



Evaluating a Charter High School by Going to Commencement

By [Paul E. Peterson](#) 06/17/2010

No spacious, leafy suburb surrounds the building and grounds of [Mystic Valley Regional Charter High School](#). On the contrary, the neighborhood's image, as conveyed by Clint Eastwood's gloomy "Mystic River," [A. O. Scott tells us in his *New York Times* review](#), is captured by a camera drifting "down from its aerial survey of Boston and alight[ing] in a nondescript blue-collar neighborhood of triple-decker wood-frame houses and scuffed-up sidewalks." So it was quite a thrill when I discovered a totally different Mystic Valley the other night at the school's commencement exercises.

As on other such occasions, the students were excited, the parents proud, and the teachers looked perfectly pleased with themselves. But what made the event special was the sense of accomplishment felt not just by the 43 members of the graduating class—the largest class ever to graduate from Mystic Valley—but by everyone in the room. The charter school opened its doors as an elementary school in 1998 and then grew its high school once its elementary school students reached that stage of their schooling. Some of the students had thus been at the same school since first grade, shortly after the school doors opened. As the salutatorian of the class of 2010 reminded his teachers: "We've been here longer than you

have.” Only a few members of the Board of Trustees could match him in longevity.

Mystic Valley has thus been around long enough that an evaluation is in order. On graduation night, the school passed with flying colors. Diploma recipients had faces of many hues, but the school seemed as thoroughly socially integrated as one could ever hope. The atmosphere was totally different from that at other, similar occasions I have witnessed, even in the most prestigious of suburban public schools, where the pattern of cheers tended to match the color of the graduate. Also special to this occasion were the excellent manners and general orderliness on display throughout the evening, even during the less scintillating passages of the commencement address given by yours truly.

Mystic Valley [expects students to master the international baccalaureate curriculum](#). Their success in meeting expectations is evident from the school’s rating, both this year and last year, as one of the nation’s best schools by [Newsweek](#), and also by the high ranking given to it by [U. S. News and World Report](#) just this month. According to the school’s director, all of the students in the graduating class plan to go to college this fall, and several will enter highly selective New England colleges, with one a possible enrollee in the course on American government I will be teaching this fall.

The district public schools of Malden that stand as the primary alternative to Mystic Valley are no better than one might expect from Eastwood’s portrait. Roughly two-thirds of Malden’s tenth graders are deemed by the state to be proficient in math and reading—roughly the state average. Meanwhile, the percent proficient among tenth graders at Mystic Valley was 80 percent in math and 96 percent in reading.

The state tried to convince Mystic Valley that the school should accept federal Title I money for its disadvantaged students; in return, the curriculum would need to be altered to accommodate federal policy. The school’s Board of Trustees politely declined.

I doubt the commencement exercises are deceiving, as the show and tell is mainly for the students, staff, and families, not outsiders. So, unless politics are involved, I can’t quite understand why the Deval Patrick administration is approving new charter schools for Massachusetts at the shabby rate of one per year, accommodating an additional 250 to 300 students with each new school, even though 25,000 students are waiting in line.