English language learners to achieve at high levels. Each organization has earned a Level 1 accountability rating from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), which signifies that it is “meeting gap narrowing goals.”<sup>11</sup> Further each organization enrolls a significant population of English language learners: two of the organizations have ELL percentages that are greater than that of the surrounding traditional public school district and

one serves slightly fewer ELL students than the district but has a significant population of ELLs in comparison to surrounding charter schools (see tables below).

Interviews with school leaders and, in some cases, school observations reveal best practices that are common across these organizations. Those best practices fall into five categories: 1. inclusion of students in mainstream classrooms; 2. formative assessment; 3. language-enriched environments; 4. teacher recruitment and development 5. Parent and community engagement.

### THE ORGANIZATIONS: MISSION AND VISION

One of the driving ideas behind charter schools is that, with autonomy, they can innovate to meet educational needs that aren’t adequately addressed in some traditional public systems. The organizations profiled in this report are proof that innovation comes in various forms in the charter sector. These organizations also prove that students of all cultural, social, and economic backgrounds can excel academically when given the right tools and the opportunity.

Prior to developing the philosophies, tactics, and strategies that comprise best practices, each organization profiled here made a conscientious decision to engage its community for particular reasons and in a particular way. Though the organizations have grown and adapted over time and, in many instances, overcome challenges, each remains true to a specific mission.

*Excel Academies, Chelsea and East Boston, MA*

In 2003 East Boston and Chelsea were (as they continue to be) communities with rapidly

**TABLE 2. BOSTON CHARTER SCHOOLS/BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS DEMOGRAPHICS<sup>10</sup>**

	Boston Public Schools	Boston Charter Schools
Limited English Proficient*	21%	17%
Special Education	30%	8%
Economically Disadvantaged	75%	79%

\* Referred to in this paper as ELL



growing immigrant populations. At the time, families that wanted an option other than the traditional public district had little to no choice. The founders of Excel Academy Charter Schools wanted to provide options for these communities. Since its founding in 2003 Excel has added two campuses in East Boston; in 2015 it opened its first high school.<sup>12</sup>

Like most Boston charter schools, Excel serves a very high percentage of economically disadvantaged students. In comparison to other Boston charters and even to the surrounding district, Excel also serves a very high number of students who the state classifies as “first language not English;” Many of these students are also classified as ELL. Excel has helped these students to succeed when many other schools have not.

*The Community Group, Lawrence, MA*

The Community Group currently operates four<sup>13</sup> charter schools in Lawrence, MA and co-operates the Match Community Day Charter School in Boston. One of the first charter schools authorized in the Commonwealth, Community Day<sup>14</sup> was established at a time when the city of Lawrence was experiencing great hardship: it had been placed under a state mandated financial oversight board and the public school system was also “faced with a state takeover due to chronically low test results, high dropout rates, and the loss of accreditation of its only high school.”<sup>15</sup> The founders of the school, which included parents, teachers, and community leaders, were looking to fill a gap for the children of Lawrence; they saw a need for a K-8 school that would expose children to rigorous academics, thus preparing them for high school and beyond.<sup>16</sup>

**TABLE 3. EXCEL ACADEMY CHARTER SCHOOLS/BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2014-15 DEMOGRAPHICS**

	Excel Academies	Boston Public Schools
English Language Learner	15.6	29.8
First Language Not English	57.5	47.4
Students with Disabilities	15.4	19.5
Economically Disadvantaged	46.6	49.3
Accountability Rating	1	4

Source: MA DESE, School and District Profiles

**TABLE 4. COMMUNITY DAY—PROSPECT/LAWRENCE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 2014-15 DEMOGRAPHICS**

	Community Day Charter Public School—Prospect	Lawrence Public School District
English Language Learner	39.8	29.9
First Language Not English	77.3	70
Students with Disabilities	9.3	16.9
Economically Disadvantaged	47.5	61.7
Accountability Rating	1	5

Source: MA DESE, School and District Profiles

Lawrence is often referred to as a “gateway city,” meaning it is home to many recent immigrants. Since the founding of the first Community Day school, the percent of Lawrence’s population identifying as Hispanic or Latino has risen dramatically—US Census figures show an increase of more than 31 percent between 2000 and 2010.<sup>17</sup> Given this, all of the schools in Lawrence, public and charter public alike, have had to work to assess and accommodate the changing needs of the community. For its part, the Community Group has committed itself to serving all students, making it a point “to aggressively recruit”<sup>18</sup> English language learners and their families. The group’s ability to help all of its students achieve at very high levels, has earned it accolades in recent years.<sup>19</sup>

