

# **MASSACHUSETTS CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS BEST PRACTICES USING DATA TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN SPRINGFIELD**

*by Cara Stillings Candal*



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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



**This paper is a publication of the Center for School Reform**, which seeks to increase the education options available to parents and students, drive system-wide reform, and ensure accountability in public education. The Center's work builds on Pioneer's legacy as a recognized leader in the charter public school movement, and as a champion of greater academic rigor in Massachusetts' elementary and secondary schools. Current initiatives promote choice and competition, school-based management, and enhanced academic performance in public schools.



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## INTRODUCTION

Recent studies continue to shine light on high-performing charter schools.<sup>1</sup> While Boston-area charter schools—a concentrated group of high-performers—garner more attention than others, many excellent schools outside of Boston have been quietly chipping away at the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. One of these schools is the SABIS International Charter School (SICS) in Springfield, MA, a school that has been named a “top high school” by *US News & World Report* for five years running.<sup>2</sup>

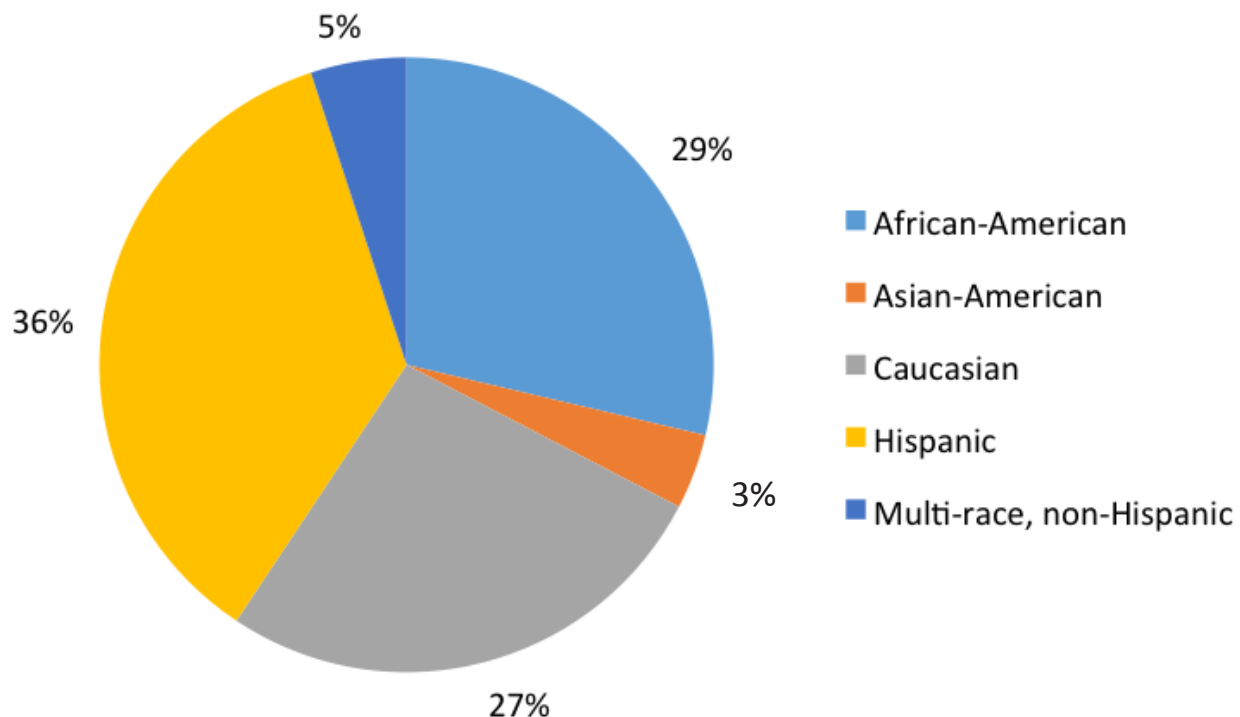
What makes SICS a “top school,” according to *US News & World Report* and the American Institutes for Research? It prepares students to persist in college and enables it students, the vast majority of whom are economically disadvantaged, to “perform better than statistical expectations.” That is, students at SICS not only outperform their peers in similar schools on standardized tests of achievement, they

also embody the idea that “demography is not destiny.”

