

Common Criticisms of High-Performing High-Poverty Public Schools And MATCH School Responses

You pick all the good kids. That's why you do well.

Actually, we admit by random lottery.

You skew the lottery, though. You advertise in the Boston Globe and other newspapers, such that you only reach the "good parents,"

No, we go directly to every local middle school to recruit – including and especially the Boston schools with the lowest test scores. We don't run any ads in the Globe or Herald. We do run a few ads in the community newspapers of low-income neighborhoods.

Well, whatever. Only parents from the caring middle class families actually sign up for your lottery in the first place.

Actually we have a slightly higher percentage of poor students than the sending district of Boston.

Okay, well maybe you do have poor kids, but you have fewer minority kids.

Nope. We enroll a higher proportion of black and Hispanic students than the Boston district as a whole.

Well the other schools have more special education kids.

Not true. We have 10% of kids with "mild to moderate" special needs. That's roughly what other local high schools have, too. Boston also serves another 6% to 7% of children with more severe special needs but they generally attend separate schools. So charter opponents like to characterize that "regular Boston schools have 16% special ed and you only have 10%" but that is misleading. Furthermore, the local charter schools actually serve slightly *more* children with special needs than the district's own version of autonomous schools, called pilot schools.

Hmm. Fine – but then you must have the "smarter" kids who apply to your school. That's why you do well on tests. Who else would sign up for more rigorous work?

It turns out that the 8th grade MCAS scores of our entering students are slightly below the district average.

Attrition, then, must be the reason your students appear to do well. You're comparing incoming 8th grade students which include the laggards against a smaller 10th grade class where they've been weeded out.

We only compare apples to apples – in other words, we emphasize the "gain MCAS score" of students: the gain of a student as an 8th grader (pre-MATCH) to the **exact same child** as a 10th grader on math and English exams. Students who depart are not counted in these analyses.

Well attrition is bad anyway.

We agree. We work relentlessly to keep kids and parents at MATCH who want to leave.

Why do they leave? The number one reason is "It's too hard. I can go to a different public high school and get easy grades with very little homework." So sure, from a kid's perspective, we're

offering the educational equivalent of spinach and the other school is offering Twinkies. But why is that our fault? Wouldn't you expect a critic to ask instead – why don't other schools offer high academic expectations so that students are choosing between spinach and broccoli?

The number two reason kids choose to leave our school is “I don't like the rules.” Are our rules different from other public schools? Just the dress code, which some Boston schools have but it's not universal. *Otherwise MATCH has “the usual” school rules*: no cell phones, don't be late, pay attention in class, don't cheat, etc. The difference is that we *enforce* the rules. Sure, nobody likes to get a 90-minute detention for being late to school – but if there's not a clear disciplinary response, who is advocating for the kids and the teacher disrupted by a steady stream of late arrivals? Again, wouldn't you expect a critic to ask: Why don't other schools enforce *their* existing rules so that students can't easily transfer out of the schools which *do* enforce them?

Test scores aren't everything.

We agree! We also value our high parent satisfaction (measured annually in a 50-page report), our high parent demand (10 applicants for every slot), and high volunteerism.

We need to get a lot better as an institution. But those would deny that our teachers, parents, students, and volunteers have made great strides through hard work – those critics simply refuse to face the facts.

A Challenge

This might be an interesting experiment where we could collaborate with a skeptic of charter schools and standardized tests.

Let's choose another open-admissions public school with our student demographics.

We'll hire a sound engineer to randomly sample 5-minute sequences from 20 different classes at our school and 20 different classes at the other school.

We'll get a panel of veteran teachers to score each 5-minute sequence on a 1-to-10 scale – without any knowledge of which of the 40 clips comes from which school. They won't even know that 2 schools are involved, that one is a charter, etc. They'll only know that their job is to rate 40 clips on a 1-to-10 scale of “To what extent do you think kids are learning in this class?”

Then we'll compare the average scores. For those who would question the “authenticity” of any standardized test, this might represent a more elaborate but randomized way to get an apples-to-apples comparison of expert perception of learning.

- October 2003