*Lowell Community Charter School, Lowell, MA*

Lowell Community Charter School (LCCPS) is a K-8 school founded by a group of (mainly) immigrant parents with a vision to create a safe school for children from different cultures. The school’s motto is “learning together to live together,” and alongside academic excellence, the school places an emphasis on cultural competency, global citizenship, and diversity among both students and staff.<sup>20</sup> Of all the three schools profiled in this research, LCCPS is the most “diversely diverse,” meaning that it serves students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds—students at LCCPS come from “20 different countries and speak 23 different languages.”<sup>21</sup>

LCCPS has received attention in recent years not only for the great results it has helped students to achieve but also because those results represent a great turnaround for the school. As recently as 2010, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education had threatened non-renewal of the school’s charter due to disappointing MCAS results. In doing this, DESE was upholding the Commonwealth’s strict commitment to closing charter schools that don’t meet the state’s comparatively rigorous academic standards. Taking under consideration the community’s great support for the school, DESE agreed to put LCCPS in turnaround status. Under this agreement the school reorganized and downsized—going from a K-8 to K-6 school—and hired new leadership. The DESE provided LCCPS with specific supports and closely monitored its progress over time.<sup>22</sup> After just one year in turnaround status, the school began to see dramatic results: 2014-15 was the third year in a row that the school achieved a Level 1 accountability rating (the state’s highest) and it now serves as a model of academic excellence, especially for English language learners.<sup>23</sup>

**BEST PRACTICES FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

Despite research suggesting that effective practice for English language learners involves tactics and strategies that go beyond “just good teaching,”<sup>24</sup> each of the organizations profiled in this report characterizes their results as a product of teaching

**TABLE 5. LOWELL COMMUNITY CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL/LOWELL PUBLIC SCHOOLS 2014-15 DEMOGRAPHICS**

	Lowell Community Charter Public School	Lowell Public Schools
English Language Learner	47.2	26.6
First Language Not English	65.1	36.3
Students with Disabilities	16.6	15.1
Economically Disadvantaged	46.9	49
Accountability Rating	1	3

Source: MA DESE, School and District Profiles

and learning strategies that serve *all* students well. None have adopted an “off-the-shelf” curriculum or trained teachers in a prescribed pedagogical approach touted for ELLs. None identify a “magic bullet” that enables strong outcomes. These schools do, however, cite the importance of developing “a tailored curriculum and lesson plans to ensure that all student’s needs are met.”<sup>25</sup> As one interviewee put it, helping ELL students to achieve excellent outcomes “isn’t rocket science . . . it’s about meeting the needs of our children.”

What seems like a disconnect between research and effective practice is therefore better described as an individualized approach; these organizations don’t think of English language learners as a “category.” Consequently, students who are not ELL also benefit from organizational structures, systems, strategies, and habits that have proved to serve ELLs well.

***Best Practice: Individualization with an Emphasis on Inclusion***

When asked what key levers leadership pulled to turn Lowell Community Charter Public School around, head of school Kathy Egmont responds with little hesitation, “taking a whole school approach.” LCCPS has learned that an approach that treats native and non-native speakers of English differently doesn’t serve students well; the school is now committed to an inclusive model of teaching.

Though it manifests slightly differently in each organization, inclusion is a practice that all of these organizations emphasize. Regardless of a student’s status as ELL or SPED, exposing students to as much mainstream content as possible is a priority.

Pulling a student out of class is a disruption for the individual and for his or her peers. As Carrie Reeve-Hildebrandt of LCCPS explains, “pull out,” when misused, can be a missed opportunity: “We believe in a balanced approach to ELL that includes pull-out and inclusion, based on analysis of data. However, we carefully consider

when pulling a student out from core content and do not pull students simply because they are ELL.” When inclusion is practiced, these high-performing schools find other ways to provide students with the extra, individualized supports that they may need. They leverage ELL specialists who can “push in” to the mainstream classroom and support students in need. They also take advantage of extended school days to provide students with one-to-one help, a structure common in the charter world.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, there are exceptions to every rule, and when it is clear that the best way to address an individual student’s needs is to remove him or her from the mainstream to provide more intensive help, these organizations do so. In some cases, such as extremely limited English proficiency, limited literacy in the native language, or a specific learning disability, temporary removal from the mainstream facilitates access to the curriculum. When removal from the classroom is necessary, it is specifically targeted to minimize disruption and students are matched with specialists who can meet their needs.<sup>27</sup>

