

Collaboration between City of New Bedford and Alma del Mar Charter School announced

After receiving extensive public comment about charter school growth in New Bedford, Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeffrey C. Riley and leaders in New Bedford have agreed on an innovative response to Alma del Mar Charter School's expansion request. The charter school had applied for up to 1,188 additional seats across two new campuses, the largest expansion request in the current charter cycle.

A creative agreement among Commissioner Riley, New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell and Alma del Mar Executive Director Will Gardner would chart a new path forward. The plan's major components are as follows:

- * Commissioner Riley will recommend to the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education that Alma del Mar expand to an additional site serving 450 students in kindergarten through grade 8.
- * New Bedford Public Schools will create a neighborhood zone from which students would be drawn for the new Alma del Mar campus. The new campus would enroll students from the neighborhood instead of using a citywide choice lottery. This would be the first time that a Commonwealth charter school and a city have agreed to integrate a charter school into the district's student assignment system.
- * Alma del Mar will gain a facility that the City of New Bedford will convey and which the city is not currently using. The facility will house the Alma del Mar expansion and anchor the neighborhood from which the school would draw students.
- * Alma del Mar would open the new campus in August 2019 to serve 200 children in kindergarten, first, second and sixth grades.

* New Bedford Public Schools will apply for targeted assistance grants from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to support the new model, and the charter school will pursue charter expansion grants.

This new model gives Alma del Mar the ability to expand its footprint through the neighborhood school model, gain access to a facility, and grow with the city and school district as partners. Alma del Mar has a strong record of effectively serving New Bedford students, in particular, English language learners and students from low-income backgrounds. The new school will complement New Bedford Public Schools' existing elementary schools, which have experienced considerable improvement in recent years.

With Alma's commitment to serve all students within a neighborhood zone, the city and school district can more effectively and efficiently plan for the charter school's expansion. In addition, the smaller expansion size reduces the financial impact on the city.

This agreement represents the first step in a long-term commitment between the city, school district and Alma del Mar to engage one another in partnership. The parties have committed to work together to finalize remaining components of the plan and secure any required approvals, including legislation.

"The compromise reached between New Bedford and Alma is very encouraging. I am excited that Alma will be able to grow at the new location with children from the immediate neighborhood," Rep. Christopher Hendricks said. "Also, I am very proud of the way Mayor Mitchell went to bat for New Bedford Public School students. I hope we can continue to collectively work on the problems within our education system in Massachusetts the way Mayor Mitchell and Alma's Will Gardner have done today."

Commissioner Riley said, "This partnership is the product of outside-the-box thinking by New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell and the strong leadership and dedication to all students of Alma del Mar Executive Director Will Gardner. They put aside their differences to focus on the best interests of all New Bedford children."

City of New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell said, "This agreement contemplates a fairer way to do charter schools – fairer to cities, fairer to taxpayers, and fairer to students in district schools. It will level the playing field by requiring the new charter school to accept all students in its neighborhood."

"We're excited to create another high performing K-8 school that provides more New Bedford kids with access to an Alma education while working in partnership with the city and school district," said Alma del Mar Executive Director Will Gardner. "We look forward to becoming even more deeply embedded in the community through this neighborhood school model."

"I view this outcome as an optimal compromise for all of us to grow as we prioritize the education of New Bedford schoolchildren," New Bedford Superintendent Thomas Anderson said. "I am optimistic that this collaborative effort will help enhance the education of all students."

The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education is scheduled to discuss the commissioner's recommendation at their meeting at 5 p.m. Monday, Jan. 14 in Malden. The Board is expected to vote on the recommendation at their Jan. 22 meeting.