



THE STORYLINE from the latest MCAS results is disappointing: Overall, our schools are only making slow progress narrowing the gap between low-income and middle-class kids.

But the charter school folks have reason to be happy. Once again, some terrific charters have had some eye-catching success at boosting their students to proficient or above on the statewide test.

The Edward W. Brooke Charter School, a Dorchester K-8 whose student body is 98 percent black or Hispanic and 78 percent low-income, was tied for tops in the state at that task on fifth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade English, and led in eighth-grade math.

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Excel Academy, an East Boston middle school whose studentry is 73 percent Latino and 75 percent low-income, led the state in seventh-grade math and tied for first in eighth-grade English.

Boston Preparatory, a Hyde Park sixth-to-12th-grade charter whose kids are 91 percent black and Hispanic and 73 percent low-income, was tied for first in 10th-grade math.

All told, 15 charters tied for first or led the pack in different subjects at various grade levels.

That success should spotlight a crucial education issue: the need for a longer school day.

At Edward Brooke, the day runs from 7:45 a.m. to 4 p.m. At Boston Prep, school starts at 7:45 and ends at 4:15, with a half-day Saturday session for kids who need it. At Excel, the day runs from 8 a.m. to 3:40, with three hours on Saturday to provide extra help. (At all three schools, one day each week is shorter.) Each

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also features a longer year.

In other words, charters are succeeding in part because they are providing low-income kids the extra learning time and academic support that suburban kids get through tutoring or at home.

But despite the obvious importance of a longer day, the regular schools are hardly rushing to adopt one. Not in Boston, anyway.

Three-quarters of Boston Public Schools students are in schools with the shorter traditional day - six hours in the lower grades, 6.5 hours in grades 9 to 12 - according to a new report by the Boston Municipal Research Bureau.

Ask Deputy Superintendent Michael Goar why the district hasn't embraced the longer-day lesson of charters, and he insists it has, noting that the two in-district charters the BPS just opened and its 11 turnaround schools all have longer days.

That's true - but the reason is instructive: Last year's education reform act gave the BPS enhanced authority to lengthen the day without first securing agreement from the Boston Teachers Union.

However, the district can't do the same in the traditional schools - and after a year and a half of contract negotiations, management and the union don't even appear to be close on a plan to extend the day.

The union insists teachers must be paid for any additional time; the department say it can't afford the \$18 million or so that would cost.

Further, the two sides are only talking about an extra half-hour of classroom time. Frankly, that pales in comparison to what the successful charters are already doing.

At this point, several things should be crystal clear to everyone.

First, more learning time can transform low-income kids into high achievers. Second, charters, which offer a significantly longer day for the same per pupil expense, are a bargain for taxpayers. Third, incremental change in the

traditional schools will no longer suffice.

“This contract will be the test,” says Sam Tyler, president of the research bureau. “It’s absolutely essential that it bring significant reform, including an extended day - and that needs to be more than just half an hour.”

The district has already lost some 3,600 students to independent charters. With the currently scheduled charter expansion, the research bureau estimates that that number will jump to 5,600 over four years. That’s about one-tenth of the district’s current enrollment.

If charter results stay strong, more and more parents will demand that kind of opportunity for their kids. If the traditional schools don’t offer it, pressure will build for another cap lift and another wave of charters. And families will vote with their feet when those new opportunities come.

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