Exposing all students to mainstream content as much as possible means that teachers must be equipped with specific strategies and tactics for teaching ELLs. These organizations help teachers to become endorsed to teach in a Structured English Immersion (SEI) environment in addition to providing other substantive internal and external professional development opportunities specific to student and teachers needs. Effective differentiation of instruction, for example, is a development priority for some. According to Pat Teichman, of the Community Group, “we need our teachers to differentiate right in the classroom and to use the same curriculum for all of our students.”<sup>28</sup>

Because the idea of inclusion is not new—both state and federal governments require that schools serve students in the “least restrictive environment”<sup>29</sup>—what these organizations are doing may seem unremarkable. A deeper look at how they make inclusion work well,

however, reveals organizational structures and supports that are sophisticated and intentional. Inclusion that works for all students requires detailed attention to student-level data, precise coordination among highly trained adults, and the identification of teaching and learning strategies that are consistently effective.

***Best Practice: Formative Assessment***

Data-driven instruction is a commonly used phrase in education, but just because a school uses data to make instructional decisions doesn't mean it enhances student performance. For data driven instruction to work, formative assessments have to help educators gather the right information frequently. From there, educators must work collaboratively to interpret what the data reveal about individual student needs.<sup>30</sup> In the organizations profiled here, educators have learned that blanket assumptions about what data reveal are not useful—when data indicate a problem, these organizations search for the root of the problem.<sup>31</sup>

Instead of assuming that the student doesn't know something, they ask questions, such as “is this a math issue, or a language issue?” and seek answers before adjusting the curriculum to meet individual student needs. Indeed, the willingness to adjust curricula is another mentality common across all three organizations. Mary Chance describes the Community Group's approach to data driven instruction and curriculum development, saying: “We are always under construction.”<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that adjusting curricula is not the same as changing or “dumbing down” content. Nor is it tantamount to having different standards or expectations for different students. Instead, students might need a different access point to understand certain concepts. They may also need more time or other supports to master a given standard. In high-achieving organizations such as these, a high and rigorous bar is non-negotiable. Helping students to achieve that bar often requires collaboration among faculty and innovative thinking.

For innovation and collaboration to take place, schools need to be structured appropriately. At Excel Academies, for example, teachers are organized into grade level teams that meet both within schools and as a network. These teams “consult on overall and individual student performance,” and leverage ELL specialists within the network for support with lesson planning and inclusion.<sup>33</sup> At LCCPS teachers track individual students with three formal benchmark assessments over the course of a semester and meet frequently—usually weekly—in between to consider other formative assessments and adjust individual learning plans for students.<sup>34</sup>

While such meetings might seem like common sense, they require careful, school and network-wide planning to execute. Space in each teacher's schedule and physical meeting space is required. These things can present such great logistics issues and therefore don't happen in many school contexts.<sup>35</sup>

***Best Practice: Language-Enriched Environment***

A final instructional best practice evident in all of the organizations is the creation of a language enriched environment. According to Mary Chance:

*It's about metacognition. We don't just talk about numbers, we talk about how to talk about numbers. We think about how to talk about each subject that we teach, how to use [student] prior knowledge and how to make language visible everywhere by putting academic language on the walls, providing visual supports in all that we do and modeling language for our students.*<sup>36</sup>

The idea of making language visible was echoed by all interviewees for this report, and even a cursory glance at the classrooms in a school like LCCPS makes this clear. Not only are students surrounded by written language on every wall, the language that surrounds them is explicit and structured for accessibility. Yutaka Tamura describes the intentionality of this approach: “everything about our work is very detailed.

