

25 charter school bids named finalists for expansion effort

By James Vaznis, Globe Staff | October 1, 2010

Twenty-five charter school proposals, including 16 in Boston, will advance to the final round of state consideration, education officials said yesterday, setting the stage for the most aggressive expansion of these public schools in more than a decade.

In culling the initial 42 applications, the state appeared to favor applicants that already run charter schools with high MCAS scores. That tendency reflects a new state law that aims to double the number of charter school seats in the lowest-performing districts but requires that additional capacity be awarded only to “proven providers.”

The quality of applications for Boston was so strong that the more than 7,200 seats under consideration exceed the roughly 5,000 seats that could be added in the city under the new state law. Such capacity is renewing calls among some charter school supporters to ban all state limits on charter school growth.

“I think after this round, the state will have to take a look at the cap because the demand to open these schools is so great,” said Marc Kenen, executive director of the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association.

Three high-profile Boston charter schools — Roxbury Preparatory, Edward W. Brooke, and Excel Academy — are each seeking to open three or four additional schools. Also, MATCH Charter School is pursuing a school aimed at English-language learners, and at least two other charter school operators outside Boston received the go-ahead to submit a final proposal for a Boston school.

The number of finalists is the most since the 1997-1998 school year, when the state named 35 finalists out of an initial 61 applicants. Thirteen received charters.

Mitchell Chester, state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, did not say yesterday how many of this year’s finalists will prevail.

“That 25 out of 42 were of high enough quality that we are willing to entertain a final application is a positive sign for education in the Commonwealth,” Chester said.

The finalists will now submit comprehensive proposals by Nov. 8. Experts will vet the plans and

advise Chester. In February, the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education will vote on proposals endorsed by Chester.

Created under the 1993 Education Reform Law, the independently run charter schools are intended to be laboratories of innovations because they operate with more flexibility than traditional public schools. Charter schools generally do not employ unionized teachers and have freedom from some regulations.

Some charter schools have achieved high successes on the MCAS, but others have poor academic records, prompting the state to close a handful.

The proposed expansion has met resistance from many teacher unions and local officials, who argue that charter schools sometimes get better results because they teach more academically capable students — an assertion charter school officials deny.

At the core of the debate is money. Students who leave their districts take with them thousands of dollars in state aid to the charter schools. Boston expects to lose about \$55 million this year to charter schools.

Richard Stutman, the city's teachers union president, called yesterday's list bad news.

"The growth of charter schools comes at the expense of our public schools, further exacerbating a dual school system — a public system that provides education for all and a charter system that is free to educate a select few," Stutman said.

In an effort to keep students, the Boston system is overhauling programs and seeking to open its own charter schools. The state advanced two of the city's three proposals: One is geared for students at risk of dropping out and the other would have a charter school company run a low-performing school. "We are in a competitive market and we are working to be competitive ourselves," said Boston Superintendent Carol Johnson.

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