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## WHERE CHARTERS SUCCEED

**L**OCAL CHARTER schools just got a good report card. Students in these independent schools tend to score higher on the MCAS than peers in district public schools, according to a study from the state's Department of Education.

It's a victory for the Commonwealth, and a contrast to last month's federal study showing that nationally charter schools lag behind public schools on the National Assessment of Educational Progress test. The next step is to identify the factors that promote student success and see if they can be replicated.

Not every Massachusetts charter school is a leader. In 2005, math MCAS scores at 11 percent of charters were lower than at the public schools in their districts. But when successful, charter schools can help close the achievement gap, improving the scores of minority, low-income, special-education, and limited-English students.

The state report doesn't say how these schools succeed. But one strength is the flexibility to redesign the school day.

Established in 1995, the Community Day Charter Public School in Lawrence is a kindergarten-to-eighth grade charter school with an eight-hour day. Its student body is 86 percent Hispanic; 34 percent have limited English skills; and two-thirds qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. And its MCAS scores are substantially above average. In 2005, 89 per-

cent of the school's eighth-graders scored in the proficient and advanced levels in math, compared with a state average of 39 percent and a district average of 13 percent.

The state education department credits teachers at the school with using MCAS results data to adapt the curriculum to student needs. And the school actively engages parents, relying on official outreach and informal contacts in the Hispanic community.

A summer program serves students of all ages — even kindergartners and first-graders. Sheila Balboni, the school's executive director, says that a big challenge is making sure the youngest students "make the leap" and acquire basic literacy skills upon which their education depends. That should help give students a rigorous academic experience that will enable them to consider a range of choices when they have to pick a high school, and, later, a college.

The Community Day School has an advantage: It doesn't have to accept every student, as public schools do. Parents apply, and acceptance is based on a lottery. Still, the school's results show that more can be done to help students of all backgrounds succeed.

Charter schools have been demonized for siphoning money and students from traditional public schools. But the state report shows that many should be seen not as thieves but as pioneers, cutting new roads to academic success.