



The Road Not Taken: Horace Mann Charter Schools In Massachusetts

Introduction

Massachusetts' Education Reform Act of 1993 created new public school choice options in the form of Commonwealth charter schools. In 1997, the legislature created a second type of charter school, called Horace Mann charter schools, designed to be semi-autonomous schools operating within the mainstream school districts. In the ensuing years, these two seemingly similar options have had very different fates. While Commonwealth charters have garnered high levels of public interest and the number of these schools has grown steadily, Horace Mann charters have come to represent, in essence, the road not taken. This brief responds to the question: *Why has there been so little uptake of Horace Mann charters?*

It is necessary to begin by clarifying the difference between Commonwealth and Horace Mann charters. Commonwealth charter schools are com-

pletely independent of local school board and district authority; by contrast, Horace Mann charter schools retain a limited district affiliation and serve as a within-district choice alternative (see inset for complete explanations). Horace Mann charters were designed to represent a compromise: districts could be involved in creating sites for innovation inside their borders, rather than losing students to Commonwealth charters.¹ Under the best circumstances, Horace Mann charters might bridge the best of the charter movement and the best of regular public schools—and, in so doing, diffuse some of the divisiveness inherent in conceptions of charters and regular public schools as wholly distinct entities competing for scarce resources.

Currently, there are eight Horace Mann charter schools and 49 Commonwealth charter schools—

In Massachusetts, state legislation permits two forms of charter school

Horace Mann charter schools operate as part of existing school districts. They can be established either through conversion of existing district schools or as new entities. Horace Mann charters receive a five-year contract that must be approved by the local school committee, superintendent, and president of the teachers union. Teachers are members of the union bargaining unit, accruing seniority and receiving negotiated salaries and benefits. However, other contractual terms may be waived. Budget allocations are received from the school district.

Commonwealth charter schools are independent of any school committee and are granted a five-year charter. The school has the freedom to establish its own mission and curriculum, separate from that of any public school district. Commonwealth charter schools control their own budget, as well as hire and fire teachers and staff. Funding for Commonwealth charters follows the students out of their would-be public school district and to the charter school.

¹ Horace Mann charter schools were designed by state officials to replicate the internal semi-autonomous schools, called Pilot Schools, which had been jointly developed by the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Teachers' Union.

By the numbers:	
Charter schools in MA	57
Horace Mann charters	8
Commonwealth charters	49
Horace Mann charters available 2005-06	40
Commonwealth charters available 2005-06	19
Horace Mann applications filed 2004-06	0
Commonwealth applications filed 2004-06	20
Horace Mann applications filed since 1997 ²	16
Horace Mann applications approved since 1997	9
Approval rate of Horace Mann applications	56%
Commonwealth applications filed since 1997	168
Commonwealth applications approved since 1997	62
Approval rate of Commonwealth applications	37%

for a total of 57 charter schools—operating in Massachusetts. That is, only 14% of the charter schools in Massachusetts are Horace Mann charters. Further, no new applications for Horace Mann charters have been filed in either of the last two years, though there are more than twice as many Horace Mann charters than Commonwealth charters available.

The apparent lack of interest in Horace Mann charters is surprising given features of the local and national reform context, such as:

- **Continuing demand for choice by parents.** Families in Massachusetts want to exercise choice over their children’s education. Though many choice options exist, demand far exceeds current capacity—as illustrated by waiting lists at most charter schools. Horace Mann charters represent a

strategy for providing students with wider choice alternatives, as well as an opportunity for teachers and site leaders to exercise entrepreneurship and increased ownership over the school reform process.

- **Federal mandates for reconstitution of chronically failing schools.** The No Child Left Behind Act requires reconstitution of schools that have been chronically underperforming for five consecutive years. One specific possibility for reconstitution offered by the legislation is: re-opening the school as a charter school. There are over two dozen schools in Massachusetts that are currently in reconstitution status, and an even greater number that have been labeled underperforming for four consecutive years.
- **Preference for in-district chartering in other states.** There are several states that, like Massachusetts, offer both within-district and independent chartering options. However, it is not always the case that the availability of independent charters correlates with a lack of interest in within-district charters. For example in Wisconsin, a state that allows both types of charters, the number of within-district charters exceeds the number of independent charters. California and Washington are also places where in-district chartering is popular.

Debates over charter schooling are highly polarized, continually attracting both strong advocacy and equally strong opposition. Horace Mann charters represent a potential compromise within this polarized field, and may serve as a catalyst for broader educational improvement in the Commonwealth. However, thus far, there has been scarce interest in exploring this strategy.