Lesson objectives are transparent to students, handouts are scaffolded, and expectations are clear.” These “basic technical strategies,” Tamura says “are helpful for any population, not just for ELL students.”<sup>37</sup>

Practitioners familiar with the literature on best practices for ELL students, will not be surprised by these “technical strategies;” many of them have even been neatly packaged and sold as curricular models for teaching ELL students.<sup>38</sup> Importantly though, none of the organizations mentioned here would attribute its success to the deployment of pedagogical strategies alone. To teach large populations of ELL students successfully, they assert, is about a holistic approach to teaching and learning that is conscious of language and culture and conscientious in meeting individual student needs. Further none of the best practices for teaching and learning outlined here work in isolation. They are accompanied by other practices, among them teacher recruitment and development, that help these organizations excel.<sup>39</sup>

### *Best Practice: Teacher Recruitment and Development*

Many charter schools hold dear the autonomy to hire teachers without union or other constraints. Charter schools, by and large, aim to hire teachers that buy in to their mission and fit in with the existing culture of the school.<sup>40</sup>

Organizations that serve high numbers of ELLs are no exception; in fact, autonomy in hiring may be even more important to them, as they are considering their missions within the additional contexts of culture and language.

Several of the school leaders interviewed for this report cited “knowing the community” as an asset in a teacher.<sup>41</sup> “Knowing the community,” in this context connotes an understanding of the specific needs of English language learners as well as familiarity, when possible, with the linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds of students.

Familiarity with linguistic background does not mean that these schools specifically recruit bilingual teachers. Though all of these organizations emphasize bilingualism as an asset to both students and teachers, it cannot be a priority in hiring for a number of reasons.<sup>42</sup> First, all of these organizations take an approach to teaching known as “sheltered English immersion,” which is mandated by the Commonwealth. Even if they could take a different approach to teaching, some see it as the most appropriate model. As Carey Reeve-Hildebrandt at LCCPS points out, “we couldn’t possibly find a teacher to speak every language represented within our student population.”<sup>43</sup>

Beyond knowledge of the ELL community, another best practice that these organizations share is seeking teachers who are willing to be developed. Mary Chance of the Community Group refers to recruiting teachers with a “growth mindset,”<sup>44</sup> and Yutaka Tamura of Excel describes looking for teachers who are “coachable, open to feedback, and mission aligned.” He also notes that “intellectual curiosity and clear command of subject area knowledge,” are absolutely critical. These things, according to Tamura, indicate that a teacher has “growth potential.” The potential for teachers to grow is critical to these organizations, which make substantial investments in teacher professional development.<sup>45</sup>

Investing in professional development means providing targeted, structured opportunities for teachers, often working together, to refine their practice. All of these organizations are concerned that their teachers fulfill state requirements, but state mandated certifications and trainings are only base components of what professional development means to them.<sup>46</sup>

At LCCPS, professional development includes a variety of things, including engaging teachers in curriculum planning and finding time for all teachers to meet with math, reading, ELL, and SPED specialists. Specialists provide actionable feedback on teacher practice and offer new

teaching strategies, something for which teachers “hunger,” according to one school leader.<sup>47</sup>

At Excel, full days devoted to professional development require making the time for teachers to observe their peers in the same school or even in other schools in the network. Development also entails experienced teachers mentoring their less experienced colleagues and helping them access opportunities for professional development outside of the school. Importantly, teacher development in these organizations is differentiated and targeted to individual needs.

Differentiated professional development is something that is so important to these organizations, that some cite it as a need that needs to be considered by the state. Acknowledging the valuable advice and support that DESE provided her school during its turnaround, LCCPS head of school Kathy Egmont also notes:

*Some of the new DESE initiatives around ELL and high needs populations have been a challenge for us. When the state provides development on how to help these populations access curricula, for example, they are thinking of schools with 10 students who are ELL and high needs. Here we have 200. Charter schools are often ‘clumped together’ when they need different supports.*

Here Egmont is not only assessing how the state frames support and compliance for schools, she is also reiterating the idea that schools that successful serve high numbers of ELLs don’t see ELLs as a “category” of students, they view them as “our students.”

#### ***Best Practice: Parent and Community Engagement***

Organizations that value teacher “familiarity” with the community also value parent and community engagement. Absent the desire to serve a specific community, none of these organizations would exist: Both Community Day and LCCPS were founded by community members, and Excel Academies were founded

specifically to fill a need that its founder located in Chelsea and East Boston.

Schools often engage parents by providing them frequent opportunities to come to school, sending communications home in multiple and relevant languages, and offering translation services at all school events and meetings. These things, often cited as “best practice,”<sup>48</sup> represent a mere minimum in the cases profiled here.

