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Hundreds descend on State House in support of charter schools

The Boston Globe



Students were joined by parents, politicians, and educators for the hearing on the governor's proposal to expand the number of charter schools in certain districts. (Suzanne Kreiter/Globe Staff)

By James Vaznis

Globe Staff / September 18, 2009

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A sea of blue rolled into a State House auditorium yesterday afternoon, as charter school students, teachers, and parents donned light blue T-shirts to trumpet a quote from President Obama: "We must eliminate all charter caps."

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Among those looking for more charter schools in the state's worst-performing districts was 18-year-old Eddie McGuire, a senior at Boston Collegiate Charter School in Dorchester, who believes more students should have the same

kinds of opportunities he has had.

"Kids deserve a successful education," McGuire said in an interview as he left the hearing, which lasted several hours. "Our school has proven itself more than once over the years."

Hundreds of business leaders, politicians, parents, students, educators, and advocates turned out for the first legislative hearing on Governor Deval Patrick's proposal to expand the number of charter school seats in school districts with the lowest MCAS scores as well as another proposal that would

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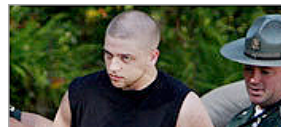
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allow for a state takeover of failing schools.

While supporters were apparent with their blue shirts, plenty of dissenters, including high ranking teachers union officials, filled the seats, too. Unions see the proposals as an attack on the performance of teachers in traditional schools as well as a threat to their workplace rights because the proposals could reduce union contract provisions.

Speaking before members of the Joint Committee on Education, Richard Stutman, president of the Boston Teachers Union, said, "The solution to better schools lies with working with us and not against us."

Concerned about lagging achievement among some disadvantaged student groups, Patrick pitched the proposals this summer to launch what he calls the second phase of the state's more than decade-long overhaul of public education. The charter school proposal was a sharp turnaround for the governor, who had previously resisted calls for an immediate lifting of the charter school cap.

The governor now, however, views the expansion of charter schools, which were initially created under the state's 1993 Education Reform Act, as a cornerstone of his improvement plan. Several charters have proven successful in boosting achievement among low-income students as well as blacks and Latinos, and he would like those to expand - either by allowing them to accept more students or by opening more schools.

One of the key provisions of the governor's proposal would double the portion of a school district's budget that can be dedicated to charter school tuition. As of now, no more than 9 percent of a district's net school spending can go toward charter tuition. The change would allow for 27,000 new charter seats in about 30 cities and towns, from Boston to the Berkshires.

Paul Reville, the state's secretary of education, told the committee that he's still working on how much the proposal would cost the state, but gave a rough annual estimate that ranged between \$8 million and \$22 million, depending on how many seats are added each year.

During the first three years of a charter school's life, the state provides some level of reimbursement for the money districts lose for each student who attends the charter.

"It's the right thing to do - to give each and every child access to a quality education," Reville said of the two proposals.

The other proposal would enable the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to move forward with plans to seize control of approximately 30 of the worst-performing schools from local districts.

The state would develop a turnaround plan for these schools and then either give them back to the district to run as prescribed or hire an outside contractor, such as a charter school operator. ■

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