2 Horace Mann legislation was enacted in 1997.

Methodology

This is the introductory brief in our *Policy Perspectives* series. The *Policy Perspectives* format is designed to allow us to report on the pulse of the policy community. It involves both short-term research—in this case, interviews with fifteen key policy makers and education leaders—and analysis by the Rennie Center. The series is designed as a place to reflect on the range of viewpoints that exist on “hot-button” issues. The *Policy Perspectives* series is one way in which the Rennie Center provides the additional attention needed to push issues into the public eye and shape an effective public education agenda.

Horace Mann charters represent a potential compromise within this polarized field.

For this research we posed a series of questions to legislators, leaders at the Department of Education, heads of the major education associations, charter school principals and other charter school experts. The primary research questions were:

- What advantages might be offered by Horace Mann charters?
- What factors limit interest in the creation of new Horace Mann charters or the conversion of regular public schools to Horace Mann charters?
- How might greater interest in Horace Mann charters be encouraged?

Interviewees expressed a wide range of viewpoints, illustrating the diversity of opinion on the topic. This brief summarizes themes from these interviews and concludes with recommendations for state-level policy interventions that might cultivate greater interest in the Horace Mann model.

The Potential of the Horace Mann Model

This research began from the assumption that Horace Mann charters hold untapped potential. We asked interviewees to reflect on the advantages of the model. Some pointed to specific accomplishments of current Horace Mann charters as examples of the potential of the model. Others who were involved in the original charter legislation clarified the advantages the Horace Mann option was theoretically created to address. In that way, responses are a blend of what Horace Mann charters *are* and what they *could be*. Some of the advantages of the Horace Mann model include:

- **Provide greater flexibility and autonomy than mainstream schools.** Interviewees indicated that Horace Mann schools have more flexibility and autonomy than mainstream public schools. Such flexibility and autonomy can be beneficial, if implemented correctly. This autonomy might include freedom from some elements of collective bargaining agreements and greater flexibility with regard to curricula, evaluations, scheduling, and other working conditions.
- **Leverage district central office as support.** Interviewees noted that, unlike their Commonwealth charter counterparts, Horace Mann schools were able to leverage their in-district status to gain infrastructure support from the central office. Benefits derived from this relationship include tapping the district’s economy of scale for purchasing power, technical supports, transportation capacities, building facilities, and professional development opportunities. From both a cost and structural perspective, this affiliation can offer value.³
- **Can serve as ‘laboratories of innovation’.** Some interviewees articulated the original premise of the charter legislation, recalling that charter schools were intended to serve as ‘laboratories of

3 This section focuses on the educational advantages Horace Mann charters can leverage for students. There is a competitive advantage districts, themselves, may gain by creating Horace Mann charters. That is, students enrolled in Horace Mann charters are counted as part of the district, whereas students in Commonwealth charters are not. Horace Mann charters can retain the districts’ market share of students—and the funding that goes with them—while Commonwealth charters effectively drain students and resources from districts.

innovation'. As change agents with new operating freedom, charters were responsible for communicating the lessons they learned to mainstream schools and districts. In this way, Horace Mann charters might be a source for innovative ideas for school districts. At present, critics express concern that this early goal of sharing best practices is not being adequately accomplished, and that charter schools, generally, have not been as innovative in pursuing new teaching and learning strategies as it was once believed they might be.

- **Attract new, high quality talent, especially among principals.** Some interviewees expressed that high quality teachers and administrators could be more easily recruited and retained in schools with greater autonomy. These interviewees believed that decentralized educational communities provided more opportunity for ownership and innovation, factors valued by educators seeking greater professionalism and a chance for career growth.
- **Create specialized learning environments.** Many of the Horace Mann schools that have been established to date differ from typical public schools in (1) how they were started and (2) in the populations they serve. Schools like the Boston Day and Evening Academy provide alternative education services to a specific target student population, often students that have not been well-served in traditional public schools. Other Horace Mann charters offer students a college preparatory curriculum with a specialized theme, such as the Health Careers Academy. Given the relative autonomy of Horace Mann schools, they can design alternative learning strategies, with non-traditional schedules, theme-based curricula, and/or staff trained to work with specific populations.

It is clear that the Horace Mann model has educational value and promise, independent of any political considerations associated with implementation. However, it is important to conclude this section by including a potential political advantage of the model. Horace Mann charters, by and large, are far less threatening to mainstream educators.

Because Horace Mann students are counted in district enrollments (and funding allocations) and teachers remain unionized staff, this charter model generally does not provoke the same level of political controversy as Commonwealth charter schools. Horace Mann schools may offer a more politically feasible way to grant schools greater autonomy, provide choice to parents, and experiment with flexible teaching and learning structures.