For Excel Academies, it was necessary to become known to community organizations in order to recruit students—they sought to embed themselves in the community before even opening. School leaders recruited the first class of Excel students, as many charter school leaders do, by garnering support from local civic groups and businesses, helping to make the school known to parents.<sup>49</sup>

Community Day was already a well-established group within the Community of Lawrence before it received a charter for its first school, and according to Pat Teichman its schools are “no longer a secret.” The organization is not so much for the community as it is of the community. “We are known,” says Teichman, “but we’ve also established trust.” Parents, believe, for example that Community Day schools will help students to and through college. This is, perhaps, especially impressive given that the demographics of Lawrence have changed so dramatically since the first Community Day school was established. “Fourteen years ago we served a different community of parents,” Teichman says. “One of the things we’ve learned is that we can’t collectively group students and families.”<sup>50</sup>

Understanding the different and often changing needs of the broader community can be as important as understanding the learning needs of students. LCCPS, for example, serves families from increasingly diverse backgrounds and an increasing number of families coming from very difficult situations. In recent years, it has seen an influx of refugees from countries in Africa and the Middle East, which means that

students and parents benefit from the support of psychologists and trauma specialists, human capital investments that the school has chosen to make.<sup>51</sup>

It is in addition to this knowledge of and connection with the community that these organizations support parents and students with strategies specific to academics. They enhance academic support by providing training for teachers specific to parent engagement. Teachers need to understand, for example, the different relationships that parents of different backgrounds might have to schools.<sup>52</sup> They also help parents to become involved in the education of their children by frequently sharing student test scores and other markers of progress. Some ask parents to view and ‘sign-off’ on student homework on a nightly basis.<sup>53</sup> Others encourage parents to read and write with students if and when they can.

In all endeavors these organizations try to be attuned to parent needs and the sometimes competing demands that parents, especially low-income parents, face. “We are judicious in how we asks families to use their time,” notes Yutaka Tamura of Excel.<sup>54</sup> Activities designed to engage parents should be purposeful and geared toward supporting students, not burdensome or simply another thing for parents to do.

## CONCLUSIONS: WHY THE CHARTER CONTEXT MATTERS

The organizations highlighted in this report provide clear evidence against the argument that charters “cream” students. They also prove that charter schools can enable high levels of student achievement no matter student background. But to what extent does the charter context matter? Could any school or organization adopt the best practices described here?

Certainly, many traditional public schools enable large populations of ELL students to succeed academically. Many also deploy some of the strategies highlighted in this report. There are clear differences, however, between charter and

traditional public schools that enable charters to execute some best practices more effectively and efficiently.

When applying for a charter, charter schools have to demonstrate a clear understanding of the nature and needs of the communities that they seek to serve. They also have to demonstrate that they have the capacity to meet the community needs that they identify. Furthermore, if a charter is granted, charter schools have to attract students to enroll—they do not have a built-in student community as does the “public school down the street.” Existing for the community rather than because of the community helps many charter schools understand their constituents better. Perhaps most importantly, because charter schools can be closed for failure to meet academic standards or fulfill the terms of their mission, they have added incentive to serve the community well.

Structural features of charter schools also make it easier for them to employ some of the tactics and strategies described in this report. Extended school days make it easier to practice inclusion effectively; students who require additional one-to-one support may receive it outside of the regular school day, without missing “mainstream” classes. Extended school days and years may also make it easier for charter organizations to provide targeted professional development and enable teacher collaboration. With more time in the school day and year and more flexible scheduling practices, schools can provide the time and space for faculty to learn without sacrificing time for student learning.

The autonomy to hire faculty and staff without union or other constraints is another important feature that makes it easier for charter schools to create environments conducive to high achievement. Hiring teachers who share a “growth-mindset,” and/or a familiarity with the community, can enable school leaders to create a culture of high achievement more easily.

It is also important to acknowledge that some structural features of charter schools make it

easier for them to enable student achievement. Specifically, charters are less likely to have high student mobility than their traditional public school counterparts. In gateway cities in the Commonwealth, this difference is particularly relevant.<sup>55</sup>

The charter lottery system allows schools to know earlier in the year the students who will be matriculating. Thus, charters can more easily understand and plan to meet the needs of an incoming student population. Furthermore, though charter schools are required to “backfill” empty seats until roughly halfway through the school year, high performing charter schools with low student attrition do not have to accommodate many new students after September. Traditional public schools do not have this option.

Despite what might be characterized as structural advantages, however, it is important to emphasize that these organizations take great advantage of opportunities *to reach out to and plan* for incoming students. All of these organizations devote substantial time before the school year begins to getting to know students and to understanding their individual needs. These are things that any school, charter or otherwise, could do, and therefore a best practice that should be shared among sectors.

