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LEARNING CURVE
IN THE BATTLE OVER EDUCATION REFORM, CHARTER SCHOOLS MAY BE THE CLOSEST THING TO GROUND ZERO - AS THE CITY OF LYNN IS FINDING OUT

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LYNN - The newest public middle school in this mostly working-class town 11 miles north of Boston is a small six-room annex at the rear of a church. Its playground is an empty parking lot. There's no official gym, no theater, no science lab, no lockers, no room to spare.

Yet for the 77 Lynn families who sent their fifth-graders to the brand new KIPP Academy charter school this past August - a month before classes began at regular public schools - this place is a godsend. The Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), a national network of 38 public schools across the country, has been widely acclaimed for its success putting underserved students on the path to college. Started in 1994 by two former Teach for America teachers, KIPP's flagship schools in Houston and New York City continue to outperform their district counterparts, and in the last 10 years each has risen to become one of the top-performing schools in its district.

Five months into their first year at KIPP Lynn, students are at home in their new classrooms. The atmosphere is one of quiet concentration, thanks to KIPP's strict standards of behavior, but the lessons are engaging and even spirited. In one math class, the teacher leads a group of enthusiastic fifth-graders as they clap their hands and shout their way through the multiplication tables in unison: "Boom! KIPP, KIPP, good as gold, let me see your fingers roll: 8, 16, 32, 40!"

And yet these children are not exceptional learners. As an open-enrollment school, KIPP draws from the same population found in its neighboring district schools, and, says principal Josh Zoia, is more heavily minority and has a higher percentage of special education students than the district as a whole. So what's KIPP's secret? According to the 31-year-old Zoia, who also wrote KIPP Lynn's charter, success comes from placing education at the center of children's lives and teaching behavior expectations as systematically as their lessons.

School days begin at 7:30 a.m. and last until 5:00 p.m., plus two hours of homework, four hours of class every other Saturday, and three to four weeks in the summer. "If students need extra help, teachers are available by phone until 10 p.m. each night," says Zoia. "If a mom can't rouse her child out of bed, we go and pick the kid up." After four years, Zoia explains, KIPP students will have spent up to 60 percent more time in the classroom than their public school counterparts - an extra 2- 1/2 years of school.

Aside from the intrinsic draw of KIPP's program, for many Lynn parents the school simply represents another choice. Most have had few educational options for their children; unlike wealthier families, few can afford private schools or just pick up and move to the suburbs. To them, charter schools - publicly funded schools that operate outside the regulatory constraints of most public schools - seem a great alternative to their district options, and they've pinned their hopes on KIPP, sight unseen.

But not everyone in Lynn shares this zeal for charter schools. Last fall, the mayor of Lynn, the school superintendent, the School Committee, the head of the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers, and several state

representatives all fought to bar, or at least postpone, any new charter school in Lynn. For them, the issue was simple: The Lynn public school system could not afford to support a new charter school, no matter how good the program might be.

On the state level, Massachusetts lawmakers were embroiled in the same heated battle, culminating earlier this year in Governor Mitt Romney's veto of a proposed statewide moratorium on new charters. Now, four months into the new school year, and with the moratorium no longer a threat, the debates within Lynn and across the state have mostly quieted. Yet these local battles over charter schools raised important questions about education reform that reach far beyond the borders of Massachusetts. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, children across the country who attend schools identified as needing improvement have the opportunity to enroll in charter schools located within their district.

So why in the world - no matter what its financial situation - would a public school system aching with underachievement even think of turning away a program with proven success? On the other hand, why would a state department of education approve a school that the city itself actively fought against? How can a fledgling charter school survive, much less thrive, in a district that doesn't want it? And how, after all that, can both sides claim to be fighting for public education?

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The first charter schools appeared nearly 15 years ago in Minnesota, as an arm of a much older and larger movement seeking alternatives to public schools. Today, over 3,000 charter schools operate in 41 states across the country - 56 of them in Massachusetts.

Proponents envisioned charter schools as laboratories of innovation, places where progressive solutions could be developed and the best of them integrated back into the system. Placing power in the hands of the private sector, they claimed, would not only speed up educational reform, it would create healthy competition - both of which would improve the overall system.

As it matured, however, the movement attracted its share of adversaries. Though (like supporters) opponents are found on both sides of the aisle, the loudest voices come from teachers' unions and liberal thinkers, who raise issues of equity. Charters, opponents claim, are unregulated experiments that siphon money and public confidence away from the system that supports them. And for every strong charter school like the KIPP Academy, they point out, there are just as many that rank below comparable schools in the district. Though charters are ostensibly held to the same state standards as regular public schools - for instance, in Massachusetts, charter school students still must pass the MCAS - just how well their performance compares to traditional public schools is a matter of hot debate. (See sidebar. In the case of Lynn, both the city officials and the charter proponents mounted compelling arguments. The issues here were financial, not philosophical, said district officials. "Two years ago, we lost $2.4 million of additional revenue we'd expected to receive," said Bill Bochnak, the deputy chief of staff and educational policy advisor for the Lynn mayor's office, referring to the massive cuts in state aid to local districts. "Everyone - city officials, schools, teachers, administrators - had to make sacrifices."

