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State should keep the cap on charters

By **Mary Battenfeld** | MAY 23, 2014

“We the parents, are always the losers.” This East Boston mother’s words carry the pain of so many parents. Cuts to public education hurt us and our children. That pain will become unbearable if the Massachusetts Senate follows the House, and authorizes more charter schools. The day after the pro-charter House vote, legislators further demoralized parents by voting down a budget deal to reimburse districts for a small portion of money charters take.

At least the vote proved charters are public schools. If “public” means taking taxpayer money, and lots of it, that is. Next year, Boston alone stands to lose \$130 million to charters. Statewide, charters will grab 42 percent of new Chapter 70 funding for education.

That’s just for fiscal year 2015, and with the existing cap. No relief’s in sight, since charter promoters derailed efforts to tie the charter cap lift to district reimbursement. Now we’re hurtling on unstable rails, headed for a complete wreck of our already underfunded public schools.

If “we the parents” are to avoid that crash, we need “we the people” help from those we elected. Do not abandon us, or call the bill that runs us off the tracks a compromise.

I’m not asking politicians to base their votes on parents’ cries. Nor should they let the drumbeats of the charter army decide. They should ask whether charters are good public policy. What will more and more charters mean for our children’s future, and for public education in the Commonwealth?

Critical differences in the answer to that question, not unnecessary rancor, spark the fiery debates over charter school expansion. It isn’t like I have a Mac, you a PC, and we can agnostically agree to disagree on our operating systems.

Charter schools diverge sharply from the road of publically supported “common schools” Thomas Jefferson first laid. Their bedrock is competitive capitalism, not cooperative civic democracy. My husband owns a small business, and the market economy has its place. But children are not goods, and schools are not markets.

Charter demographics are also disturbing to a democracy built on Jefferson’s self-evident truths. They show high levels of racial isolation and suspension, and low numbers of students with disabilities and English language learners.

Massachusetts's cap lift bill answers such serious civil rights questions with toothless language, asking of charters only a vague plan to reduce attrition. In striking contrast, the unfunded, charter-like turnaround mandates for district schools in the cap lift bill come with detailed instructions for monitoring progress of vulnerable student populations.

This pattern of clear accountability for district schools, coupled with hazy requirements for charters, continues elsewhere in the bill. What, for example, will an "opt out" admissions lottery mean? In New Orleans, parents, especially of special needs students, reported feeling more stressed and less empowered under an algorithm rich and transparency poor unified lottery. Parent anger (Mayor Walsh, please take note) at the "One Newark" plan, which included a joint charter-district lottery, contributed to the recent mayoral victory of Ras Baraka. Baraka opposed One Newark, calling it "a dismantling of public education."

Moreover, bringing equality to charter schools isn't about getting a more diverse population in the door. It's about providing services, teachers, and learning environments that help all students succeed. Data show charters aren't doing that, and the cap lift bill does not hold them accountable for those failures.

Unquestionably some students with few options for quality education gain from a charter safety valve. But they benefit, too, from the interdistrict racial diversity METCO program, which has 15,000 students on the waitlist. Boston high schools like Snowden International, New Mission, and Boston Arts Academy, from where my daughter soon graduates, also have many more applicants than seats.

Our children desperately need equal educational opportunities. But what steps will take us to equitable, quality schools for all? Do we invest in anti-poverty programs, in METCO and its mission, in innovative pilot schools, and in improving a shared, accountable, and truly public education system? Or we do hand Boston and districts from the Cape to the Berkshires over to charters, leaving so many of us losers?

Education is a right, not a competitive race. Politicians can show they believe that by voting to keep the charter cap. Then we can work on enacting and funding initiatives that sustain our "common schools," and ensure that no district, school, parent, or child is left a loser.

Mary Battenfeld is a parent of three Boston Public Schools students and a member of QUEST (Quality Education for Every Student).

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