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# Opinion

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## Teachers should get with charter reality



By **Lawrence Harmon** GLOBE COLUMNIST SEPTEMBER 16, 2011

CHARTER SCHOOLS removed the crust of complacency from public education. Doors swung open to longer school days and more opportunity. Now the Boston Teachers Union must decide whether it wants to compete with these independent schools or continue losing students to them.

A new report by the nonprofit Boston Municipal Research Bureau offers a no-nonsense look at the future financial and enrollment impact of charter schools in Boston. It's not just another in a line of dueling studies on whether charter schools outshine their district counterparts. Instead, it's a by-the-numbers analysis showing that charter school enrollment is likely to hit the 8,000-student mark in Boston by 2015, up from about 5,000 today. And if Boston school officials think they have headaches now trying to close or consolidate schools due to empty seats, just wait for the next group of charter schools to open.

The report's authors are respected analysts, not ideologues. They aren't bashing Boston teachers or their union. But they are suggesting that the Boston Teachers Union needs to embrace some of the strategies of charter schools or risk obsolescence. And the city can't afford to shower the union with dollars in exchange for common sense concessions such as tougher teacher evaluations,

performance-based raises, and greater power for principals to hire the teachers that match the needs of the students.

For 17 months, such issues have been batted around in collective bargaining sessions. Richard Stutman, the president of the Boston Teachers Union, said the sides are close or have reached agreement in principle on the longer school day and ways to free managers from seniority rules that dictate how teacher vacancies get filled. But there is much to resolve around teacher evaluations and teacher compensation.

Deputy Superintendent Michael Goar sounds less optimistic on behalf of the 56,000-student district. He said a gulf of about \$100 million separates the sides in the contract negotiation. That's based, in part, on the union's demand for a 10 percent salary hike over three years and the school department's offer of 5 percent over four years. Stutman scoffed at Goar's claim, saying the school department is exaggerating the gap by about one third.

Meanwhile, the state continues to subtract aid to Boston public schools for each student who cuts and runs to charter school. The Municipal Research Bureau projects that the outflow will create a \$90 million loss to the school system by 2015.

That's a lot of reasons to get serious about forging a new contract. And it is the union that must step up. Boston teachers are among the best-paid around while their work day is among the shortest. The union has more room to maneuver than the school department, which recently closed several schools to help absorb a \$63 million budget gap.

Heavy hitters in education, including the Gates Foundation, will be in Boston on Tuesday to congratulate the city on forming a compact with the city's 19 charter schools. Mayor Menino didn't start out as a devotee of charter schools. But he got tired of getting so little in the way of concessions from his own teachers' union. So he is prepared to accommodate space-hungry charter schools that want to lease vacant or underutilized school buildings in Boston. And charter

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school operators are pledging to recruit more special education and bilingual students who often require more intensive and expensive education programs.

Charters schools may turn out to be as good at educating kids with limited English skills or learning disabilities as they are at improving the test scores of low-income students. If so, the demands for their services will only increase in Boston. State lawmakers effectively have set an 18 percent cap on the number of public school students who can attend charter schools in Boston. But the longer the waiting lists at these charter schools, the greater the likelihood that the cap will be lifted.

Boston teachers complain they are ground down by criticism of their performance and their schools. But it must occur to many of them that it is their contract - not their skills - that is bogging down the system.

The opportunity to get this right comes along once every three years or so. The teachers union can continue to dig in and resist the changes. But it might as well be handing out one way tickets to Charterville.

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