



CITY OF BOSTON
Office of the Mayor
Martin J. Walsh

**Remarks of Mayor Martin J. Walsh
Joint Committee on Education
October 13, 2015**

As prepared for delivery

Chairwoman **[Sonia] Chang-Diaz**; Chairwoman **[Alice] Peisch**; members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to speak today. And thank you for the extraordinary time and thoughtful effort you have put into these issues already.

I have visited this building many times since I left the House of Representatives in 2013. But this is the first time that I come before you to testify on a policy matter as Mayor of the City of Boston.

That's because there is no more vital issue—to me, to our city, or to our Commonwealth—than the education and the future of our children.

The issues you take up today are of immense importance to the children, the families, and the future of Boston.

The Boston Public Schools educate roughly 57,000 students.

Public charter schools in Boston educate about 8,700 students.

Together, these students comprise 7% of all public school students statewide and fill about 25% of the state's public charter school seats.

We have a beautifully diverse student population. And we have a richly diverse portfolio of schools. I have said it many times, but I want to be clear again: I support ALL our schools, traditional public schools and public charter schools alike.

It was true when I was a State Representative, and it's true now that I am Mayor. My only concern is that every young person gets the first-class education they deserve.

As Mayor, I am proud of the Boston Public Schools. There are great things happening across our system, for students of every background and need. I am absolutely committed to their success.

As a founding board member of the Neighborhood House Charter School, I am also proud of Boston's public charter schools. I've watched them grow steadily into thriving school communities. They've innovated, and they've achieved.

I visit both types of schools, all the time. In classrooms across the city, I talk with students who are eager to learn; teachers who are passionate about their craft; and leaders who are moving schools forward.

What I see when I look at education in my city is a diverse, committed community of students and teachers, parents and volunteers, business leaders and nonprofit partners.

All across this community, there are bright spots and success stories. But if we can come together and act as that community, we have the opportunity to do something great. We can build a new model of comprehensive success in urban public education.

I also know we face tough challenges. We've made tremendous progress in school performance. But we have a long way to go. And the urgency for families is very real.

If we are to bring high-quality education to all our students, we must address these challenges, head-on.

First and foremost, that means: we must get past the futile and destructive pitting of one type of school against another.

It's worse than a distraction.

It's the wrong way of looking at differences between schools.

And ultimately, it's an injustice to the students we serve.

To do right by all our students, our system of public education must support a diverse range of learning models.

It must allow successful models to grow in accordance with the need.

And it must structure that growth and change in a fiscally responsible manner, to sustain equitable, system-wide improvement.

I believe the only way to create such a system is through the special role and special talents of this legislative body. We need significant reforms.

And we need a commitment from the Commonwealth to back cities and towns, as we work to help all our schools and all our students succeed.

As I said, we are striving for greatness. We see the road forward. But we can't get there if we are divided. And we can't get there without your help.

So as you hear testimony and examine the bills coming before you, I respectfully ask you to consider the following factors, based on our experience in the City of Boston.

First, we need greater access to proven school turn-around tools in the districts that need them the most.

In Boston, we have driven forward with deep reforms. We have hired new Superintendent Dr. **Tommy Chang**, an innovative leader. We have expanded pre-kindergarten by 380 seats in the last 2 years; extended the school day by 40 minutes; launched a 10-year facilities master plan; begun a robust high school redesign process; and tripled the size of our college completion program.

But as far back as 2010, the Legislature knew that some districts needed additional tools to turn around struggling schools. We are now 5 years out from those reforms, and they have been a success. Over the past 3 years, 6 Boston Public Schools have improved their performance and moved up, out of Level 4 status.

Yet, over this same time frame, 5 new BPS schools were identified as Level 4 schools.

In other words, under the current system, we are waiting for schools to fail and then moving too slowly to give them the tools they need.

Our community can't wait any longer. And our children certainly can't wait.

So I ask that you build on your 2010 reforms, with the following 3 steps:

1: allow the lowest performing 10% of school districts to apply Level 4 autonomies to our Level 3 schools.

2: define a 5-year transition period, beginning when a school exits from underperforming status. During this period, the turnaround plan which resulted in those improvements would remain in place, to ensure that the gains continue.

And 3: provide districts with the flexibility to address a subset of school employees who have been separated from their positions, but have failed to secure any new role over 2 hiring cycles.

Public charter schools and district schools alike have proven that school-based autonomy is a powerful catalyst for success. It's something that I and Boston Public School leaders believe in, and are advancing. We simply ask for the tools to empower schools in a more transformative and more sustainable manner.

Second, I ask that you raise the cap on public charter schools.

I have seen first-hand the value that public charter schools provide to our students and our communities. Charter schools have proven that they belong in our portfolio of schools, along with district, private, and parochial schools. And public charter schools have proven that they can build on their success as they grow.

I ask that you lift the cap: from its current level of 18%, to 23% of Net School Spending in our lowest performing districts, by annual increments of one-half of one percent.

This would allow thousands of new charter school seats, in the City of Boston alone, over the next decade.

I know that many are calling for the cap to be raised even higher, or removed completely. I am convinced that such a dramatic change would be reckless under the current funding mechanism, and unwise under any circumstances.

The cap should rise at a rate that does not destabilize school district budgets, or public charter schools.

I have watched and helped public charter schools grow. I know how much dedicated planning and effort it takes. It's one of the reasons I have so much respect for our public charter schools in Boston.

- A new charter school needs to build a strong board and leadership team.

- It needs to fund, secure, and prepare a facility that meets state law and enables ambitious learning plans.