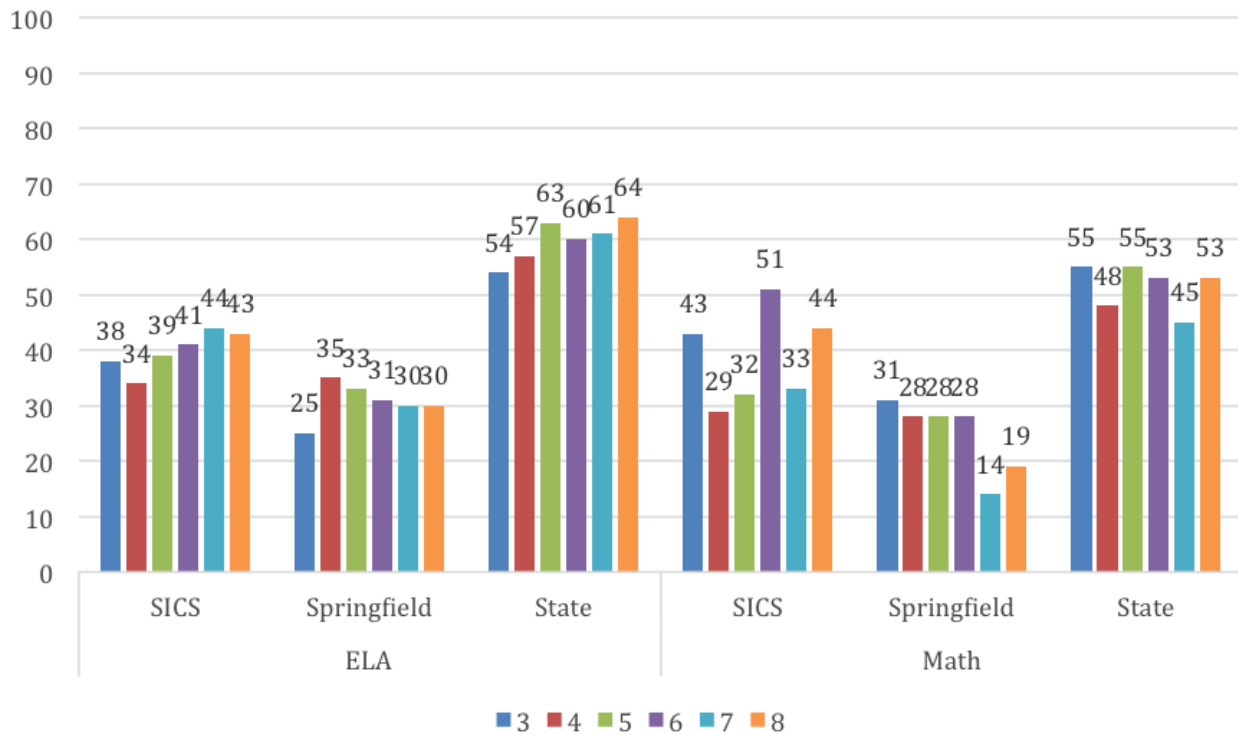
Founded in 1995, SICS was among the first charter schools established in Massachusetts. It serves students in grades K-12 and has a clear, two-pronged mission. The first part of the mission is academic: to prepare students for success in college and to be critical thinkers who are intellectually engaged and excited about life-long learning. The second part of the SICS mission is to produce ethical, responsible “citizens of the world”; people who care about their community and are engaged with social issues.<sup>3</sup>

By most measures, SICS has been fulfilling its mission since its founding. Beginning with its first graduating class, 100 percent of SICS students have been accepted to college. An impressive percentage of graduates also receive scholarships each year.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, from the very start, SICS has outperformed the surrounding Springfield district on standardized tests of achievement.

**FIGURE 1. SICS DEMOGRAPHICS**



**FIGURE 2. SICS 2015 PARCC % OF STUDENTS PROFICIENT OR BETTER**



In recent years the school has moved fewer students from the proficient to advanced categories than it would like—something that faculty and staff are working to address. The results that SICS consistently enables students to achieve, however, come much closer to the state average than its demographic peers in and outside of the Springfield school district.<sup>5</sup> These data are even more impressive in context: 75% of SICS students are high needs and/or economically disadvantaged, a slightly higher percentage than the sending district.<sup>6</sup>

**BEST PRACTICE:  
DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTION**

To understand how SICS students defy “statistical expectations,” it is necessary to understand the SABIS approach to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. SABIS is a for-profit educational management organization (EMO) that SICS contracted with upon its founding. SABIS contracts with 15 schools in the U.S. and 59 around world. It provides schools

with everything from financial management services and a specified approach to fostering a positive and healthy school culture to an administrative structure designed to support the SABIS approach to teaching and learning. Components of the approach include the following things, which are designed, delivered, and continually revised and supported by SABIS:<sup>7</sup>

