

State Gives Green Light to 16 Charter School Plans

10 sites slated for Hub within the next two years

By Akilah Johnson
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The state Board of Education added 16 charter schools to Massachusetts' array of publicly funded, privately run campuses yesterday despite objections from advocates who fear that special education students and English-language learners' groups will be further marginalized in charter classrooms.

The board denied only one of the 17 charter school applications that Education Commissioner Mitchell Chester had recommended for approval on Feb 17.

This was the second time that Lynn Preparatory Charter School applied to open kindergarten through eighth grade, and was rejected. Both times, the reasons were similar: concerns that the provider was trying to convert a private school, Hathaway School, into a charter campus, which is prohibited.

In Boston, 10 new charter schools will open, six in the fall and the others within the next two years. Two of Boston's new charter schools will be run by the school system.

Charter schools, authorized under the 1993 Education Reform Act, are tuition-free public schools, created through a contract or charter with the state that authorizes the school and allows it to operate with more autonomy than a traditional campus.

Last year, a state law passed that allows school districts with the lowest scores on standardized tests to have significantly more charter school seats.

The new law also requires charter schools to better serve special-education students and English-language learners, and advocates point to a provision in the law that they say is being largely ignored. According to the new statute, applicants must have a record of successfully meeting the academic needs of special-education students, English-language learners, or those from low-income families.

In a letter to the state board, the Multicultural Education, Training & Advocacy group said the applicants "continue to fall far short of equity and protecting the statutory and civil rights of ELL students."

The group asked the board to either reject all of the applications or approve them on a one-year provisional basis, and pointed to a Feb. 16 memo in which Chester states that many of the applicants' strategies for educating these students "were not as clear or concise as I would have wanted."

Jerry Mogul, executive director of Massachusetts Advocates for Children, who testified on behalf of children with disabilities yesterday, said the state board shared some of the advocates' concerns, but "they only offered vague promises of monitoring. We were disappointed that they didn't really offer any kind of concrete remedy."

Marc Kenen, head of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association, called the vote exciting and said his organization is eager to work with advocates to improve programs and services for English-language learners.

"When we got the bill passed last year that was a great accomplishment, but that was a piece of paper," he said. "These are real seats for kids."

This school year, 63 charter schools enrolled more than 27,000 students, about 20 percent of whom are in Boston.

The board's vote adds more than 7,000 charter school seats to districts statewide; about 70 percent of those seats will be in Boston. Currently, there are 14 independently run charter schools in Boston.

In addition to the Boston schools, new charter classrooms will open in New Bedford, Lawrence, Chelsea, Springfield, and Salem.

Thirteen of the approved charter schools would operate independently of local school districts. The other three, including the two in Boston, would be run by the districts.

Boston's district-run schools "are going to be really a great addition to our portfolio of school choices for families," said Superintendent Carol R. Johnson.

While the legislation encourages all charter schools to recruit and retain students with special needs, Johnson said the public must wait and see who registers before the effectiveness of the requirement can be gauged.

Still, she said, "As a public school, their doors should be open to a broader array of students in our community."