

Statement of Mayor James J. Fiorentini in Opposition to Wildflower Charter Application

Good evening. My name is James J. Fiorentini. I am here this evening, as Mayor of the city and as Chairperson of our School Committee, to join our superintendent of schools in opposing this charter school application. This would present the city with very serious financial and logistical problems and make it much more difficult for us to continue the great progress we have made in improving financing for public education. I have co-signed a letter of opposition with the superintendent and I wish to supplement those comments with my own.

I have no objection to the Montessori school concept. I also support pre-school and having more opportunities in our Mount Washington area for our people to work and for child care. It is for that reason that when the school department declined to provide funding for the Montessori pre-school, I arranged for funding both from the Community Development Block grants and from the city budget for a total of \$26,000 in funding. I did so only after securing a pledge from the Montessori planners that they would not use this as a means of funneling children to a charter school. Tonight I am deeply concerned whether they can or will meet that pledge.

I am not unalterably opposed to all charter schools. Charter schools do provide choices for parents, and help to recruit new parents to our city when, unfortunately, a number of middle class parents will not send their children to our inner city schools. I signed on last year to a charter application to provide assistance to children in Lawrence and Haverhill who had either dropped out of school or were in danger of doing so since that is a real deficiency in our system.

But the dangers of this application, in my opinion, far outweigh the advantages.

There are three principal dangers:

1. Transportation Costs

This charter school has a particular disadvantage, distinct from other charter schools, in that it is going to have six different locations located throughout portions of the city and will ask the city to provide transportation to all six. The charter applicants indicate that this will not be a cost, but it most certainly **will** be a cost, **an enormous cost**, to the city.

Cost

Transportation expenses are paid by the city, not by the school district. They do not count towards net school spending, but these costs most certainly do count. Right now we spend about \$6 million on transportation costs. Any increase in that amount will come either by raising taxes, or by cutting some other vital service. Since about 60% of our budget goes towards public education, the only place it is likely to come from is from a smaller increase in funding to education.

The head of the company which supplies our school bus service indicated that the cost could be around \$75,000 per bus, not including special handicapped costs. The total cost to our city would be around \$450,000. A letter from that company, Coppola Bus Service is attached.

Because they will have six locations, not one, this is completely dissimilar to the cost of providing transportation to one charter school.

Logistics

Transportation also presents us with another more difficult challenge, the logistical problem of being able to provide the service. We are told that for some or all of these buses we will need a full size bus, a driver and two bus monitors. We simply do not have the bus drivers, the monitors or the buses to provide this additional transportation.

I spoke today with the head of the company that provides our bus service. He indicated that if there were six additional small schools that opened at around the same time of time, that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to find drivers or monitors for the buses, they are finding it extremely difficult to find enough school bus drivers today. There is a nationwide shortage of school bus drivers. I have attached a statement from the head of our school bus company indicating the cost and the very difficult problem they will face if they have to provide six additional buses with drivers and monitors.

For an article indicating the problems in obtaining school bus drivers, see <http://sudbury.wickedlocal.com/news/20181101/sudbury-squeezed-by-nationwide-bus-driver-shortage>.

2. This Charter School Would Deepen the Divide

Charter schools in general, and, in particular, a charter school targeted to our poorest areas runs the risk of worsening the divide between poor and middle class children. This divide will be made much worse if this charter school has sibling preference.

No matter how hard they try, charter schools attract parents who are informed, who know about the charter schools, are the ones who sign up. Some charters make a gallant effort to recruit the poor and minorities, but ultimately, it is the informed parents, often the middle class parents, who know about charter schools. These are exactly the parents we want in our public schools. The parents who are less informed, the parents who are just moving to the city, generally do not know about charter opportunities and do not apply.

Sibling preference only exacerbates the problem. Once the more affluent and informed parents have a child in the school, all of their other children can attend to the exclusion of any new parent who moved here recently.

3. Funding for School Itself

My final and most serious objection is to the funding for the school itself. I join with the Superintendent in voicing serious concerns about this and I endorse and support her comments concerning funding.

As you know, funding follows the student. This may sound fair, but it is not.

If we were to lose students from a school, we would still have the same capital costs for that school. We would still have the same principal, the same administration, and the same teachers. As the superintendent stated, it is highly unlikely that we would be able to close classrooms. We would have the same costs, but less money to pay it with.

Our charter school assessment today is over \$4 million. This would eventually go up by \$1.8 million if this application is approved. This would lessen the amount of resources available to our existing students.

4. Conclusion

I fully understand and support the desire of parents to have additional options for their children. Every parent must do what is best for their own child. I have no quarrel with the parents here tonight in support of a charter school.

But about 90-95% of our children attend public schools not charter schools. Our focus as elected officials, our money and our support has to go to the overwhelming majority of our students.

Thank you.

James J. Fiorentini, Mayor