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Charter schools start recruiting drive

The Boston Globe

City's 14 institutions make concerted effort to attract more English language learners

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | January 30, 2010

More than 150 teachers, parents, and advocates are launching an aggressive drive today in Boston to recruit immigrant families to their charter schools in an attempt to reverse woefully low enrollment of students who are not fluent in English.

They will be canvassing neighborhoods with large immigrant populations, handing out fliers printed in Spanish, Chinese, Haitian Creole, and Portuguese, as well as distributing applications.

They will also take to the airwaves, advertising on radio and television in a variety of languages, in addition to placing ads in ethnic newspapers.

The recruitment drive represents the first coordinated effort among the city's 14 charter schools to attract more English language learners, a group that has among the lowest achievement rates across the state and that some charter school leaders acknowledge they have not done a good enough job trying to recruit.

"We take the hit too often that we don't serve these children," said Kevin Andrews, headmaster of Neighborhood House Charter Public School in Dorchester and president of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association. "We are going to make sure these kids get a great education. Charter schools will step up to the plate and show we can do it."

Many charter schools are under pressure to boost their enrollment of students who are not fluent in English because of the enactment of a new education law this month. It requires charter schools to develop recruitment and enrollment retention strategies so their students reflect the demographics of their communities.

Andrews emphasized yesterday that planning for the all-hands recruitment drive began well before the law was passed.

Boston charter schools tend to do a good job of enrolling other student groups that tend to struggle academically. The percentage of African-Americans, for instance, at several charter schools exceeds the average of the city's school system.

Most schools also serve a significant number of low-income students.

Yet the percent of English language learners at all but one charter school was less than 4 percent, according to a Globe review last year, while the school system average was nearly 20 percent.

Charter school critics, who often include employees of traditional school districts, cite the low enrollment numbers of English language learners in arguing that charter schools skim the cream of the crop to achieve academic success.

Charter school advocates dismiss such arguments, saying that innovative programs, top-notch teaching, and intensive tutoring propel their students to do well.

Matt Wilder, a spokesman for the school system, said Superintendent Carol Johnson welcomes the charter schools' marketing campaign, pointing out that the new state law requires more aggressive recruiting.

"Superintendent Johnson believes public schools should serve all students, and that includes charter schools," Wilder said. "The Boston public schools have been working all year to improve our services for [English language learners] and their families."

The school district is also recruiting students for the next school year and publishes information in seven different languages.

Boston began spending millions of dollars to bring its programs for English language learners into compliance with state and federal laws, after administrators learned during a state review that thousands of students who should be receiving such services were not.

Recruiting groups for the charter schools will be fanning out today in places such as Mattapan Square, Dudley Square, Uphams Corner, Fields Corner, South Bay Shopping Center, and Orient Heights.

One of the most basic tasks will be explaining what a charter school is. Charter school advocates say that many parents, regardless of their ability to speak English, have the misconception that charter schools are private, tuition-charging institutions.

The city's registration centers for public schools include only information about the school system and nothing about charter schools.

They will distribute fliers that open with a simple statement: "There are 14 special schools in Boston called charter schools. They are free. All of them have one mission: to prepare your child for success in college. Many of these schools have the highest test scores in Boston."

The marketing blitz also includes a multilanguage website and a toll-free telephone number.

The goal is to have parents fill out applications or at least persuade them to attend the charter school recruitment fair on Feb. 6 at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

The true test of whether the marketing campaign succeeds will be in March, when the charter schools announce the new enrollees. Students are randomly selected to attend a charter school through a lottery.

The opportunity to attend a charter school could be a boon for English language learners, so long as they develop the right programs and provide teachers with proper training, said Miren Uriarte of the Mauricio Gaston Institute for Latino Community Development and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Betsy Alvarez-Diaz, whose son graduated from Excel Academy charter school in East Boston last year, said she believes charter schools could be a golden opportunity for English language learners.

"Charter schools have excellent teachers and tutoring programs," said Alvarez-Diaz, who moved here from Honduras as a teenager and is director of parent and community outreach for the Boston Charter School Alliance. "Having that kind of individual attention, while learning English, produces amazing results." ■