In addition, Lynn was still smarting from its last encounter with charters. In 2002, Lynn's only other charter, the 246-student Lynn Community Charter School, was ordered closed by the state Board of Education for its shabby academics and organizational disarray - after costing the district approximately $1.9 million for each of its five years in existence. (To date, this is the only charter school in all of Massachusetts ever to be shut down for poor performance. By many accounts, the city of Lynn had a special case on its hands. But as Marc Kenen, the executive director of the Massachusetts Charter School Association, sees it, Lynn is representative of school districts across the country that are resistant to charters encroaching on their territory.

"The truth is, there are many districts who claim they can't afford to have charter schools," says Kenen. "From my point of view, these are exactly the places that can't afford *not to." Seen from a different angle, Kenen suggests, the issue of money raises a basic philosophical question. "There is an assumption that the money belongs to the system, not to the kids," he says.

Still, in many states, Massachusetts among them, the district is reimbursed at 100 percent, 60 percent, and then 40 percent for the first three years a student attends a charter. In effect, says Kenen, districts are paid twice - 200 percent over three years - for a student they are no longer educating. These three years should give districts time to adapt, he says, "but unfortunately, public schools are under the thumb of such slow-moving bureaucracies, they often simply don't."

This is precisely why charters are so important, argues Chester Finn Jr., coauthor of the 1997 book "Charter Schools in Action" (updated in 2000) and the president of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, a conservative Washington, D.C.-based research group focused on education reform. A champion of the charter school movement (and

former assistant education secretary in the Reagan administration), Finn believes the current public education system is built around adult interests, rather than kids' needs. Textbook companies, school boards, teacher unions, and central administration all have a stake in every decision.

"How can change and innovation ever take hold in an environment so stymied by adult interests?" asks Finn. Something has to push public schools to pick up their pace, he argues, and introducing competition might just be it. "If we say to public schools, 'We'll take away your kids, your budget, and your reputation,' this should be a cold shower to open up their eyes."

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Conservatives like Finn have long championed so-called "market" solutions to public education reform. But the charter movement has enlisted progressive Democrats as well, in Massachusetts and across the nation.

Mark Roosevelt is managing director of the Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education and as a state legislator was coauthor of the 1993 Education Reform Act, the landmark legislation that created MCAS and restructured the way the state manages and funds public schools. To Roosevelt, a liberal Democrat and a passionate advocate of standards-based education reform - which he calls the most important civil rights movement of our time - competition is an essential mechanism for highlighting success and weeding out failure in public education. "The long waiting-lists of kids [to attend charters] are very powerful things," he says. "If schools see themselves losing kids, this should tell them something."

To that end, says Roosevelt, charter schools must take the same cues. In his view, the closing of the Lynn Community Charter School, while disheartening, is proof the system works. Unlike regular public schools, charters have a built-in mechanism for accountability, he says. If they do not perform, they are shut down.

But Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, and editor of the 2002 book "Where Charter School Policy Fails," argues that there is a significant flaw inherent in this market model. While competition may work magnificently in the business world, she says, where in corporate America do fierce competitors ever work together to create innovation? "There is a fundamental contradiction in how proponents describe their model," says Wells. "Competition is antithetical to collaboration."

Even in cases where there are real innovations to share - and where charter school leaders have the time and inclination to do so - Wells points out that there is no established mechanism in the current state infrastructure to facilitate the transfer of new ideas. "To the extent that it is happening," she says, "it is because individuals on the ground level are doing it. There is nothing in state policies about *how to share ideas. So, for the most part, it just doesn't happen."

In Massachusetts, however, this may be changing. Although there are no state-run programs or policies, the nonprofit Project for School Innovation (PSI), based in Dorchester, is one of the only organizations in the country whose explicit mission is to connect charter and district public school teachers in a two-way exchange of effective practices and innovations. Now in its fifth year, PSI is involved with educators from 55 charter and district public schools in Massachusetts. They work with schools to identify, research, and document their most effective practices, and then publish books and hold teacher-led workshops to share the information.

In the well-matched battle over charter schools, it's simply too early for either side to declare victory. But even the movement's critics see potential. "I have great respect for people at the ground level trying to start something new," said Wells. "But as a public policy, it simply is not equipped to transform the public educational system."

But in small arenas, Finn points out, change is happening. Schools like KIPP are opening up new worlds for students and providing options for families who traditionally had none.

In the town of Lynn, the 77 kids at the KIPP Academy sit in classrooms plastered with inspirational messages: "No shortcuts, no excuses," "Only you can change your attitude," "Success is measured by effort." But perhaps the most fitting is a small handwritten sign hung beside the school's main doors. "Be the change you want to see in the world," it reads. Most kids brush right by it as they rush out the door at the end of the day. But it's there for a reason.

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