



Charter school critics have lot to learn

By Linda Brown and Charles D. Chieppo

September 4, 2001

One of the guiding principles behind Massachusetts' 1993 Education Reform Act was to introduce greater accountability. It does not seem unreasonable that candidates for the United States Congress should be held to the same level of accountability as the commonwealth's public schools and their students.

That's why the response of one of the Ninth District congressional candidates, State Senator Brian Joyce (D-Milton) to a question about charter schools was so disturbing. The number of false statements packed into a single paragraph was nothing short of breathtaking.

Joyce claimed that charter schools "cost far more than public schools" on a per-pupil basis. For the sake of the citizens of the Ninth Congressional District, I hope Senator Joyce realizes that charter schools are public schools — ones that receive less public support than district schools.

For each student who chooses to attend a charter school, the school receives a sum from the state equal to the average per-pupil cost of the school district in which that student resides. But unlike district schools, which use that funding only for operating expenses, charter schools must stretch the money to cover their capital costs as well. Charter opponents succeeded in passing generous reimbursement legislation that allows school districts to continue to receive funding for students they no longer educate. In other words, district public schools are actually making money off charter schools rather than losing money to them.

Joyce goes on to claim that charter schools "take fewer minority students... than the district schools." Wrong again, Senator. Since virtually every charter school has more applicants than space, admission is done by lottery. According to the Massachusetts Department of Education's newest publication on charter schools, the schools enroll twice as many black and Latino students on a percentage basis than other public schools in the commonwealth, and a higher percentage of charter school students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Next, Joyce attacks for-profit education management companies, claiming that their "goals often conflict with the goals of public education." Massachusetts law prohibits the granting of a charter to a for-profit entity. The charters go to non-profit boards, which may choose to contract with a for-profit company to manage their school. Ten of the commonwealth's 40 charter schools are managed by such companies.

Management companies have a monetary incentive to achieve the very highest goals of public education. No student is assigned to a charter school. If the school fails to satisfy its students and their parents, the students can return to the district or pursue other educational options, leaving the management company without customers. More than 3,000 families in Springfield are undeterred by private management. The Sabis International Charter School has 1229 students — and another 1,949 on the waiting list.

The same forces that decry for-profit management have no problem with companies that earn a profit from providing computers, textbooks, food, transportation, and other services to public schools.

The breakneck pace of fabrication continues with Joyce's claim that "there is no evidence that performance of charter school students exceeds that of regular public school students." Even the most cursory look at MCAS results tells a very different story.

The top three non-exam middle schools in Boston — Academy of the Pacific Rim, South Boston Harbor Academy, and Neighborhood House — are charter schools. It's not just Boston. The Sabis International Charter School, which is managed by a for-profit company, is the top-scoring middle school and number two scoring elementary school in Springfield. Want more? The Lawrence Community Day Charter School outperformed the district by a combined 47 points in eighth grade English and math. Another management company school, the Somerville Charter School, outperformed the district high school by a combined 39 points in tenth grade English and math.

Charter schools demand accuracy from their students. We have a right to expect the same from candidates for high elective office. We deserve better than a litany of false statements when candidates are asked to respond in print to questions about important public issues.

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