

"Either write something worth reading or do something worth writing." - Benjamin Franklin

Charter School Lobby Day a Tremendous Success

I would like to take this opportunity to thank parents Debbie Rogers, Jim Green, and Michael Koran who joined me and Heidi Berkowitz at the Charter School Lobby Day at the State House on April 29th. It was a truly exciting day, and we were able to meet individually with several legislators and their staffers to highlight our school and the importance of charter schools and school choice in the Commonwealth.

As districts are going through their budget cycles and talk of charter schools in general continues to negatively dominate some conversations throughout our sending districts, we have been asked several times recently for some talking points on the issues. Fortunately, you all have wonderful success stories you can personally discuss, however some do not have the specific information to address the many inaccuracies that are stated in the media, at town halls, on ball fields, and throughout our neighborhoods. This information should help:

History - Charter public schools were created by the Education Reform Act of 1993 to provide educational choice for parents, expand educational opportunity for their children, and promote change in their districts. There are 61 charters in Massachusetts – 54 Commonwealth charters, which are totally independent of local school systems and not subject to teachers' union contracts, and 7 Horace Mann charters, which have some management autonomy but still operate under the control of school districts and teachers' union contracts.

Enrollment - Since the first school opened in 1995, enrollment has steadily risen and demand has remained strong. More than 24,000 children are enrolled with 23,000 on wait lists.

Charter Schools Are Public Schools - Charters are open to all, free of charge. We cannot and do not select our students. If there are more students than available seats, we hold public lotteries to decide attendance. We are independent – not private – schools. We are founded by parents and community leaders who believe there are educational needs that are not being met by the district schools. We operate independently of local districts, local government and the teachers unions. Instead, we are overseen by the state Board of Education.

Oversight - In return for our independence, we are held to a higher level of scrutiny - not by the local school district – but by the state. We are audited each year by the state auditor, inspected each year by the state Department of Education, and our charters have to be renewed every five years. A national study concluded that Massachusetts has the most rigid accountability standards in the country. Three charters have been revoked.

Funding - There is no loss of public school funding because *charter schools are public schools*. The state reallocates the money that would have been spent to educate students in district schools. The amount is based on a formula that reflects the actual cost of the students who transfer – whether they are low-income, minority, or English language learners. The formula excludes the cost of expensive special needs students who receive their services outside the district schools. Charter schools also need to finance their own buildings – they are not eligible for funds from the Massachusetts School Building Authority. Charter public schools represent just 2% of overall education spending. The funding that is reallocated to charters is coming from an expanding pool of state aid: since the first charter school opened, state

education aid has risen by 144 percent to just under \$4 billion (FY '95 -FY'09). At the same time, enrollment in district schools has grown by 12.9 percent. In spite of having to transfer funds to charters as students leave, district school budgets have risen dramatically. Total per pupil spending has risen from \$5,832 to \$11,086.

District Reimbursement - The state provides three years of transitional assistance to districts by reimbursing them for every new dollar that is transferred: 100 percent the first year, 60 percent the second and 40 percent the third. This gives them time to adjust their budgets, as well as provide funding for students who are no longer in their schools. The districts have protested that the current formula is unfair because it runs out after three years and fails to cover the fixed costs that are left behind after students transfer out. They also note that the reimbursement money is contained in a line-item – making funding less predictable.

If you would like additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me or Heidi Berkowitz here at the school.

Facility Improvements Seen Throughout the School

As you many of you have seen, we are improving the grounds with new mulch, shrubs, walkway, pruning, and maintenance. Throughout the next several weeks, we will continue upgrading the exterior, including at the main entrance and in the main parking lot.

We have also gone out to bid on the bathroom rehabilitation project. We anticipate awarding a contract in June, after the Facilities Committee and Board of Trustees have had an opportunity to review and approve a vendor. This project will commence shortly after we award the contract and will be completed in August.

In addition, as you know, over the years we have run into periodic issues with our HVAC system. As a result, we have spent from \$10,000 to \$25,000 in any given year to put a short-term fix on a long-term problem. These days are about to be over!

We have finalized the engineering designs and specs for a formal bid to completely replace our system with a new one. Of course, both the costs and scope of service of this system replacement are significant. As the cost is approximately \$400,000, we have had to schedule the work over two budget cycles, so that we could afford to do it right. The timeline for this project is similar to the bathroom rehab project summarized above.

Currently, our HVAC system is working, and of course, we are hoping this continues through the end of the school year - with a 60-year old building and an old roof-top system, "hoping" is a good word. It may need some constant tweaking, and we are prepared to do the best we can with what we have. But please know our plans to replace the system are well underway to make sure our classroom environment is better than ever - and better than most district schools that have no AC systems at all!

Other capital improvements are ongoing and will be phased in based upon our financial ability. Please note that all of these funds to improve the facility are expended directly through our capital accounts and do not impact our operational, personnel, or curriculum monies at all. I will update you as we progress through these initiatives.

- Mark Logan