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Obstacles and Limitations

While the Horace Mann charter option may be attractive in theory, it has faced myriad challenges in reality. Judging by the lack of recent applications, education leaders are largely hesitant to initiate Horace Mann schools. Further, though currently operating Horace Mann schools are finding success in many respects, their experience reveals the difficulty of negotiating quasi-independence from district authority. Responses to the question of what limits interest in the Horace Mann model fell into five general categories:

- Preference for Commonwealth charters
- Political challenges
- Relationship to the state
- Insufficient information
- Financial disincentives

Preference for Commonwealth Charters

Commonwealth charters represent the purest version of the charter ideal, in that these schools are completely free of district authority. Many interviewees noted that the Horace Mann model does not motivate strong charter advocates to action the way the Commonwealth model does. For potential site leaders with a vision and a desire to break from the mainstream, the Horace Mann model is too limiting because its requirement of district and union affiliation creates severe restrictions on autonomy.

Day-to-day operation of a Horace Mann charter is also a challenge. Horace Mann charter leaders must engage in a complex process of negotiating authority. Both Horace Mann leaders and the district share responsibility for student results, which can lead district superintendents to desire more control over curriculum, programs, and budgets. These partnerships are complicated to enact and have been done differently within the pool of currently operating Horace Mann charters. Interviewees questioned why a potential charter leader would choose a model that required these encumbrances.

Political Challenges

It became evident through our interviews that all forms of charters continue to evoke strong feelings of either support or opposition. Horace Mann charters may be intended to represent an ideological compromise, but many educators and policy makers remain wary of any choice option that reduces traditional district and union authority. Charters, even within-district charters, are viewed by some as the beginning of the slippery slope toward privatization of public schools.

Horace Mann charters require the very constituents who have the most reason to oppose charters—unions and district leaders—to support charterization of their own schools.

- **Unions' resistance to increased autonomy.** Some interviewees indicated a belief that teacher unions are resistant to instituting more autonomy in contracts. Two specific areas of concern were teachers' schedules and adding time to the school day without commensurate compensation. There is a perception that teacher unions are concerned about charterization because of its impact on the hiring, morale, and retention of teachers. That is, if union members who work in charter schools routinely work longer school days without additional compensation, some union members may object to inconsistencies in the way members of the same union are being represented under the same district contract.

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- **District management concern regarding lost control.** Multiple interviewees noted a belief that superintendents and school committees are resistant to reform strategies which result in a loss of control over district schools and budgetary resources. For example, superintendents would be wary of being publicly transparent about a Horace Mann school's budget for fear that other constituencies in the district would want greater budget transparency and access. Accountability pressures of NCLB compound district leadership apprehension, as well as trepidation about creating separate units within a district that may be perceived as receiving preferential treatment. Other interviewees noted that district management may worry that Horace Mann schools will seek further independence and pursue Commonwealth charter status later.

■ **Challenges of the Sign-Off Process.** The initiation and renewal of a Horace Mann charter requires the site leader to obtain sign-off from both the district superintendent as well as the union leader. While this provision was designed to ensure buy-in from all involved, it can be an obstacle in the start-up or conversion of a school. In some instances, one or both parties may be reluctant to sign-off, or may use the prospective Horace Mann school as a bargaining chip in negotiations. Further, the sign-off structure may inhibit current principals in traditional schools from approaching central office leaders about conversion to a charter for fear that they may be perceived as disloyal.

Some interviewees noted that it is not always necessary to pursue charterization in order for a school to gain greater autonomy from the district. Sometimes less formal alternatives are preferable because they are less complicated to enact. In some districts, it has been possible for school leaders to create more flexible working environments by integrating contract language to enable Horace Mann-like autonomies without creating formal in-district charters.⁴ Many of the Boston Pilot Schools have negotiated this autonomy without Horace Mann status. Revision of collective-bargaining agreements and inclusion of side letters allow districts to maintain greater control over schools as well as avoid the complication of state involvement and bureaucracy.

Relationship to the State

The state is involved in the creation and operation of charter schools, and this state involvement may be a disincentive for Horace Mann creation. Some interviewees expressed a lack of faith in the Department of Education and Board of Education, and they feared working closely with the state bureaucracy would be problematic.

Those who have initiated Horace Mann charters (and conversions) have experienced multiple start-

up challenges. For example, lack of time and insufficient planning money hinders the process of designing and proposing within-district charters. These issues can acutely impact teachers. Lack of technical support and guidance from the Department of Education were also cited as obstacles to the start-up process. In sum, the Department of Education has provided inadequate information on how to start a Horace Mann charter and what the relationship between the different constituencies involved in the leadership of the charter should be.