Another take-away for all schools should be the value of using data to drive instruction *and* create responsive curricula. Many high performing charter organizations purposefully plan curricula backwards, allowing teachers to “work vertically,” and understand what students will need to know at each grade. Doing so can help to ameliorate some of the challenges that high rates of student mobility can pose.

Just as charter schools should (and do) share best practices, the DESE should be attuned to fostering the continued success of high performing schools that serve high numbers of ELL students. There are a number of things it can do.

First, DESE should acknowledge that these successful organizations shy away from viewing students in terms of categories, to the benefit of students. In fact, when schools are successful in teaching ELLs, they help those students to shed the “categorization” ELL all together—many of these schools do so quickly, sometimes to their own disadvantage. As students move out of the ELL category, the number of ELL students on the school’s rosters declines. These successful schools may then be criticized for not being “at parity” with the surrounding district.

While charter schools *should be held accountable* for recruiting and retaining diverse groups of students, the state should also consider a more nuanced approach for understanding the diversity within student populations and how categorizations can shift over time, especially as students are enabled to achieve.

DESE should also target support to schools based on the individual populations of learners that they serve. Broad supports designed for schools with comparatively smaller populations of English language learners may pose challenges for schools with very large populations of ELLs, especially those who are also economically disadvantaged and have other needs. Likewise, supports designed for schools that serve ELLs who come from similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds may be less relevant for schools that serve very diverse populations of English language learners. The same nuanced perspective should be applied when DESE decides how it will interpret regulations and ensure that schools are compliant.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

*Disseminate and Encourage Best Practices for ELL Students*—Academic literature on best practices for ELL students continues to become available, but comparatively little information on best practices for ELLs specific to Massachusetts and to the charter sector exists. Inclusion, data-driven instruction, language-enriched environments, and parent engagement are all best practices that



can readily that be disseminated across school sectors.

*Incubate Best Practices with Support and Autonomy*—The best practices highlighted in this report scratch the surface of what successful schools do, and deeper understanding of how schools enable success for ELLs and all learners would be a boon to all schools in the Commonwealth. Providing targeted, differentiated supports to schools will foster success. Moreover, providing schools with the structural and other autonomies that foster innovations in teaching and learning will lead to the development of new best practices.

*Lift the Cap on Charter Public Schools*—Not only would lifting the charter school cap allow high performing organizations like those profiled here to replicate, it would also provide the space for new organizations to innovate in service of English language learners and other populations of students. Providing more charter schools in more places would enable more partnerships, such as those between Community Day and the Lawrence Public Schools. More high performing schools in the Commonwealth would also provide more opportunities for schools to share best practices.

*Reward Results, Not Compliance*—Understanding that not all populations of English language learners are the same and acknowledging that ELL is a tool for temporarily categorizing students, not a diagnosis, will encourage more schools to behave like the high performing organizations profiled here and work to move students out of the ELL category and into the mainstream as soon as possible. Charter schools should be accountable for recruiting and retaining ELLs and other special populations, but they should not be punished for helping students move out of a “category,” if that enables their academic achievement.



## About the Author

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

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*Federal Overreach and Common Core*, White Paper, July 2015



