



## Issue of Interest: Analysis of DESE Charter School Waitlist Data

March 4, 2016

### Overview

A 2014 audit of the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) oversight of charter schools found that they did not adequately collect or maintain data, most notably relative to the waitlist. Six months later, DESE told the OSA that the agency did not intend to take action on many of the audit's findings and recommendations. In response to continuing questions about the validity of the waitlist, DESE recently released updated information. As part of our ongoing oversight of state agencies, OSA reviewed (but did not audit) that data. Based on DESE's own statements and our analysis, we believe that over-statement of the waitlist persists and DESE has not taken the steps necessary to ensure accuracy in its waitlist counts.

**“DESE has not taken the steps necessary to ensure accuracy in its waitlist counts.”**

### Data Collection

While DESE has made certain enhancements to the data submission process, this has primarily improved only the format of the data. According to its own statements to this office, DESE is still not gathering student home address and phone number information as statutorily required. That information is essential for accurate matching of student names appearing on multiple charter school waitlists.

### Rolling Forward Previous Waitlists

DESE partially addressed OSA's recommendation regarding the practice of rolling forward waitlisted students from prior years by prohibiting charter schools from rolling forward students added to the waitlist after March 2014; however, charter schools are allowed to continue rolling forward waitlists established prior to that time. DESE states that it has surveyed schools and determined that 75% of charter schools have now eliminated entries that had been rolled forward. However, it has neither identified which schools continue the practice nor indicated how many students continue to be rolled forward. To better understand the potential impact of the 25% of schools continuing to use this



process, the office reviewed how waitlist numbers are distributed across schools. Given that just 19 of the 74 schools currently reporting waitlists account for over 67% of the students on waitlists, the probability that rollovers inflate the total number on the waitlist is considerable.

### Misleading Information

Formerly the waitlist numbers counted only Commonwealth charter schools. For Fiscal Year 2015, DESE added the numbers from Horace Mann charter school waitlists. Mixing the two is misleading.

### Some Charter Schools May Not be at Maximum Capacity

As part of this review, this office cross-matched DESE's most recent waitlist data with its separately published capacity and enrollment data. That analysis indicated that 45 of the Commonwealth charter schools reporting waitlists have been operating below their DESE authorized maximum capacities. This discrepancy can be attributed to a variety of factors and must be expected, at least to some extent, during a school's initial start-up years. However, if those 45 Commonwealth charter schools are operating at less-than-full capacity while still reporting waitlists, waitlist counts could theoretically be reduced. Given recent, not yet published, decisions by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to increase capacity at some schools, this office was not able to determine the exact impact this issue could have on the waitlist, but estimates it could be close to 4,000 unused seats.

### Related Audit

#### [The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Oversight of Charter Schools](#)

For the period July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2013; Issued December 18, 2014

This audit examines aspects of DESE's oversight of the charter school system and fulfillment of statutory obligations, including matters related to student waitlists, student and educator data, development and dissemination of replicable innovative best practices, and attainment of academic and demographic profiles comparable to those of the school districts from which charter schools draw their students.