When Access To Choice Depends Upon School Failure

AN ANALYSIS OF CHARTER SCHOOL POLICY IN MASSACHUSETTS, USA

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Massachusetts's charter schools are high-performing, particularly in urban centers.

▶ Compared to students in surrounding district schools, Boston's charter schools "added an additional 12 months of learning in reading and 13 months of learning in math each school year." – *Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, Stanford*

▶ Students attending Boston's charter schools are more likely to take Advanced Placement exams and matriculate to college. –*Angrist et. al*

▶ Boston's charter schools close achievement gaps for English language learners and students with special educational needs.— *Elizabeth Setren, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*.

State law caps the number of charter schools that can exist.

- ▶ 125 charter schools may exist statewide.

- ▶ Districts may not send more than 9 percent of "net school spending" to charter schools.

- ▶ If districts are among the lowest 10 percent in the state on standardized tests, they may send up to 18 percent of "net school spending."

- ▶ In 2019, there are 31,893 students on charter school waiting lists, mostly in low-income communities.

What constitutes a "low-performing" district?

▶ The Commonwealth ranks districts according to the number of students who score proficient on tests and how districts have helped students "grow" on those tests (SGP).

▶ Proficiency accounts for 75% of the formula; SGP accounts for 25%.

▶ Districts that fall into the bottom 10%, according to this formula, may spend more money (18% of NSS) on charter schools.

What Is The Student Growth Percentile?

- *"A student growth percentile measures student progress by comparing one student's progress to the progress of other students with similar MCAS (test) performance histories. We refer to students with similar score histories as 'academic peers.'"—Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*
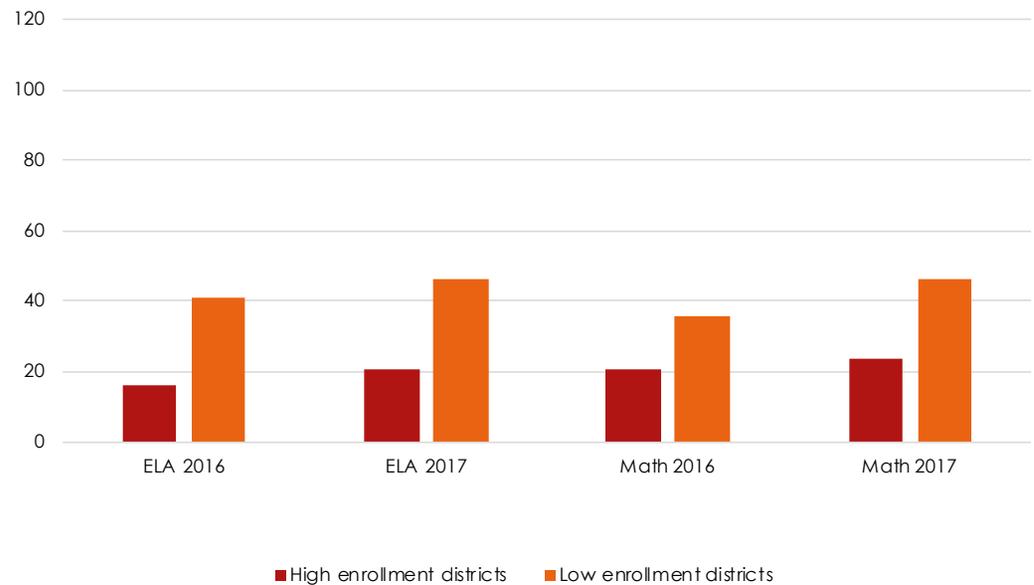
The Trouble with Measuring "Growth". . .

Several studies in the past few years report that a 95 percent confidence interval for SGPs spans anywhere from 60-80 points. In lay-terms, if a school's reported SGP median score is 50, researchers can be 95 percent confident that the school's actual SGP median score is somewhere between 20 and 80.

"measurement error makes SGPs unreliable at student and teacher levels . . .corrections at teacher level exacerbate error at student level."

SGP estimates are less precise for high- and low-achieving students than for students with average achievement when the total sample size is small.

In Massachusetts, the Relationship between Sample Size and SGP is Clear.

CHART 1: Districts with Non-typical Student Growth Percentiles (SGP less than 40 or greater than 60)

	ELA 2016	ELA 2017	Math 2016	Math 2017
High enrollment districts	16	21	21	24
Low enrollment districts	41	46	35	46

■ High enrollment districts ■ Low enrollment districts

Larger districts exit the bottom 10% by displaying high growth and smaller districts enter because of low growth, but the SGP measure is unreliable.

MCAS Results, Lynn, Massachusetts, 2018		
	4th Grade Proficiency	8th Grade Proficiency
English	33%	31%
Math	33%	23%

The Consequences of Faulty SGP Calculations

▶ Large urban districts, *where parent demand is highest*, are not eligible for charter cap increases, despite very low overall proficiency.

▶ SGP increases volatility (movement in and out) of the bottom 10 percent. When there is a cap increase, there is not enough time for new operators to enter the market. Existing operators do not have predictable enrollment or budgets.

▶ Parents believe that their schools are improving when there is no valid evidence this is true. Districts in need of better schools aren't getting them.

District failure should not be a prerequisite for access to charters.

- **Reconsider the "Smart Cap" and Its Accompanying Regulations**

- **Abandon SGP and Replace it with Multiple Reliable Performance Indicators**

- **Identify Low-Performing Districts Earlier and Provide Purposeful, Tailored Support**