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High-flying pilot schools

Study points to range of successes in Boston's experimental program

By Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | November 9, 2007

Students in Boston's pilot high schools perform better on the MCAS tests, are suspended less frequently, attend class more often, and graduate in higher percentages than students enrolled in the city's regular public high schools, according to the first comprehensive study on the effectiveness of the experimental schools.

The findings, detailed in a report to be released today at a Boston Foundation forum, reaffirm the conviction of some educators and city leaders who believe that school officials should open more pilot schools to keep families from fleeing the school system and prompted others to question why the school district has not adopted the successful methods at its regular schools.

Despite a much-heralded agreement between the city and the teachers' union last year to open seven more pilot schools at all levels by 2009, only one has opened, and no others are scheduled to launch soon, said Paul Grogan, president of the Boston Foundation, which has given schools more than $1 million in the last five years to convert to pilots.

"The process of creating more pilot schools is completely stalled," Grogan said. "If we've got something that's this promising, how can we not do more? It's a terrible shame."

The study, which was conducted by the Center for Collaborative Education, used Boston Public Schools data to compare the performances of students enrolled in pilot schools with those in regular schools over four years, in several categories.

The center is a Roxbury-based nonprofit that supports pilot schools, a position that was cited by Richard Stutman, president of the Boston Teachers Union.

But Stutman, who in the past has raised the most concerns over expansion of pilot schools, did not dispute the accuracy of the findings.

"Undeniably, pilots have done well," Stutman said.

Boston's pilot schools have been emulated in Fitchburg, Los Angeles, and other cities and the state Department of Education is using them as a model to reform failing schools. But the report also notes that the city's 10 pilot high schools, as a whole, enroll fewer struggling students, making it difficult to determine whether the success stems from the quality of the students or the schools' unique practices; the schools also enroll fewer students with severe

special needs and students with limited English skills.

The Globe reported in July that many pilot high schools have set a variety of admissions criteria, including demanding essays, teacher recommendations, interviews, and even transcripts, to ensure that students are the right fit for the schools.

The system's regular schools are assigned students through a computerized choice lottery.

Boston's pilot schools, created in 1995 under an agreement between the district and the teachers' union to compete with charter schools, are public schools that have greater control over their budgets, scheduling of the school day, hiring, and curriculum.

Run by independent governing boards, the city's 20 pilot schools are free from many union and school system restrictions; many require teachers to work a longer day. Given the increased freedoms, pilots were charged with producing better student results.

"The evidence is fairly strong that there seems to be some advantage of being a pilot school," said Paul Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education, who will moderate today's discussion on pilot schools. "The question in my mind is what do you do with those principles that work? How do you apply them to all schools?"

Key factors that appear to help pilot high schools produce better results, he and principals said, include the schools' small size (100 to 450 students), faculty buy-in, and greater accountability. Teachers show more passion for what they teach because they help design the curriculum at each school, they said.

Superintendent Carol Johnson said that the study results were encouraging and that she plans to ask teachers from "a select group of pilot schools that really beat the odds" to work with regular schools.

"While the autonomy and flexibility are key elements in a pilot, it's also about instruction," Johnson said. "So what would be helpful is to examine what specific strategies and elements hold promise."

At Another Course to College, a 200-student pilot high school in Brighton that is one of the city's most popular schools, for instance, English teachers make up their own reading syllabus. One teacher recently added Octavia Butler, a black science fiction writer, to the list. Another teacher introduced a short story by the school's headmaster, Rachel Skerritt, who is a novelist.

Skerritt said the school's small size allows her to know not just every student's name, but also how each one is faring in his or her classes. She checks on their grades once a week.

"I just take a look so I can have informal conversations with students about their achievement when I see them," Skerritt said. "It shows that we're paying attention, and that we care."

The report also showed that pilot high schools do better with at-risk students, those with low eighth-grade MCAS scores and attendance.

When enrolled in a pilot high school, such students had higher ninth-grade attendance, higher promotion rates to the 10th grade, and higher 10th-grade MCAS scores. For example, 70.4 percent of at-risk pilot school students who failed the eighth-grade math MCAS passed the 10th-grade exam, while only 50.7 percent of at-risk students attending regular high schools passed.

Ellen Guiney, executive director of Boston Plan for Excellence, a nonprofit that works with the city to improve schools, said that the Boston Foundation had promised to commission an independent study last year, but has yet to follow though.

Guiney also questioned the fairness of the new study's premise, because these schools do not teach the same types of students who attend regular public high schools.

"I don't think they have cooked the books, but they are absolutely different kids," she said. "Regular high schools have the greatest concentration of kids who are the most behind."

Stutman said he expects more pilot schools to be established within two years, including one run by the Boston Teachers Union, as the agreement provided. He said he met with school officials about a union-run pilot school this week to discuss what grade levels it would serve and expects clearer direction this winter.

But Grogan and others remain skeptical about progress. In the last year, a Brighton middle school and a Jamaica Plain elementary school have attempted to become pilot schools, Grogan said. The plans ended when teachers voted them down.

The latest stall, said Dan French, executive director of the Center for Collaborative Education, does not bode well for the school system's future. The school system has lost 7,000 students, or more than 10 percent of its enrollment, since 2000, he said. More than a quarter of school-age children in Boston attend private, parochial, charter or other nondistrict schools, he said.

"In a time of declining enrollment and more and more families choosing to enroll their children outside the Boston Public Schools, we have an example of schools that are attracting families back into the district," French said. "The school district should be intent on creating more."

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