

[**State plays politics over charters**](http://www.bostonherald.com/opinion/op_ed/2016/03/state_plays_politics_over_charters)

Rejects school plan, ignoring chain’s proven record

[**Charlie Chieppo**](http://www.bostonherald.com/users/charlie_chieppo_0)**,**[**Jamie Gass**](http://www.bostonherald.com/users/jamie_gass) Tuesday, March 22, 2016

With debate raging over raising the charter school cap, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved two new charters last month. But the bigger developments surround a school that wasn’t approved and a now-tainted state charter authorization process.

Among the rejected proposals was one for a Fitchburg school whose founding group planned to affiliate with Sabis, a for-profit education management company.

A 2010 state law raised the cap on charter schools in low-performing school districts, but required any new schools in excess of the earlier cap to be operated by “proven providers.” It would be hard to find a provider more proven than Sabis, yet the rejection of the proposed school in Fitchburg was not an outlier: Between 2008 and 2016, six of the seven Sabis-affiliated charter school proposals have been rejected.

Recent Pioneer Institute case studies of two western Massachusetts schools that are managed by Sabis show there is much to like about the company’s work.

Nearly 90 percent of the 704 students at the K-8 Holyoke Community Charter School are Hispanic and the overwhelming majority are low-income. As of March 2015, there were 574 students on the school’s waitlist. During the last school year it retained 93 percent of its students, which is above the state average.

US News & World Report has named the K-12 Sabis International Charter School in Springfield as a top high school for five years running. Some 75 percent of the school’s 1,573 students are minority and every graduate in its history has been accepted to college. Its students score closer to state averages than to their Springfield district peers on MCAS. There are 2,851 kids on Sabis Springfield’s waitlist.

The first signs of bias against Sabis and of irregularities with the state’s charter authorization process came in 2008. After the commissioner of education recommended the board approve a proposal for a Brockton-area school that planned to work with Sabis, the plan was rejected due to concerns about Sabis’ special education practices in Springfield. A letter from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education acknowledged that the school had successfully addressed all material issues, but then-board chairman Paul Reville refused to allow school officials to discuss the department’s letter. It was the only time the board has ever rejected a charter proposal recommended by a commissioner.

The politicization worsened the following year when Reville cited political pressures in asking state Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education Mitchell Chester if he could “see his way clear” to approve at least one charter application, even though none met the commonwealth’s rigorous criteria. Chester subsequently overruled the decision of his department’s Charter School Office and recommended that the board approve a Gloucester charter that was later closed due to poor performance.

By next year, more than 4,000 additional students would have had access to a world–class education if not for the rejections of six Sabis-affiliated proposals. While it’s important to fight for a legislative increase in the number of charter schools, it’s also time for Massachusetts to stop playing political games with the charter authorization process — and the educational futures of low-income children.

*Charles Chieppo is a senior fellow at and Jamie Gass directs the Center for School Reform at Pioneer Institute, a Boston-based think tank. Talk back at letterstoeditor@bostonherald.com.*