New Bedford pols fail kids with opposition to charter expansion

Alma del Mar school has been shining model of success

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IF YOU WONDER where children fall in the hierarchy of priorities for some elected officials, take a look at New Bedford, where Mayor Jon Mitchell and City Councilor Hugh Dunn are apoplectic about a highly successful charter public school’s expansion plans.

Alma del Mar Charter School has applied to open two more K-8 schools in New Bedford that would educate an additional 1,188 students over the next five years. The city has room for about 1,225 more students under the Commonwealth’s charter cap.

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Not only do Alma del Mar students outperform their district peers on MCAS, they often score higher than the surrounding suburbs. In some areas they are even among the highest-performing public schools in Massachusetts.

Thanks to combining [rigorous demands with strong levels of support](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oz9K8tUv7Lo), Alma achieves this performance with relatively low attrition and suspension rates. No wonder the school has 500 students on its waitlist.

At this point, the playbook usually calls for local bureaucrats to claim that charters have different demographics than the surrounding district. But Alma del Mar educates a large percentage of students with high needs, and each high-need group performs significantly better than their statewide or district peers.

Alma del Mar serves a similar percentage of students with disabilities as New Bedford’s district schools. But last year those Alma students passed MCAS at four times the rate of their district counterparts in English language arts and twice as often in math.

The majority of English language learners (ELLs) enter Alma del Mar in kindergarten and are able to move out of ELL status within two years, thanks to strong sheltered English immersion instruction. Their combined population of current and former English language learners is nearly 40 percent.

Meanwhile, the majority of New Bedford district students are relegated to schools that perform among the lowest 10 percent in the Commonwealth. Even Mayor Mitchell called the district “a mess.” The superintendent brought in to turn things around abruptly resigned a year ago, the state has expressed “systemic concerns” about the city’s schools and there have been rumors of state receivership.

When all else fails, defenders of the status quo claim charter schools “siphon money.” When a student chooses to attend a charter, funding follows him or her from the district. But more than 80 percent of New Bedford’s education budget comes from the Commonwealth, so local dollars wouldn’t be “lost” to the new charters.

Given that overall public school enrollment has been rising in New Bedford, district enrollment has remained steady (a 2 percent drop over the last decade) even as more students have chosen to attend the city’s charter public schools. During that same period, state aid has risen by 28 percent, resulting in significantly higher per-pupil funding. In addition, the school district received $18.5 million in charter school reimbursements from the Commonwealth.

Expanding Alma del Mar could also improve New Bedford High School’s poor performance. The addition of 150 highly qualified Alma students each year would have beneficial effects on the high school’s culture and student performance.

The Commonwealth is expected to act on Alma del Mar’s application in late October. We know what Mayor Mitchell and Councilor Dunn’s priorities are. We hope that the state gives a higher priority to students than to protecting the status quo.

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