

‘We’re real parents in a real crisis’



Massachusetts (census.gov)

QUEST, or Quality Education for Every Student, is a volunteer parent group in Massachusetts working to persuade state legislators to adequately fund public education and maintain the current cap on the number of charter schools. Mary Battenfeld, a member of QUEST and a parent of three Boston Public School students, writes in this

post why she and others oppose the growth of charter schools in her state.

By Mary Battenfeld

The Massachusetts charter school lobby has called up the public relations cavalry. They’re charging in to pass legislation that would allow more charters in the Commonwealth’s lowest-performing school districts. One ad, featuring an African American girl, asks, “what if our politicians had to look her in the eye?”

Don’t worry, the lobbying blitz ensures they have.

Charter lobbyists already took round one when they blocked a compromise bill that would have helped district schools regain some of the millions lost to charters. Unaccustomed to democratic give and take, charter proponents just said ‘no’ to even this small concession.

As a Boston Public Schools parent, I get the urgent need for more quality options. Charters have a place at the education table. But is it too much to ask that politicians pause to look in the eyes of the families of children who attend Boston and other district public schools?

They will find no disdain for charter families there. They will see determination to stop charters from taking a disproportionate share of state education aid. This year alone, Boston lost \$87.5 million in state aid, and that was just to approximately two dozen charters. The figure will ascend to terrifying heights if the charter cap is lifted.

Politicians will also see anger at the charter lobby for labeling our city's public schools failures. It reminds me of a bully, grabbing our kids' lunch money while taunting "nanny, nanny, boo boo, our schools are better."

Traditional public schools are not failing. They deserve support, not scorn. Many Boston Public Schools excel in growth and achievement on state tests, from Orchard Gardens, to Boston Latin Academy, my daughter's school, which last year had the highest tenth grade scores in the state.

I have other reasons to be proud of my children's schools. Boston Arts Academy admits students who have struggled academically, engages their creative passions, and sends 94 percent, my senior included, on to college. Two of my children graduated from an elementary school that offers rigorous advanced work classes for students whose first language is Spanish. My son's current school, the Washington Irving, provides students with disabilities an environment where they can succeed.

In important ways, district schools succeed where charters fail. Take those special needs students at my son's school. They make up 27.8 percent of our student body. Quite a few are former charter students, some from a school up the street. Charter lobbyists tout that school, the Edward Brooke, as a slam-dunk success. They won't tell you that the Brooke's student population includes just 6.9 percent students with disabilities, and an astoundingly low 1 percent English language-learners.

It's long past time to look those English language learners in the eye. Ride the MBTA Blue Line to East Boston, and visit the Patrick J. Kennedy School, where 70 percent of students are learning English. Then go up the street to

Excel Academy charter. Take a look at Excel's 6.2 percent ELL population, and tell me that charters serve the same students as district schools.

Charters are known for “no excuses” discipline, giving demerits for mismatched socks. How about demerits for inequity? Where is the outrage over the nearly 40 percent suspension rate at Boston’s City on a Hill charter? When will charters admit that their high school graduation rates hide huge attrition, especially acute for boys of color?

Finally, when will politicians take responsibility for the negative impact charters have on urban districts and families? Our eyes are ringed with worry. We’re hemorrhaging, losing social workers, paraprofessionals, enrichment opportunities, safe transportation, and chances for our children to thrive.

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The money charters snatch for schools that serve far, far, fewer of our state’s most vulnerable students isn’t the only thing draining us. But it’s a steady stream now. What will happen if we open the floodgates to even more such schools?

I’m not alone in fearing a future where charter schools burgeon while district schools wither. Quest (Quality Education for Every Student), a volunteer parent group, has gathered nearly 3,000 signatures on a petition asking state legislators to adequately fund public education and maintain the cap on charter schools.

As Lorde sings, “we’ll never be royals,” feted by corporate education reformers. Nor are we teacher union pawns. We’re real parents in a real crisis. And maybe, just maybe, if politicians look *us* in the eye, our children and their truly public schools might get the support they so desperately need.