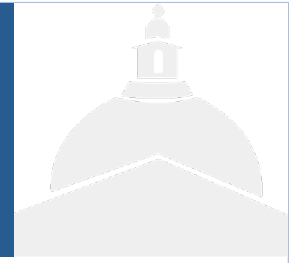




Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents



2016 Statement on Charter Schools

Background

Charter schools were introduced in Massachusetts as part of The Education Reform Act of 1993. The Education Reform Act recognized that the experimental nature of charter schools could be an engine of innovation to improve comprehensive K-12 public schools. Since 1993, M.A.S.S. has expressed concerns that, despite the national and international recognition of the excellence of Massachusetts' public schools, we have seen diminished budgetary resources to support programs and services to the district schools, due in part, to charter school expansion. We have also acknowledged that too often charter schools do not reflect the diversity of the school districts they serve. Since 1993, K-12 school districts have recognized the challenges to improved student outcomes and sharpened their focus on curriculum, improved student performance, and improved educator training and accountability and often embody the very goals of the original Charter School language.

There is much we have learned from successful charter schools and more to be learned in the future. The focus on charter schools should not, however, be at the expense of the local K-12 school systems. To the argument that choice is better we would purport that in fact better is better regardless of the system. Reasonable people can debate in the political arena whether the cap on charter schools should be lifted. We believe that discussion, which is essentially a political question of educational policy, rather than a judicial solution in search of a cause should occur in the legislature. It was, after all, the legislature which created and defined charter schools in 1993, and the Massachusetts legislature which has created and defined the duties of K-12 school districts in Massachusetts since 1640.

Charter School Funding

The charter experiment is an expensive one.

The current funding formula requires that sending districts pay the charter school the entire per-pupil tuition and a per-pupil assessment for capital costs. Sending districts also compensate charter schools for students' transportation costs. Despite the statute to reimburse districts according to an inadequate formula, state budgets have not appropriated these funds to the full extent.

M.A.S.S. Statement on Charter Schools

We have often heard that dollars are simply following students. This assertion hides two important facts. First, the creation of the existing charter schools has added layers of administrative, bureaucratic, and operational costs that increase the cost of education statewide. New charter schools duplicate costs.

Second, and most important, the current funding formula drains valuable resources from the sending schools. For every four to five students who attend a charter school, the sending district loses the equivalent of one teaching position. The formula fails to acknowledge that the sending school districts can only realize marginal savings, not the full tuition for a student who attends a charter. When students leave the district, expenditures for capital projects, maintenance, administration, utilities and other teaching and administrative costs remain constant. In most cases, it is impossible to reduce the costs of a teacher since charter students come from different schools and grade levels.

The current legislative solution is that the state provides districts with relief funds, in declining amounts, over three years. While providing some initial relief, this strategy is not a long-term solution. Eventually, the district assumes the entire tuition burden, as well as those teaching, administrative and infrastructure costs it cannot cut when students transfer to charters. In the long term, losing funds from charter tuitions forces districts to reduce staffing and programming. Our public schools lose the financial resources to improve programs, implement innovation, and enhance student performance. Instead of stimulating reform and innovation in public education, the funding formula undermines improvement efforts and compromises the education of children remaining in public schools.

Recommendation

Since Charter Schools are no more than another school choice for students we recommend that the current school choice formula apply for districts. In effect, districts would be responsible for \$5,000 which would be sent to the Charter School. The difference in pupil cost would be assumed by the state.

Application and Authorization Process

The legislation creating charters gave them a particular mission within public education — to provide replicable models of innovation. To demonstrate their effectiveness, charters were to draw a student population representative of the sending schools and not discriminate on the basis of academic performance. In addition, the process dictated local input to ensure there was community need for the charter school. We have learned a great deal about the problems in implementing these principles. These problems have significantly exacerbated tensions between public school districts and charter schools.

M.A.S.S. Statement on Charter Schools

The current application process provokes conflict between the community and the proposed charter school. Often, the first time a community learns that a charter has been proposed is when an application has already been formally filed. In many cases, the concerns motivating the proposal have never been presented to the local school committee or the community. The school committee is given the opportunity to respond to the statement of need in the proposal but there is no requirement that the charter applicants seek to build collaboration from the inception of the proposal. In addition, the documentation of local support is often vague petitions garnered by proponents standing outside supermarkets and malls. The names on these petitions are rarely checked to verify community residence, children in school, or sincere interest in supporting the charter school. As a result, local school districts often question both the need for and local interest in the charter school

Recommendation

Charter providers considering an application for a charter school must first consult with the local superintendent(s) to discuss the needs of the district(s). Specifically, we are seeking a complementary relationship with Charter providers. Any charter schools should address under served student populations and address needs of the district(s).

Any charter proposal must be presented to the community and receive local approval to confirm that the proposed charter school would fulfill a need and be of benefit to the community.

Further Recommendations

Charter proposals must include an educational, financial and social study related to the impact on sending school district(s).

Charter Schools are required to have a representative of locally appointed or elected representation to serve on the Charter Board of Directors.

There must be more consistent and increased oversight of Charter enrollment and retention rates.