Insufficient Information

Interviewees stated that informational gaps exist regarding the Horace Mann concept and are compounded by connoted links with the Commonwealth charter model. Knowledge gaps were cited as obstacles that decrease general interest in in-district charters, as well as reduce demand among community members and educators for their establishment.

■ **Little public information about existing Horace Mann charters.** For the most part, interviewees stated that existing Horace Mann charters had minimal influence on the rest of the education community. Boston's Pilot School initiative and Barnstable's middle school conversions stood out as exceptions to this trend, as better known instances of district-led attempts to increase school autonomy but maintain in-district status. However, little is understood about the start-up of these schools in other districts. With little knowledge about the experience and success of existing Horace Mann schools, momentum behind the in-district reform model remains minimal.

■ **Confusion about regulations and legislation governing Horace Mann charters.** Interviewees noted several instances in which regulations and legislation governing Horace Mann charters either contradict each other or are unclear. Some interviewees indicated that this ambiguity discouraged

⁴ However, it is important to note that the level of flexibility that has been negotiated in non-Horace Mann schools does not match the level of flexibility afforded Horace Mann schools. The only possible exception are the Boston Pilot Schools, which were the inspiration for the Horace Mann legislation.

potential Horace Mann leaders who foresaw complications with implementation and start-up.

Lack of community awareness and demand for Horace Mann schools reinforces most legislators' lack of investment in their expansion. Among educators, a similar lack of information about Horace Mann operation, funding, and union involvement creates confusion and a general lack of interest in the Horace Mann concept.

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Financial Disincentives

The current structure of funding for Horace Mann charters creates disincentives for both site leaders and host districts.

- **Budgetary pressure in districts.** District leaders have less control of budgets for Horace Mann charters than for their other public schools. The majority of interviewees noted that in a climate of budget cuts, rollbacks, and layoffs, districts were less likely to focus on co-managing innovative reform efforts in within-district charters. A challenging fiscal climate does not lend itself to creative, strategic thinking about Horace Mann establishment or innovation.
- **Financial disincentives for site leadership.** From the perspective of potential and existing Horace Mann leaders, inadequate planning and start-up resources exist to lay a strong foundation for a new Horace Mann school. Once instituted, Horace Mann schools face a sustainability challenge. Whereas Commonwealth charters are guaranteed the ability to carry over money available at the end of the year, Horace Mann charters must negotiate

this provision on an individual district basis. Some Horace Mann schools do not have control of excess funds and this can inhibit strategic planning. Of equal importance, many interviewees noted that parameters for district funding of Horace Mann schools are unclear. Because districts can restrict their support of Horace Mann schools, these schools experience uncertainty about future allocations, as well as potential imbalances and inequities. Finally, others reported that some within-district charters tend to receive fewer resources and poorer facilities than regular schools in the same district.

The Future of Horace Mann Charters: Policy Considerations

Horace Mann charter schools are an important innovation that could benefit education reform in Massachusetts, yet they are currently an underutilized innovation. Massachusetts school districts may be missing an important opportunity. In this section, we highlight the policy considerations that might enable the growth of the Horace Mann model in the future.

At present, ambiguity surrounds Horace Mann charters. There is a limited pool of potential leaders to initiate a Horace Mann charter, and this is, in part, because so many are unclear about what Horace Mann charters are, and how they differ from other types of public schools. Even within current Horace Mann charters and their host districts, there is often a lack of clarity around lines of authority and funding. Our interviewees offered a variety of strategies that might encourage the establishment of more Horace Mann charter schools. Most centered on ways to attract new leaders, support them in establishing within-district charters, and enable smooth functioning once new charters have been established. In this section, we focus on three key categories of future activity for policy-

makers interested in expanding Horace Mann charters in the state. They are:

- Clarify roles and responsibilities
- Provide public information
- Provide support mechanisms

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

One reason that education leaders are hesitant to initiate new Horace Mann proposals is that most current Horace Mann schools experience common (and daunting) operating challenges. These challenges stem from the fact that leadership of a Horace Mann charter involves several distinct constituencies: the district central office, the Horace Mann board, unions, and the site leadership team. The state Department of Education could reduce some of the complexity involved in funding and managing a Horace Mann charter by providing additional guidance to those constituencies. They might:

1. **Establish clear, consistent funding guidelines and regulations** for Horace Mann schools. Current challenges include a lack of clarity about state rules regarding per-pupil compensation from districts to Horace Mann schools, yearly fluctuations in district funding impacting Horace Mann schools, and the inability to guarantee roll-over of excess funds from prior years.
2. **Enhance the autonomy** of Horace Mann school boards to minimize the extent to which local school district politics impact school governance, managerial decision-making, and charter proposals and renewals.
3. **Clarify management and accountability expectations.** Horace Mann charters are allowed more freedom from district control than regular public schools. Yet, their host district is still responsible for the school's performance in state and federal accountability systems. Both district superintendents and Horace Mann boards need guidelines to better understand the scope of their respective responsibilities and discretionary control. To date, the Department of Education has done an

inadequate job of clarifying what operations and accountability in a Horace Mann school-district partnership should look like.

