

# Some charter teachers join union

## Labor gets start in school system

By Anand Vaishnav, Globe Staff | August 10, 2005

About 50 of the state's 2,000 charter-school teachers have joined the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers, giving the labor group a foothold in schools that have operated [free](#) of union influence for a decade.

The teachers come from a dozen charter schools across the state, from Lowell to Boston to Foxborough. They will be associate members with limited benefits, at least for now. But joining a union is a first step toward giving them a voice about work hours and pay, say union officials and some of the new recruits.

"So many decisions are being made at our school, and it just seems like teachers have no say when it comes to certain things," said Tracy Fisher, a third-grade teacher at the Boston Renaissance Charter School who joined the union. "Charter schools feel like they're in [charge](#) of everything and can do things their own way. Sometimes that's not a good thing."

Since the first charter schools opened in 1995 in the Bay State, they have operated unhindered by some state regulations and without union contracts. Even though the number of teachers joining the union is small, it represents a new battlefield for the independently run public schools, which have spent the last three years fighting union-backed legislation to halt their growth.

As associate members, the teachers will qualify for some union benefits, including liability [insurance](#). But until 60 percent of their colleagues at their school agree, they can neither form a union nor bargain for wages. No school has more than a half-dozen teachers who signed up for the union.

Charter school leaders worry that if unions form at their schools, teachers will be less inclined to [focus](#) on students' needs. Charter teachers typically work longer hours for less [money](#) than teachers at traditional public schools, and they often do not get tenure. Charter leaders say teachers know what they are getting into when they agree to work at the nontraditional public schools.

"You don't go to a charter school if you want an 8-to-3 teaching job," said Michael Munhall, head of school at the South Shore Charter Public School in Norwell. "Most of the people who come to us to work put in far more time than they might at another school. We can make changes quickly; we don't have to go through long votes and big reviews or anything like that."

Two months ago, the Massachusetts Federation of Teachers mailed letters to the state's 2,000 charter-school teachers that invited them to join. By yesterday, 48 teachers had signed up; the union expects that number to double by Jan. 1.

"They have absolutely no job [security](#) in charter schools," said Edward Doherty, special assistant to the federation's president. "People teaching next door can be paid more for no apparent reason."

Charter proponents say the union, which objects to the way the state funds charter schools, is trying to destroy charter schools from within.

"Charter-school teachers need to read that the same organization that hates them wants them to join," said Kevin Andrews, headmaster of Neighborhood [House](#) Charter School in Dorchester. "This is so transparent."

Fisher, entering her fifth year at Boston Renaissance, said she likes working at a charter school. Families are more motivated to attend, and she can take some risks, such as using [books](#) of her own choosing in [reading](#) class. She said she does worry that a union might stifle efforts to innovate.

On the other hand, Fisher said she would like a more controlled schedule, in which she isn't called for meetings during her lunch break and so that workshops don't last into the evening hours.

"If the union can say, 'You can't get in on her planning time; she gets an hour every day for planning,' I'd be more than happy," Fisher said.

Cecilia Rose, a Spanish teacher at the SABIS Foxborough Regional Charter School, said she joined the union for the membership perks, not because of dissatisfaction with her school.

She said she doubts that a union will form at her school, because administrators have responded to teachers' concerns about salary.

The union's recruitment drive has caught the attention of national pro-charter groups such as The Center for [Education Reform](#). In July, the Washington, D.C., center mailed letters to Massachusetts charter-school leaders urging them to notify teachers that they could join professional associations instead of labor unions.

"It is a big deal, in the sense that the charter concept means performance, accountability, and freedom, all rolled into one," said Jeanne Allen, the center's president. "If they want to pull the freedom and flexibility out from under the charter concept, it will indeed hurt the performance of charter schools."

This fall, the state will have 51 charter schools enrolling 20,300 students. The union plans to mail another round of letters and hold a reception and workshops for their charter-school teachers, Doherty said.

State Senator Robert A. Antonioni, cochairman of the Legislature's [Education](#) Committee and a charter supporter, said he believes the union's recruitment drive will not go far, because the charter schools' flexibility was the initial attraction for teachers.

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