



The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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Testimony of Representative Frank I. Smizik
Before the Joint Committee on Education
In Opposition to H. 4163, "An Act Relative to Charter Schools in Underperforming
Districts" and H. 4164, "An Act Establishing Readiness Schools"

September 17, 2009

Good afternoon. I am here today to speak in opposition to both bills before you today, H. 4163 and H. 4164. As a former member of the Brookline school committee, as a parent of two children who were educated in the public schools and now as a legislator who has examined these issues for the past 8 years, I have concluded that neither of these bills will have the desired effect but will, instead, lead us farther away from our goal of ensuring quality education to all our students.

First, H. 4163, relative to charter schools, is based on a faulty premise that charter schools are an appropriate tool to serve (quote)"the neediest students in Massachusetts lowest-performing districts". As we are now well aware, charters have, by and large, not been effective for the neediest students, be they special needs, limited English proficient or low income. Studies from across the country, and including Massachusetts, have shown that students in charter schools DO NOT perform better than those in regular public schools. And, we have just learned that charter schools, at least those in Boston, have unacceptably high attrition rates, proving what many of us have known for years: charter schools push students out who do not fit in to their program, whether for academic or discipline reasons. These findings make it clear that charters cannot be an effective tool to narrow the achievement gap.

Charter schools are more expensive than regular public schools and the current funding for charters hurts regular public schools. Getting more money from the federal government for charter schools will not help, as this funding helps the charters, not the regular public schools. Until we deal with fixing the funding to ensure that regular public schools are not disadvantaged by charter schools in their districts, this expansion of charter schools is inappropriate and unfair.

The bill is particularly egregious as it would allow the doubling of the current cap on the amount of local school district funds that can be spent on charter schools. The cap is already high: 9 percent of a district's net school spending can go to charter schools under

current law. This bill would allow that cap to double to 18%, for those charters that meet this bill's criteria

So, we know that charter schools don't work as intended, that most students leave before graduation and, we know that charters are more expensive and hurt regular public schools. Why in the world would we want to lift the current caps on charter schools?

Some have argued that we need this legislation to make sure we receive federal funding, but we know that removing the caps on charter schools is not a requirement of receipt of federal funding, and we also know that Massachusetts will be getting federal funds regardless of what we do with charters.

Second, H. 4164, establishing readiness schools, appears also to be based upon a false premise, that there is little or no innovation going on in our regular public schools right now and that achievement problems in our worst performing schools can be addressed by having (quote) "high degrees of flexibility and autonomy"—which apparently means, getting rid of collective bargaining.

And yet, we know that there are numerous examples of innovative programs in our public schools and the problem, as I think all of you are aware, is not collective bargaining and the teachers union. In almost every case, the reason that our low-income, minority, limited English proficient or special needs students are not achieving as they should, is because our low-income school districts, be they urban, suburban or rural, do not have the resources they need to provide the quality education that we know works. What do students need to be able to learn? I think we all know that answer to that: we need quality early childhood education, full-day kindergarten, small class sizes in the early grades, extended learning time, before and after school programs. Our school districts are now struggling to provide physical education, art and music, breakfast and lunch programs, school health services, functioning libraries and media centers and guidance services, all of which are needed to help students learn and achieve at high levels. To think that all our most troubled schools need is "freedom to innovate" and a performance contract to enforce that freedom, is insulting and deceptive.

I would like to submit that you have already heard several bills that will have a much greater effect on our troubled schools and on the achievement of students than either of the bills being heard today:

One, H. 3660, which is a bill that would require changes to our student assessment and accountability system, rather than expanding our high-stakes testing regime that has led to increased drop-outs and narrowed curriculum, and,

Two, S. 278, that would require an adequacy study to determine what it really costs today, 18 years after our foundation budget formula was devised, to educate our children to the quality standard set by the SJC in the McDuffy school funding case.

Please reject H. 4163 and H. 4164 as unnecessary, costly and leading us in the wrong direction. Please support assessment and accountability reform and work to raise the foundation budget to provide adequate funding for all our schools. These are the changes that will lead to real student achievement in all our schools.

Thank you.