Provide Public Information

Information may drive future demand for the Horace Mann choice option. Among interviewees, there was concern that the public lacked knowledge of the Horace Mann model, and of the distinction between within-district and independent charters. A communication and outreach strategy might:

1. **Document and publicize success in Horace Mann charters.** It is important to track progress and measure improvement through site visits and other research. This research may demonstrate the potential value of in-district charters as school improvement agents.
2. **Extend outreach efforts to provide information about Horace Mann charters** to both educators and the public. Teachers and site leaders from regular public schools might learn about the Horace Mann model (and the programs of specific schools) through site visits. Also, the Department of Education could target educators in regular public school systems when announcing calls for Horace Mann charter applications. To lead this outreach, there may be a need for an advocate for Horace Mann charter schools that plays a role that is analogous to the role the Charter Schools Association and the Charter Schools Resource Center play for Commonwealth charters.
3. **Promote the Horace Mann model as a potential solution to specific educational challenges.** Several charter schools have had success working with specific populations of students whose needs have not been adequately met in other public schools. Horace Mann schools might be a viable strategy for:
 - Working with hard-to-educate populations. The Boston Evening Academy is an example of a Horace Mann charter that provides an innovative educational setting for students that need alternative services.

- Converting a low performing school. As No Child Left Behind specifically cites this option, Massachusetts might investigate how this type of conversion has played out in other states.
- Increasing community involvement. Horace Mann charters can be a means of generating added community involvement in the school.

Establish Support Mechanisms

Unlike Commonwealth charter leaders who benefit from a strong local and national network of peers, prospective Horace Mann leaders have few peers in the state and few successful models from which to draw design ideas. In order to encourage the expansion of Horace Mann charters statewide, greater support must be made available.

1. **Provide incentives to recruit, train and support Horace Mann leaders** to ensure that within-district charter leadership is an attractive and manageable career path. Horace Mann leaders face unique challenges with respect to shared leadership that they need support to manage.
2. **Provide increased start-up support** to districts and/or individuals interested in or involved in establishing within-district charters. Support should include financial aid, state-level technical support and strategic planning.

Conclusion

This analysis diagnoses the systemic problems that have led to limited uptake of Horace Mann charter schools. We highlight several categories of action (clarifying roles and responsibilities, providing public information and providing support mechanisms) that might be taken by state leaders to heighten interest and increase participation in Horace Mann charter schools. In addition, there may be policy changes, not explored here, that would make the Horace Mann option more attractive.

Notably absent, at present, is any sense of

urgency about resurrecting the Horace Mann charter school option. We challenge leaders on Beacon Hill to take action on this topic to create that sense of urgency. For example, leaders might establish a commission to work on this issue and put forth a more detailed set of policy and practice recommendations for expanding the use of Horace Mann charters in the Commonwealth.

Our research points to a clear need for policy-makers to take a more active interest in cultivating the Horace Mann model as an integral part of the education reform landscape in Massachusetts. We believe that encouraging the development of autonomous, district-based schools has considerable promise for teachers and educators across the Commonwealth. Additionally, this under-utilized option holds political promise for diminishing the damaging controversies surrounding Commonwealth charter schools.

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About Rennie Center Policy Perspectives

The Rennie Center is committed to diverse perspectives and voices in constructive policy discussion. With the Policy Perspectives series, we tackle “hot button” issues by reporting on the pulse of the education policy community and presenting a range of viewpoints about critical education reform debates. The series is another way in which the Rennie Center focuses attention on key issues, provides insight and perspective and helps shape an effective public education agenda.

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The mission of the Center for Collaborative Education (CCE) is to improve student learning in K-12 public schools and districts by promoting educational reform that is focused on school and system-wide change. The Center seeks to influence the larger public's view on education to better support change that fosters democratic and equitable schools.

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The Rennie Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that informs and promotes significant improvement of public education in Massachusetts. Our work is motivated by a vision of an education system that creates the opportunity to educate every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. Applying non-partisan, independent research, journalism and civic engagement, the Rennie Center is creating a civil space to foster thoughtful public discourse to inform and shape effective policy.

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