- A detailed and rigorous curriculum aligned to local standards and needs
- Textbooks to support the curriculum
- A prescribed approach to teaching the curriculum
- A sophisticated system of formative and summative assessments
- Technology that provides weekly feedback to teachers, students, and families regarding student progress on formative assessments
- An comprehensive approach to understanding data as a means to impacting

instruction and engaging students in their own academic growth

The SABIS approach to schooling is holistic, and the model’s documented success cannot be attributed to just one thing. The extreme sophistication of the SABIS approach to data-driven instruction, however, warrants a close look, especially as a means to understanding how the organization enables students to achieve such impressive results. The vast majority of assessments that SICS students take are formative in nature, designed not just as tools for understanding what students know but as learning experiences—opportunities for students to demonstrate conceptual knowledge by applying it in given contexts.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to summative end-of-semester and state-required examinations, students are assessed weekly as part of SABIS’s Academic Monitoring System (AMS). Weekly assessments do a number of things. First, they confirm what teachers are beginning to understand based on classroom interactions: the extent to which individuals and groups of students have mastered concepts. Every assessment is designed in the SABIS central office and administered to students electronically. This format not only allows for the efficient delivery of each assessment and each student’s results, it also enables SABIS and local schools to more easily adapt curricula and assessments to individuals, especially in the case of students with special educational needs.<sup>9</sup>

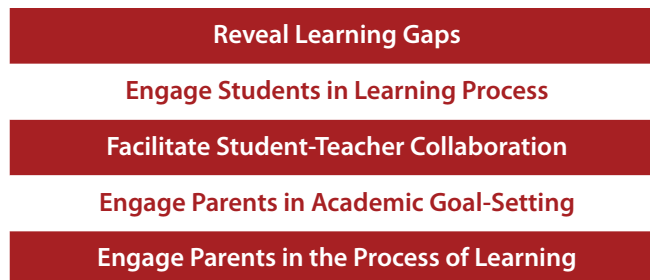
The second thing weekly assessments do is actively engage students in the process of learning. Unlike in many other school settings,

where students might sit for an exam and wait long periods of time for results, teachers, students, and even parents receive almost immediate feedback on student performance on weekly student assessments.<sup>10</sup> The school posts general results for all students (by ID number) the day after an assessment is administered. Students can see how they fare in relation to their peers, and once the results are in, they meet individually with teachers to parse their performance and create a plan of action for academic growth.<sup>11</sup>

Rapid access to student results coupled with student conferences allow teachers to better support individuals who are struggling and also reteach a concept, often using a different tact, if larger groups of students aren’t showing mastery. Importantly, this overall approach to assessment also helps teachers diagnose and correct common misconceptions that students might have. Because assessments are so frequent and regular feedback such an integral part of the process, teachers can correct misconceptions before they impact a student’s ability to understand subsequent content.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, weekly assessments under the AMS engage parents in student academic life. With a tool called the Webschool, parents can see what their children are learning and how they are faring on assessments. The program works on a 24-hour cycle, so parents can have “new and detailed information on a daily basis” about where in the academic curriculum their child is encountering success and where he or she is struggling. The same website allows parents to support students at home by providing problems,

### FIGURE 3. WEEKLY ASSESSMENTS



aligned to growth areas identified by weekly assessments, for families to practice together.<sup>13</sup>

Thus assessment data drive instruction at SICS, but the term “data-driven instruction,” as it is commonly used in schools, doesn’t adequately describe what students at this and other SABIS schools experience. With such easy access to their own assessment data, along with weekly practice in applying it to their personalized plan for academic growth, SICS students play a critical part in the process of their own learning.

With their teachers, students can set goals for themselves, figure out how to reengage a concept after a failed attempt to demonstrate mastery, and actively track their own pace toward the larger learning goals on which they will be assessed at the end of each semester. Importantly, students are also allowed to retake assessments until they demonstrate mastery—assessments are revised with each retake to ensure that students are applying conceptual knowledge and thinking content through instead of just regurgitating material they have memorized.

### **HOW SICS IS ANSWERING DEMAND FOR BETTER SCHOOL OPTIONS**

As charter supporters continue to fight entrenched special interests in an effort to lift the charter cap in Massachusetts, a better understanding of the diversity of school options that charter schools are bringing to families across the Commonwealth is important.<sup>14</sup> In 1995 SICS established a high-performing school in a struggling district, offering students a chance to go to college and to experience a curriculum and overall approach to education that is as innovative as it is traditional. There is great demand for SABIS in Springfield; the school has a waitlist of 2,851 students.<sup>15</sup> Despite political attempts to decry and devalue the school because of its association with a for-profit entity, parents and students who are benefiting from the school or want to benefit from it are a reminder that high-quality academic options for students matter far more than politics.

