

A stacked deck on school 'choice'

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AMHERST - In his March 29 article, "Keynote speaker assails Obama's education policies," reporter Nick Grabbe succinctly captured the substance of the Saving Our Schools: Defending Public Education conference that drew parents, students and education activists to the University of Massachusetts Amherst on the last weekend in March.

Grabbe's conference coverage is an excellent start on providing more detailed reporting on the growing resistance to policies that jeopardize teaching and learning at every level of our public education system.

Speakers highlighted the misdirection that education policy has taken under the Obama and Patrick administrations, which, despite increasing research to the contrary, have pushed for expanded standardized testing and more charter schools that drain resources from community-based public schools.

Unfortunately, the governor and legislative leaders accommodated virtually every demand of the powerful charter school lobby in recently enacted legislation, claiming the giveaways would better position the state for federal "Race to the Top" funds.

However, as recently reported, Massachusetts will not receive a dollar in the initial round of awards. But students, teachers and taxpayers will have to live with the consequences of these ill-advised "reforms." Our public education system is being subjected to structural adjustment bribery tactics, at the hands of our own government, as seen in the Race to the Top competition.

Figures presented at the conference, supported by a growing body of research, show that charter schools fail to enroll the same cross-section of children served by public schools and contrary to charter proponents claims, do not improve so called performance outcomes.

Additionally, financial records presented show that charter schools in western Massachusetts are building up large cash reserves, even as public schools are forced to cut programs and lay off teachers.

In part as a result, some families are understandably pleased to have the option of charter schools dedicated to the arts or language immersion.

The idea of having more choices is always attractive - in theory. To many

of us, our neighborhood public schools should be the location where an array of rich curricular options would benefit all students.

However, many may not know how the public educational funding system works. In the current fiscal year, Amherst regional students each represented \$13,642 in public school funding. Due to charter school legislation, if a student chose to attend a charter school, then the money to be allocated to the public school system was transferred to the charter school instead.

Approximately \$914,057 (\$855,568 for tuition and \$58,489 for "facilities aid") was taken out of the Amherst regional schools when 67 students chose to attend charter schools.

Michael Hussin, former chair of the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District Committee, noted during the conference that each year, a large sum of money is siphoned from the public school budget so several students can attend charter schools instead.

The argument that several fewer students might mean less of a burden on the public school budget doesn't hold true, as by and large the public school is still paying the same bills they would otherwise - the same utility bills, equipment bills, and paying the same numbers of staff and administrators.

Each year, the public school system has been facing a decrease in its overall budget due to this policy. This was amply reflected in the recent override debate in Amherst, in which taxpayers were being asked to make up for differences in part created by this diversion of funds.

If state and federal governments wants to encourage "choice" in schools, they should be willing to directly fund all schools equally, not redirect public school funds to some of them. Given the recent override in Amherst, we should all be concerned about this double dipping by the state. Asking taxpayers to contribute money to a system and redirecting some of this money to "the few" clearly isn't benefitting all.

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