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Failures on charters, testing show Chester should go

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Soon the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education conducts its annual performance evaluation of Commissioner Mitchell Chester. Over nine years, Chester has limited access to the commonwealth’s best-in-the-nation charter schools, corrupted the process by which they are selected, and dumbed down academic standards.

In an infamous 2009 debacle, Chester violated state regulations by recommending that the board approve a proposed Gloucester charter school that failed to meet state criteria, according to the Department of Education’s Charter School Office, which he oversees. The Gloucester charter opened, but was quickly closed amid scandal and poor performance.

Chester has also frequently used his regulatory power to harm charter schools. The number of allowable charter seats doubles in school districts whose performance falls in the bottom 10 percent statewide.

In 2014, Chester changed the way district performance is calculated to limit the number of students who can attend charter schools. Under the new formula, Brockton, Worcester, and Lowell were replaced in the bottom 10 percent by tiny rural districts. As a result, the number of seats in charters that are among the nation’s finest public schools fell by more than 12,000 statewide.

In addition to the red tape, Chester has bureaucratically blocked or slowed expansion of charter schools that are the commonwealth’s best. He has repeatedly recommended that the school board reject proposals from an internationally respected charter provider, thereby denying educational opportunity to families in cities whose traditional public schools rank as low-performing, including Brockton, Fitchburg and Chicopee.

In 2010, Chester recommended that the board replace Massachusetts’ best-in-the-nation English and math standards with inferior ones known as Common Core. The financial force behind Common Core was the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which poured more than $200 million into developing and promoting the national standards. Chester based his recommendation to adopt Common Core on three studies, all of which were conducted by Gates-funded organizations.

Recently Chester also headed a process that produced watered-down state science standards. The fear is that a similar fate will befall U.S. history standards that are currently under review.

Soon after becoming commissioner, Chester persuaded the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to ditch the U.S. history MCAS test as a high school graduation requirement. What isn’t tested too often isn’t taught, and history departments across Massachusetts have been decimated.

Another of Chester’s responsibilities was to recommend whether Massachusetts should stick with MCAS or switch to D.C.-driven tests known as PARCC, which were Common Core aligned. He guided that process while simultaneously chairing the national PARCC testing consortia, which lost two-thirds of its member states. A new Massachusetts test is supposed to combine the two tests, but will likely just be PARCC rebranded as “MCAS 2.0.”

Chester’s miserable performance has had a predictable result. Before he arrived in 2008, Massachusetts was No. 1 in the country on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as “the nation’s report card,” and internationally competitive in math and science testing. But between 2009 and 2015, the commonwealth was one of 20 states with negative growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

The grades are in on Mitchell Chester, and it’s well past time for the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education to face the facts about him and end his nine-year reign of incompetence.

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