

New Bedford's Alma del Mar Charter: The numbers behind the hype

New Bedford recently became a focal point in the ongoing debate over charter school expansion in Massachusetts. The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) had approved a major expansion of New Bedford's Alma del Mar Charter School, but city leaders and many parents, students and teachers vehemently opposed the move.

Education Commissioner Jeff Riley pressured the city to support the creation of a 450-seat charter school and give Alma del Mar a vacant public school building to house it. The new Alma del Mar would be a neighborhood charter school, and students in the area would be assigned to it by default.

Facing a choice between the 450-seat charter or an even larger one of 594 or possibly 1,188 seats, the mayor and school committee supported the neighborhood charter plan and approved a home-rule petition that required the support of the legislature. Community groups and the teachers' union continued to oppose the plan and convinced legislators that the petition was inappropriate, because it could have statewide ramifications. Additionally, the MOU presents no impediment to the future expansion of Alma del Mar's charter to 1,188 seats. The commissioner eventually withdrew his proposal, but the idea could resurface at any time.

Through all of this process, there was little discussion of the school that was being offered to New Bedford residents. In the table below, we summarize data comparing Alma del Mar with the New Bedford Public Schools and public schools across the Commonwealth in several key areas.

In the 2018-19 school year, more than \$15 million of New Bedford Public Schools' budget went to support local charter schools, including more than \$5 million to the Alma del Mar Charter School. Since 2012, the New Bedford's payments to Alma del Mar have quadrupled, siphoning budgetary support away from New Bedford's 25 non-charter schools. Because it has been widely acknowledged that Massachusetts public schools are underfunded vis a vis the Foundation Budget, it is imperative that we have clear information - beyond test scores - about the charter schools which receive so much of our public funds.

	Alma del Mar	New Bedford	MA
Teachers under age 32	66%	25%	21%
Licensed teachers	63%	94%	97%
Teacher retention rate	58%	81%	87%
Student suspension rate	15.1% overall 6% in school 9.1% out of school	6.2% overall 0.8% in school 5.4% out of school	4.7% overall 1.8% in school 2.9% overall
Administrators experienced with high-poverty groups	0%	58%	78%

Sources:

Alma de Mar data

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/teacher.aspx?orgcode=04090000&orgtypecode=5&>

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=04090000&orgtypecode=5&>

New Bedford data

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/teacher.aspx?orgcode=02010000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=814&>

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=02010000&orgtypecode=5&>

Analyzing the data:

- Were Alma del Mar Charter School an open enrollment public school, it's possible that DESE would label it underperforming or intervene in some other way. Problems include the high teacher turnover rate; high student suspension rate; and teachers' and administrators' dearth of preparation and experience in educating students from financially impoverished communities.
- Young teachers are often seen as energetic, a positive, but young teachers often lack both the professional and life experience needed to support a high-needs population. With only one-third of Alma del Mar's teachers above the age of 32, who can mentor younger staff effectively?
- Massachusetts has high standards for certification. Since the 1993 Education Reform Act, teachers must earn a master's degree within five years to attain professional certification. New Bedford's student population has a high percentage of students in poverty, students with disabilities and

English learners. These students present complex teaching challenges and deserve fully credentialed teachers who have developed a repertoire for addressing diverse needs, *especially* in a fiscally constrained district.

- Alma del Mar loses nearly half its teachers each year. Churn takes a toll on children, especially if there is instability in the home, due to factors we know are present in New Bedford – poverty, an immigrant community, high cost of housing, low-wage jobs. Schools can offer security when things at home are difficult, providing stable adult relationships in a place where children go each day. When teachers remain in schools over time, they get to know the families they serve, as well as their challenges, and become more effective advocates.
- Yet, in the face of the difficulties its students face outside of school, Alma del Mar's suspension rate is more than double that of New Bedford and more than triple the state average. We know that student suspensions lead to poor outcomes for students, particularly out-of-school suspensions. Researchers have linked suspension to later incarceration. Parents are also harmed when their children are suspended, often having to take time from work without pay, or leaving suspended students home without supervision. Inexperienced and uncredentialed teachers and staff likely contribute to high suspension rates. Credentialed teachers have completed coursework in psychology and child and adolescent development, and can anticipate and diffuse situations that may lead to suspensions.
- The primary task of school administrators is to provide support and supervision to the teachers. Alma del Mar's administrators lack the experience to do so.
- Test scores must not be used as the sole criteria to remove the right to a public school from children who happen to live in the vicinity of Alma del Mar. There are some differences in MCAS 2.0 scores, but they are not extreme. With Alma del Mar's small student body, just a few test-takers can have a disproportionate impact. While Alma del Mar has 287 students in grades 3-8, New Bedford serves 6,540 children.