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OPINION

A time for real education change

The dollars are there. Parents must bring the determination.

By [Scot Lehigh](#) Globe Columnist, Updated May 27, 2021, 4:48 p.m.



Teacher assistant Renelle Evans helps 6th-grader Isaiah Martin during his English language arts class at Boston Prep, a charter middle and high school in Hyde Park, in February. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

This is a time of frustration and ferment in Massachusetts K-12 education, but also a period ripe with the promise of lasting change.

The COVID-19 pandemic took a big bite out of the second half of the last school year and consumed most of this one, at least when it comes to in-school

learning. Parents are exasperated and anxious. Children have been bored or lonely or melancholy or bouncing off the walls. Everyone is, or should be, worried about the learning loss students have suffered.

Post-pandemic, all that angst should be turned into a movement for big, bold education innovation.

The ingredients are certainly there.

For starters, there's [Massachusetts Parents United](#), an urban parent advocacy organization started half a decade ago by [Keri Rodrigues](#), a former organizer at the Service Employees International Union and current Democratic State Committee member, to amplify the voices of those parents. She says the schools that serve Black and brown children won't be allowed to settle back into the status quo.

Why that confidence? Because, Rodrigues avers, often-lackluster digital-learning efforts during the pandemic have created "a great awakening of parents."

"They have seen this play out in their living rooms and they are saying, 'Oh my God, I have to start paying closer attention,'" she said in an interview. Her group is pushing for individual learning plans for students, extended learning time, high-intensity tutoring, and mental health support for students and teachers, among other things.

Yes, that will cost significant money, but there are abundant new resources flowing in for education, including \$2.8 billion in federal COVID dollars and, when fully ramped up over six years, an additional \$1.5 billion annually, targeted mainly at high-need urban districts under the Student Opportunity Act.

"It is transformational kind of money," said Ed Lambert, executive director of the [Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education](#). "We need to be sure that people are using evidence-based best practices and thinking boldly, strategically, and systematically."

Fortunately, there are dozens of idea factories of innovation and enterprise, in the form of the state's charter-school sector. Indeed, there's a lot of overlap between the changes parents want and the services charters provide.

Individual learning plans, which 86 percent of respondents supported in a [recent poll](#) conducted by Echelon Insights for the Massachusetts Parents Union, are a charter-school staple.

Almost two-thirds of the public school parents polled want a school calendar with more learning time, while 60 percent support a longer day. Those, too, are standard charter-school features.

More than three-quarters of those polled want more learning opportunities this summer. Good news: At the end of April, the Baker administration put up \$70 million for summer learning. Applications are flowing in.

But meanwhile, consider the [Brooke Charter Schools](#), which plan to start the next academic year for its three K-8 schools on Aug. 11 and end it on June 17, 2022.

Unusual? Not for Brooke.

“We have a long school year every year and a longer day,” said [Jon Clark](#), Brooke’s codirector.

The [Phoenix Charter Academy Network](#), whose high schools in Chelsea, Springfield, and Lawrence serve older, nontraditional students — the average student age at Phoenix’s Chelsea school is 19.8 — has rebuilt its class schedule around its students’ needs, according to Phoenix network founder [Beth Anderson](#). That means early morning offerings and evening classes that run as late as 8 or 9 o’clock. (Anderson credits Phoenix’s district partners with helping make that possible by providing meals for late-at-class learners and their families.)

The [Match Charter Public Schools](#), meanwhile, have become nationally known for making small, intensive tutoring sessions a regular part of the school day. Teaming with [AmeriCorps](#), Match hires 35 just-out-of-college tutors each year for one-year postings to that program. Dozens of other schools and educators have asked about it, said Match president and CEO [Nnenna Ude](#) — so many that [Match produced a webinar on the subject](#).

This should be an exciting time in education. There are ideas. There’s determination. There are dollars. But there will also, of course, be resistance from the status quo.

To overcome that, change advocates must demand smart, detailed, responsive plans for the new money, not vague expressions of good intentions. There must be concrete measures of improvement — and concerned parents acting as persistent prods in every community.

The stars are aligned for change. Don't let the opportunity slip away.

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