SABIS International Charter School in Springfield and the two other SABIS schools in the Commonwealth (in Holyoke and Lowell) can also benefit students in other schools. SABIS’s well-documented approach to data-driven instruction, an approach that engages students and even families in the process of learning is one that other schools can adopt. Even other high-performing charter schools, many of which have been praised for their own use of data to drive instruction, can learn from SABIS how to more actively involve the learner in understanding where he or she stands in relation to an academic goal in order to co-construct a sound plan for achievement.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### ***Provide Better Platforms for High-Performing Charters to Share Best Practices with Struggling Schools:***

At SABIS schools, data-driven instruction is the practice of adults vigilantly gathering many different forms of data about students and sharing that information with students and parents to their advantage. If more schools could understand how SABIS schools leverage data in various forms to engage, enable, and encourage students, more schools might see outcomes similar to those achieved at SICS.

#### ***Authorize Charter Schools with Various Approaches to Enhancing Student Achievement:***

The SABIS approach is different, and this is desirable to many Massachusetts families. The Commonwealth’s authorization process should be open, fair, and encourage various approaches to enabling student achievement. If a school produces results and maintains a healthy learning environment that families desire, outside affiliations, such as EMO status, should not bias the authorization process.

#### ***Leverage Best Practices from High-Performing Charter Schools in “Turnaround” Districts:***

As the Commonwealth has done in places like Lawrence, it should continue to seek to understand best practices across school sectors



and encourage partnerships between traditional public schools, charter schools, and districts. This can take the form of shared school spaces and administrative structures or a formal relationship, brokered by the Commonwealth, established in the interest of helping all students succeed.

***Lift the Cap on Charter Public Schools:***

After more than 20 years of charter public schools in the Commonwealth, it is clear that autonomy coupled with strict accountability for outcomes is an educational model that works. While we look to share best practices across sectors, additional charter schools, including new schools that have no basis for establishing “proven provider” status, should be able to apply for charters in all communities across the Commonwealth, even communities that are close to or have surpassed the cap.



## About the Author

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

## Recent Publications

*The Reckless Cost of MBTA Financial Derivatives*, Policy Brief, February 2016

*Fordham Institute’s Pretend Research*, Policy Brief, February 2016

*Data Reveals Out of Control Administrative Staffing Budget Increases at MBTA*, Policy Brief, February 2016

*Massachusetts Charter Public Schools: Best Practices in Curricular Innovation*, White Paper, January 2016

*Massachusetts Charter Public Schools: Best Practices Serving English Language Learners*, White Paper, December 2015



## Endnotes

1. *Urban Charter School Study 2015*, Center for Research on Educational Outcomes (CREDO) Stanford University; Cohodes, Setren, Walters, Angrist, Pathak (2013) *Charter School Demand and Effectiveness: A Boston Update*, MIT
2. “Best High Schools by U.S. News and World Report” Press Release; <http://sics.sabis.net/news/news/best-high-schools-by-us-news-and-world-report>
3. SABIS International Charter School: Our History and Mission; <http://sics.sabis.net/about-sics/our-history-mission>
4. Isenberg, Daniel (2013) *Worthless, Impossible, and Stupid: How Contrarian Entrepreneurs Create and Capture Extraordinary Value*. Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, MA.
5. *ibid*
6. Massachusetts Department of Education (MA DESE), School and District Profiles. Note: ‘High needs’ is a new accountability category. According to the MA DESE, “the new high needs group is an unduplicated count of all students in a school or district belonging to at least one of the following individual subgroups: students with disabilities, English language learners (ELL) and former ELL students, or low income students (eligible for free/reduced price school lunch).
7. Tooley, James (2012) *From Village School to Global Brand*, Profile Books Ltd., London,
8. Interview with Toni Tannous, Academic Quality Controller, grades 5-8, Holyoke Community Charter School, October 22, 2015.
9. Interview with Toni Tannous
10. Interview with Stacy Wolmer, IT Coordinator, Holyoke Community Charter School, October 22, 2015.
11. Interview with Dr. Sonia Correa Pope
12. *ibid*
13. Interview with Stacey Wolmer
14. In 2015, a cap lift ballot initiative was proposed, Governor Charlie Baker offered legislation that is similar in content to that initiative, and several different charter school bills were circulated in the House and Senate. All seek to lift the cap in some way, though with different constraints as to where and at different paces (see <http://www.masscharterschools.org/media/news/you-were-sayingtime-raise-charter-school-cap> for a more detailed summary). In September 2015, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of five students who were unable to gain charter school seats through the lottery process (see <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2015/09/15/group-students-sues-lift-state-charter-school-cap/yI0I7SExv5e6g2hWmpVsKP/story.html>).
15. Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, “Charter School Waitlist Report FY16” <http://www.doe.mass.edu/charter/enrollment/fy2016WaitlistUpdate.html>









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