

December 21, 2018

Governor Charlie Baker
Massachusetts State House
24 Beacon Street
Boston, MA 02133

RE: Public Education Funding and the Impacts on New Bedford

Dear Governor Baker,

We are writing as community, institutional, and business leaders in New Bedford who are committed to shaping, advocating for, and tangibly advancing strategies for sustainable and shared growth for the city.

The issues related to excellence in public education cities such as New Bedford has been at the forefront of our thinking. We understand and are fully committed to the need for significant improvement of all the public schools in New Bedford and to the success of the more than 13,000 schoolchildren educated in our city.

The New Bedford Public School (NBPS) system is at a critical juncture at a time when there is a compelling and ongoing conversation regarding adding additional charter school seats into the district.

To summarize the current NBPS situation:

- New Bedford schoolchildren for decades have underperformed statewide at every level. A 2011 report by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found significant shortcomings with governance, curriculum, attendance and discipline, record keeping, and most aspects affecting teaching and learning.
- The number of English Language Learners (ELL) students in New Bedford has increased from approximately five percent to 30 percent over the past decade, requiring significant additional resources for their instructional support.
- As a result of intensive improvement efforts led by Mayor Jon Mitchell, former School Superintendent Pia Durkin, and the New Bedford School Committee, New Bedford schoolchildren have made major improvements. In 2017 these improvements led DESE to release the New Bedford Public Schools from formal monitoring, noting significant gains in MCAS scores and high school graduation rates and significant reductions in absenteeism and dropout rates.
- Elementary students have made eye-popping gains, with four city elementary schools—Congdon, Rodman, Pulaski and Taylor—exceeding the state average. Ten of the city's 25 elementary schools exceed the performance of Alma del Mar, a Public Charter School for elementary and middle school students, which is seeking state approval to add 1,188 seats to its existing 450 seats by establishing two new schools.
- These improvements have occurred in the face of critical financial realities that have prevented the City from reaching the Commonwealth's Net School Spending (NSS) minimum of \$169.7

million. In 2018, New Bedford fell \$3.3 million short of the NSS minimum and has consistently fallen short for the last five years.

The financial realities impacting local funding for public education include:

- A \$14 million shortfall in promised state reimbursements for students enrolling in public charter schools in New Bedford. The Commonwealth has only reimbursed for the first year a student has left the NBPS, instead of the partial reimbursements as required for years two through four.
- New Bedford's commercial property tax rate is already the seventh highest in the state and further increases threaten to drive existing business away and discourage new economic development.
- Residential property taxes for the past five years have increased by on average 5 % annually in a city with one of the lowest per capita household incomes in the state, and levy growth under Proposition 2 1/2 averages between 1 and 2 percent per year—well under the education rate of inflation.

As community leaders we have no objection to the existing, successful public charter schools like Alma del Mar, but granting Alma an additional 1,188 seats – a dramatic increase up to the highest allowed by the cap - would mean an overall reduction of an estimated \$16 million in state assistance by 2028-29. Without changes to state funding, such a loss would require layoffs not only in the New Bedford Public Schools, but would likely affect City departments and services, including police and fire, and could conceivably force the city into receivership. Further, such a loss would come at the expense of the more than 12,000 New Bedford schoolchildren who are not enrolled in charter schools.

This year New Bedford hired a reform-minded school superintendent with experience opening a charter school in Chicago who is committed to increasing the significant gains established by his predecessor. The New Bedford School Committee and Superintendent of Schools are committed to a district improvement plan that includes:

- Increased access to early childhood education and middle school performance improvement
- Inclusion of social/emotional learning
- Expanded extracurricular activities and accelerated learning opportunities
- Infrastructure and building upgrades
- Public visioning to guide future actions

Most importantly, at the core of this issue is that the fiscal difficulties that New Bedford is experiencing are the direct result of the Commonwealth's failure to address the shortcomings of the landmark Education Reform Act of 1993. The failure of the Commonwealth to adjust the formula for Chapter 70 funding has resulted in unequal funding for urban students in clear violation of the judicial mandate for equality for all students.

The lack of required funding for the New Bedford Public Schools has created a divisive and unnecessary battle between advocates for increasing the number of students in charter schools and supporters of the reform effort in the NB school system.

Because of this we respectfully submit that:

1. The Commonwealth **must** address the funding inequality that has created a needless battle that is harming children and schools in New Bedford and other cities. **We urge you to work with the Legislature to achieve a comprehensive revision of the state's Chapter 70 funding formula to ensure that children in New Bedford and other Gateway Cities are guaranteed a public education equal to that of Massachusetts children from wealthier communities that regularly surpass the state's Net School Spending minimums.**
2. For several years, the Legislature has not funded the reimbursement formula to cities that provided for a gradual reallocation of funds when charter schools opened in these school districts. **Therefore, we urge you and the Legislature to fully fund its charter school reimbursement commitments so that public school districts can manage the reallocation of resources necessary when charter schools are created and are operating in these districts.**
3. Given that the New Bedford Public Schools are seeing significant growth in MCAS performance, along with sharp improvement in attendance and other measures, **we cannot endorse any expansion request at this time and asks that DESE defer Alma Del Mar's request for additional seats until such time that the Chapter 70 funding inequality and the failure to appropriate mandated reimbursements have been addressed and rectified.**

We thank you for your consideration of these issues that affect not only the 13,000 school children in today's NBPS system, but also the future of our vibrant city.

Sincerely,

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CC:

James Peyser, Secretary of Education

Jeffrey C. Riley, Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education

Paul Sagan, Chairman of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education

Jon F. Mitchell, Mayor of New Bedford