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GOVERNOR DEVAL Patrick supports charter schools and says he would favor lifting the cap on them if the funding formula is changed to ease tension between charters and traditional districts. We have been working with business and community leaders to develop a proposal to achieve both goals.

The governor is right about the importance of charter schools. A recent Department of Education study of several years of MCAS data showed that charter students did as well or better than their district counterparts 90 percent of the time, with 30 percent outscoring districts by significant margins.

The performance of the Commonwealth's urban charters most clearly demonstrates the critical role charter public schools play in closing the achievement gap for underprivileged children. In Boston, the three best-performing non-exam public high schools, and four of the top eight middle schools, as measured by 2006 MCAS, are all charters. In Springfield, 24 percent more charter students scored proficient or advanced on the 2006 English MCAS compared to the district average; 15 percent more in math. In Lawrence, it was 20 percent more in English and 30 percent more in math.

Some urban charters outperform even elite suburban schools. In Boston, the Edward W. Brooke Charter School ranked first in the Commonwealth on the eighth-grade English MCAS exam, and Boston Collegiate Charter School was best in the state in 10th-grade math. Community Day Charter Public School in Lawrence ranked second statewide in seventh-grade math.

With results such as these, the number of charter schools should not be capped. However, charters are subject to statewide limits on the number of schools and the percentage of public school students who can attend. In addition, no more than 9 percent of a district's school budget can be transferred to charters. These limitations should be lifted in urban districts where reforming the system and providing substantially better educational options are critical.

The 9 percent cap is most problematic. Districts like Boston, Lawrence, Fall River, Chelsea, and Holyoke are at or near the cap, blocking the creation of new charters despite long lists of students waiting for spots. The cap should be increased to 20 percent in districts that rank in the bottom 10 percent on MCAS.

The governor has said he believes the current formula takes money away from district schools, because the money follows the students when they enroll in charters. However, for every new dollar that is transferred, the state gives districts two-thirds of the money back over a three-year period.

Districts argue that the formula - even with the state reimbursement - does not take into account the costs that remain after the students leave. The current formula is fair, but if the state made reimbursement permanent at 35 percent, it would address the districts' concerns and not harm charters.

The 35 percent figure is consistent with a national movement to achieve a 65/35 split between classroom and administrative expenses. The cost to the state would be relatively small and the new formula would enable districts to cover their fixed costs, such as utilities and facility maintenance.

Our proposal conflicts with one being floated by district superintendents, who would cap the amount transferred from districts to charters at \$5,000 per student, which covers about half the cost. The remainder would be funded by the state through a separate budget line item, leaving charter funding unfairly vulnerable to attack every year during the budget process. This would create one way to fund district schools (local aid) and a separate and unequal way to fund charter public schools, whose students are predominantly low-income and minority. It would also jeopardize the ability of charters to secure private financing for facilities, which they need, because - unlike districts - they cannot receive funds through the School Building Assistance program.

Our proposal is fair to charters, districts, and taxpayers. With the volume turned down on the funding debate, the time would be right to raise the cap and give more families - particularly in urban and low-income areas - the opportunity that charter public schools provide.

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