**TELEGRAM & GAZETTE**

**Guest column: Remove roadblocks for charter schools**

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View Comments

School systems in half of the commonwealth’s 26 Gateway Cities perform in the bottom 10% of districts statewide. Among them, Worcester, Brockton, Fall River and New Bedford have large waitlists for charters as well as room for more charter public schools under state caps. Charter schools have a record of improving academic performance in urban areas.

The solution seems obvious ‒ until politics enters the picture. Take the most recent flap from Worcester, where the school district has ended third-grade field trips to Old Sturbridge Village. The outdoor history museum recreates a 19th-century town and has long been a popular destination for school field trips.

However, because the museum is partnering with Worcester Cultural Academy, a charter school that will open this August, the Worcester School Committee has led an effort to boycott it.

After the state approved the charter school in February, the Worcester School Committee asked the state auditor, inspector general, attorney general and ethics commission to [investigate the partnership between the public school and nonprofit history museum](https://www.telegram.com/story/news/2023/02/27/school-committee-calls-for-state-investigation-into-financial-arrangements-of-city-charter-school/69948442007/).

Sadly, it isn’t the first time charter opponents have played such games. In 2019, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Jeff Riley proposed giving New Bedford’s Alma del Mar charter school access to empty school buildings as part of its bid to expand, in return for Alma agreeing to draw students from the district’s lowest-performing schools.

Among those lowest-performing schools was the Hayden McFadden School, where just 19% of third graders met or exceeded expectations on the MCAS English test and just 9% did so in math. The corresponding numbers at Alma del Mar were 90% in English and 74% in math. Yet a plan that would have utilized empty buildings and helped New Bedford’s neediest students was scuttled.

Then, in 2021, a board that included a former Fall River school superintendent and assistant superintendent proposed a regional charter school focused on science, technology, engineering and math for Fall River and New Bedford, two school districts that were in the bottom 10% statewide.

But the Massachusetts Teachers Association, its New Bedford affiliate, New Bedford Mayor John Mitchell and Fall River Mayor Paul Coogan assembled a coalition to oppose it that called on local business owners who had expressed support for the school to rescind that support.

They picketed the owners’ businesses during the holiday season, handing out anti-charter leaflets. The founders withdrew their application last year.

According to the state Legislature, Gateway Cities are “midsized urban centers that anchor regional economies around the state.”

Fifty-eight of the commonwealth’s 78 charter schools are in urban areas and have for years been [closing opportunity gaps](https://credo.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ncss_2013_final_draft.pdf). Students who struggled in district schools see improved performance and test scores and graduate from high school and go on to college at high rates.

Yet no more than 9% of net school spending can go to charters in most Massachusetts school districts, though the number doubles for districts in the bottom 10%, as measured by the portion of students meeting or exceeding expectations on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System tests.

Changes to the charter school authorization process could limit obstructionist behavior by school districts. For example, neither the 1,250 families in New Bedford and Fall River on charter school waitlists nor Worcester families whose children will no longer have access to living history at Old Sturbridge Village seem to play a role in local charter disputes. One way to change that would be to give substantial weight to waitlists and other indicators of parent demand in the authorization process.

Another way to control the influence of politics would be to create another charter authorizing body in addition to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Such an authorizer – which could be a university or independent charter school board – wouldn’t also serve other education stakeholders, allowing it to focus on promoting quality applications.

A refrain common to every anti-charter drive is that charter schools “drain money” from school districts – despite copious[research](https://www.masstaxpayers.org/sites/default/files/publications/2020-04/MTF%20Charter%20School%20Funding%20September%202016.pdf) to the contrary and the fact that districts receive reimbursements when students leave. DESE should contract with a neutral outside entity to assess claims that charters do financial harm to district schools from which their students come.

Just a few small changes to the charter authorization process could connect students in Gateway Cities with the charter schools that are so desperately needed.

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