-It needs to plan every detail of its start-up and implementation, and adapt to unforeseen hurdles.

A rush to create new schools and add new seats would increase the odds of school failure—the kind of failure that neither public charter schools, nor our students, can afford to experience.

Furthermore, I support a cap of 23%. Once reached, it would allow the City and the Commonwealth to evaluate how those changes have worked, and decide what new adjustments may be needed, before the cap rises again.

Raising the cap on public charter schools is something I believe in and have advocated for a long time. But the goal of lifting the cap is not to fuel a rapid seat expansion. It's to build thoughtfully on success, and achieve the right mix of high-quality school options for our students.

I have also heard, time and again, that the availability and cost of facilities is an ongoing challenge for charter schools. For that reason, I propose making Commonwealth charter schools eligible for Massachusetts School Building Authority funds to assist with their capital needs. There is no reason that any tuition-free, public school should be barred from this vital state partnership.

Finally, I ask that you create a sustainable system for financing the growth of public charter schools.

As we all know, our education aid and reimbursement formulas are incredibly complicated. They play out differently for every community based on many variables.

In 2010, the Legislature created a two-tiered charter cap of 9% and 18% of districts' net school spending. While roughly **30** districts each year are eligible for the 18% cap, only **13** have surpassed the 9% mark to date.

In other words, public charter expansion is concentrated in a very small number of communities. As I mentioned earlier, Boston's total public school enrollment (including both district and charter) comprises 7% of the statewide total. Yet since 2011, 36% of new public charter seats statewide have come online in Boston.

In light of this concentration, the current financing mechanism imposes severely disproportionate burdens on our district.

In Boston, our total education costs this year, combining both Boston Public School and public charter spending, will grow by 5%, or more than \$55 million. Yet our state aid for education, combining Chapter 70 and reimbursements, will increase by only 2%, or about \$5 million.

This is in part because the public charter tuition reimbursements required by law are being increasingly under-funded—this year by more than 50%. This ongoing disparity has translated into shortfalls of \$12.2 million in FY15 and \$18.6 million in FY16, for Boston alone.

I cite this data not to argue that we should restrict charter school seats; but to make it clear that we need to focus the state's commitment to charter schools in the communities that are largely financing them today.

The state must be committed to charter school growth not just in principle; but as a financial priority, in the same way that cities are embracing a changing portfolio of schools.

This speaks to the fundamental problem with the ballot initiative and the bill that the Administration has proposed. They are incomplete answers to our challenges. They call on cities and towns to increase their commitments to public charter schools, while the state's own commitment to the system is wavering. Neither measure would move us toward a sustainable system.

The reforms we make must enable responsible budgeting and comprehensive improvement across our entire system of public schools.

With that goal in mind, I propose the following financing measures for your consideration.

First, eliminate the reimbursement system.

The need for transitional dollars is very real. The cost structures of large urban districts are remarkably inflexible: defined by multi-year collective bargaining agreements; enrollment patterns that do not support facilities changes; and large concentrations of the highest-need students.

In Boston, we are serious about right-sizing and innovating in our district schools. We have made difficult decisions already. And we have begun to create a comprehensive 10-year plan to maximize our resources for students. But it's simply not something that any responsible district, or mayor, can rush.

The reimbursement mechanism in place today does not account for these realities. It's a broken system that undermines planning and stifles the very innovation that a diverse school portfolio should promote.

In Massachusetts, we can do better. My office has been examining reforms that would fairly and effectively fund charter expansion, without significantly changing the state's fiscal commitment.

To begin with, I propose that the Commonwealth should provide transitional funding directly to charter schools in districts whose charter costs already exceed 9% of net school spending.

This transitional funding should cover 100% of the tuition in Year 1; 50% in Year 2; and 25% in Year 3. Under this scenario, cities and towns would continue to be responsible for 100% of the cost of pre-existing charter seats, as well as the cost of all new seats from the fourth year on. In Boston, our charter assessment would continue to grow substantially. But it would grow along a predictable and sustainable course.

In addition, the Commonwealth should directly fund the facilities component of charter school costs—eliminating the needless pass-through role played by cities and towns under the current system.

Consider the benefits of this improved model of financing:

- It would focus the Commonwealth's limited resources on the places where charter growth occurs.

-It would support charter school growth, while protecting district budgets, district schools, and the taxpayers who fund them during these transitional years.

-It would allow municipalities to embrace and support a diversity of school models, while acting as responsible stewards of the public purse.

In sum, it would enable a true educational partnership between the Commonwealth and its cities and towns.

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I know feelings run high on this issue. In some quarters, battle lines have been drawn. And I know why people care so deeply. Children are the core of our community, and public schools are the heart of our democracy.

For that very reason, I want to make a personal appeal to those inside and outside this room, who care about our schools.

We can't continue to see education as a battlefield. We don't have to pit our schools against each other. On behalf of the children who learn inside them: let's climb out of our trenches, and come together. Let's take a chance on dialogue and the democratic process. Let's come to the table and talk.

No one of us has all the answers. I am open and eager for dialogue on all of the proposals I have discussed this morning.

Sitting here and talking with you, my former colleagues, gives me great hope that we will find a solution.

I've seen it time and again, on the toughest issues. You bring everyone to the table. You listen to every voice. You find a common path forward, that we can all walk together.

Let's move forward together now, for the good of all our children and all our schools.

Let's take our passion for public schooling, and put it into building the best educational system in the world.

I look forward to working with you as you forge a bold and balanced path forward: to ensure that all our schools, and all our students, can succeed.

Thank you, and I look forward to taking your questions.