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MCPSA Position on the DESE Charter School Office

On January 18, 2010 Governor Patrick signed the historic “Act Relevant to the Achievement Gap”. At the center of this legislation was the expansion of the Massachusetts Charter School Initiative.

It is well known throughout Massachusetts education policy circles and across the country that Massachusetts has one of the highest quality charter school initiatives in the country. For the past 15 years the state has led the way in creating a national model of high quality charter schools now serving nearly 30,000 students across the Commonwealth.

At the heart of the success of the Massachusetts Charter School Initiative is one of the highest quality charter school authorizers in the country: the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the supporting state agency the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In order to become this high quality authorizer the DESE created the Charter School Office (CSO). During the past decade the CSO has become a national model for authorizers: creating high quality charter schools by developing a highly rigorous charter granting and accountability system. For this work the CSO has been recognized by the United States Department of Education and found by a Fordham Foundation study to have the most rigorous charter granting and accountability system in the country.

However, during the past few years the CSO has been decimated by staff reductions that have seriously jeopardized its ability to fulfill its basic mission, much less continue the necessary standard of excellence. And with the passage of the “Act Relevant to the Achievement Gap” this problem has reached a crisis point. The CSO must now manage the largest charter applicant pool since 1997 and develop and implement a vast array of new policies and procedures brought about by the new law which made dramatic changes

The Massachusetts Charter Public School Association’s mission is “to serve, support, and advocate for Massachusetts charter schools as they strive to achieve the goals of their charters.”

in the charter school legislation. All this while managing the accountability system for the existing 63 charter schools.

Therefore, to address this crisis the MCPSA proposes the following:

1. Upgrade the DESE Charter School Director position to Associate Commissioner
2. Increase the size of the DESE Charter School Office by 5 positions
3. Train the BESE in the charter school components of the “Act Relative to the Achievement Gap”

Upgrade the DESE Charter School Director position

We believe it is critical that the CSO have an exceptional individual at its helm to guide its work. This job demands both a highly efficient and skilled administrator managing a complex mission of charter granting and accountability and a talented leader to serve as the lead charter school person in the DESE working directly with the Commissioner, BESE, Legislature and general public to advance the state’s Charter School Initiative. With the passage of the “Act Relative to the Achievement Gap” these dual functions become even more challenging and critical to the success of the state’s education reform agenda.

Through the MCPSA leadership’s participation in the search for a new Charter School Director we have been dismayed by the meager pool of applicants capable of fulfilling this dual role. It is clear that the job, as currently constituted is not attracting candidates with the experience and skills necessary for this position.

Therefore we propose the Charter School Director position be upgraded to the Associate Commissioner level with the appropriate reporting line directly to the Commissioner and corresponding compensation level.

Increase Charter School Office staffing levels by 5 positions:

Currently there are ten staff positions assigned to the CSO. As of now there are five positions filled with two additional positions posted and on the verge of being filled (perhaps done so already). This still leaves the office three positions shy of the level previous to the passage of the Act Relative to the Achievement Gap.

With the significant additional responsibilities brought on by the passage of the bill, the CSO not only needs to be restored to its original size of 10 staff but needs a significant increase in staffing. We propose that the staff be increased by 5 staff to 15 staff members.

Train Board of Elementary and Secondary Education members on new legislation

Since the BESE is the authorizer of Massachusetts Charter Schools and the new legislation significantly changes and expands the laws surrounding charter schools we believe it is critical that the BESE members are trained in the new aspects of the law

including, but not limited to the “proven provider” concept, recruitment and retention plan requirements and what a charter school network is. Without such training the BESE members, all lay people, cannot be expected to fulfill their mission as the authorizer.

We believe these three steps: upgrading the CSO leadership position; increasing the CSO staff size; and training BESE members on the new law are critical to the success of the charter school components of the “Act Relative to the Achievement Gap” and urge the Commissioner to implement these proposals as soon as possible.