

OPINION: New Bedford Public Schools must not be extorted

State Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley has rolled a proverbial Trojan horse into New Bedford with his plan to allow expansion of the Alma del Mar charter school. This scheme hands over public assets at no charge to a private company and carves out a neighborhood district that will automatically feed students into the charter school.

Mr. Riley's deal is not only bad for New Bedford, but it is also bad for public schools across the state. They will become the targets of this new approach to aid and abet the growth of charter schools, even though voters overwhelmingly defeated a 2016 ballot question that sought a massive charter school expansion in Massachusetts.

The arguments and issues raised in 2016 have not changed. Charter schools are private businesses with no oversight by democratically elected officials – even though they take away public funds from the public schools that educate all children. Proponents of the Alma del Mar plan are calling it a compromise. In reality, it is extortion.

Alma del Mar wanted to expand by 1,188 seats. Swift and loud community outcry followed. From parents to elected leaders, the community's message was clear: Such an expansion would drain \$15 million annually from the New Bedford Public Schools, causing catastrophic harm to the city.

Mr. Riley and Alma del Mar CEO Will Gardner concocted a plan that, if implemented, would allow the charter school to expand by 450 seats. The city must hand over the closed Kempton school building plus the land adjacent to it and create a "neighborhood zone" from which students are automatically enrolled in the school, thus doing away with the citywide

admissions lottery.

At the Jan. 22 meeting of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, Mr. Riley set a 45-day timeline for ironing out the details of this plan. If this fails, he will take it off the table and grant Alma del Mar an additional 594 seats.

So is this about providing educational opportunities for the children of New Bedford or threatening a community into bending to the will of the charter school industry, which has the robust support of the administration of Governor Charlie Baker.

Mr. Gardner, who has always based his desire to expand his business empire on the claim that he has a long waiting list of applicants, seems quite willing to ignore those families if given the proper economic enticements of a free building and a guaranteed pool of students.

And what does New Bedford gain from this deal? Nothing, unless you consider losing less money than originally feared a victory. And we should not.

Here are some facts:

- Roughly one-third of the teachers currently at Alma del Mar are not licensed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- Alma del Mar has a very high suspension rate. Many of its students, primarily those with a high level of needs, are sent back to the New Bedford Public Schools.
- There is no transparency about what is happening in the school, even though it takes public funds for its operation.

This plan still needs the approval of state legislators and local officials. The New Bedford Educators Association urges our locally elected leaders to reject any charter school expansion and encourages them to speak out against any form of extortion from the DESE.

As Massachusetts embarks on its first serious effort in more than 25 years to improve funding for public education, let's honor the will of the voters and put an end to the practice of propping up the charter school model. Let's instead focus on creating public schools across the state that meet the needs of every student and family.

– Lou St. John, New Bedford Educators Association President

Have an opinion on this topic? A different topic? e-mail your essay to mike@newbedofrdguide.com.