## Endnotes

1. Massachusetts General Law (MGL), Title XII, Chapter 71, Section 89.
2. The CREDO studies take an “apples to apples” approach in comparing students and student outcomes, pairing charter school students with similar students in traditional public schools. What Works Clearinghouse Reviews (via the Institute for Education Sciences) of the methodologies used in the CREDO charter studies can be found at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/singlestudyreview.aspx?sid=220>.
3. See, for example, Massachusetts Teachers Association (MTA) study, “Charter school success or selective out-migration of low achievers?” [http://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/MTA\\_Charter\\_School\\_Report\\_-9\\_09.pdf](http://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/MTA_Charter_School_Report_-9_09.pdf)
4. See Candal, Cara (2013) *Preserving Charter School Autonomy*, Pioneer Institute White Paper no. 99, p. 6.
5. The year in which *An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap* was passed in response to the federal government’s Race to the Top initiative.
6. Massachusetts General Law, Chapter 71 89(g).
7. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Charter School Fact Sheet, 2014-2015. <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/factsheet.pdf>
8. Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (2015) “SPED/ELL fact sheet,” page 1.
9. Ibid
10. Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) (2015) *Urban Charter School Study*, Report on 41 Regions. Stanford University, p. 6.
11. See Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE) school and district profiles: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>
12. Interview with Yutaka Tamura, Founder/Senior Advisor, Excel Academy Charter Schools, September 15, 2015.
13. Three of the four schools in Lawrence are Commonwealth Charter Schools, and Community Day Arlington Elementary School is a turnaround partnership between the Community Group and the Lawrence Public Schools. Match-Community Day is a Commonwealth charter school.
14. Now Community Day Charter Public School-Prospect
15. Community Day Charter Public School Project, “Our Story,” <http://www.thecommunitygroupinc.org/cdc-public-school-prospect/cdc-prospect-about/history/index.aspx>
16. Ibid
17. Census Viewer, Lawrence, MA, “Overview,” <http://censusviewer.com/city/MA/Lawrence>.
18. Interview with Mary Chance, Director of Schools, Community Day Charter Public Schools, Sept. 15, 2015.
19. Recognition includes MA DESE “Commendation School”, 2013, New Leaders for New Schools EPIC “Silver Gain” award, 2009-2012.
20. Lowell Community Charter Public School, Annual Report 2014-2015.
21. Lowell Community Charter Public School “At a Glance”
22. Lowell Community Charter Public School, Annual Report, 2009-2010. Note: To lead the turnaround effort, LCCPS contracted with an outside group, Renaissance School Services. It is of note that the group tapped Kathy Egmont, a founding member of Community Day Charter Public School in Lawrence to lead the turnaround efforts at LCCPS.
23. Lowell Community Charter Public School, Annual Report 2014-2015
24. DeJong, Esther and Harper, Candace (2005) “Preparing mainstream teachers for English language learners: is being a good teacher good enough?” *Teacher Education Quarterly*, Spring.
25. Interview with Yutaka Tamura, Founder/Senior Advisor, Excel Academy Charter Schools, September 15, 2015.

26. Interview with Carey Reeve-Hildebrandt at LCCPS
27. Interview with Carey Reeve-Hildebrandt, Interview with Yutaka Tamura
28. Interview with Pat Teichman
29. <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/,root,statute,I,B,612,a,5>,
30. See a description of formative assessment as “assessment for learning,” as opposed to “assessment of learning,” in Stiggins, Rick, “Assessment through the student’s eyes,” *Educational Leadership*, Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development (ACSD) (2007), 64(8), 22-24. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/may07/vol64/num08/Assessment-Through-the-Student’s-Eyes.aspx>
31. Interview with Yutaka Tamura
32. Interview with Mary Chance
33. Interview with Yutaka Tamura
34. Interview with Carey Reeve-Hildebrandt
35. Darling-Hammond, Linda, “What teachers need and reformers ignore: Time to collaborate,” *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2013. Accessed October 12, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/04/11/what-teachers-need-and-reformers-ignore-time-to-collaborate/>
36. Interview with Pat Teichman
37. Interview with Yutaka Tamura
38. See: <http://www.cal.org/siop/>
39. In the educational context, “scaffolding” refers to providing a series of supports that can grant a learner access to material. Over time, supports are removed to foster independence. Yutaka Tamura notes, for example, that as Excel students move on to Excel High School the goal is that they will need less and less scaffolding to access content, which is critical in preparing them for college.
40. Candal, Cara (2015) *Great Teachers are Not Born, They are Made: Case Study Evidence from Massachusetts Charters*, Pioneer Institute White Paper no. 130
41. Interview with Pat Teichman
42. LCCPS specifically emphasizes bilingualism as an asset to students in its mission statement. Additionally, all of the organizations profiled in this report note that an otherwise qualified bilingual teacher can benefit the organization in a number of ways, providing comfort and support to students and assisting in communication with parents and other community members.
43. Interview with Carey Reeve-Hildebrandt
44. Interview with Mary Chance
45. Interview with Yutaka Tamura
46. Both LCCPS and The Community Group, for example, have articulated a goal of having 100 percent of teachers SEI endorsed.
47. Interview with Kath Egmont
48. Epstein, et. al. (2009) *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*, Third Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
49. Interview with Yutaka Tamura
50. Interview with Pat Teichman
51. Interview with Carey Reeve-Hildebrandt
52. Ibid

53. Interview with Yutaka Tamura
54. Ibid
55. Interview with Pat Teichman





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