

October 24, 2016

Kathy Paul, with Mass. Senior Action, leaves the podium after speaking against Partners Healthcare during a rally at Union Hospital, after the company contributed \$100,000 to expand charter schools. Participants at the rally oppose the ballot initiative to expand charter schools. (Item photo by Owen O'Rourke)

By **Gayla Cawley**

LYNN—Opponents of a ballot initiative to lift the state's cap on charter schools argue that the schools are a drain on funding from traditional public education, while proponents say expansion will provide more opportunity for parents and their children.

When voters go to the polls on Nov. 8, their ballots will feature Question 2, which, if passed, will authorize up to 12 new charter schools or enrollment expansions in existing charter schools annually by the state **Board of Elementary and Secondary Education**. Priority would be given to applicants who seek to open a charter school in public school districts performing in the bottom 25 percent. If it doesn't pass, the existing charter school cap will be maintained.

A WBUR poll released last week, which surveyed likely **Massachusetts** voters, showed 52 percent oppose the ballot initiative, up from 48 percent last month. Support is at 41 percent, roughly the same as last month.

State Rep. and City Council President Daniel Cahill (D-Lynn) said charter schools are a drain on public schools. Last spring, the **City Council** unanimously approved a resolution opposing the lifting of the cap on charter schools, arguing that the city can't afford it.

With the resolution, the council estimated that more than \$17 million of Lynn's budget for its public schools is being diverted to charters, and that public schools are losing more than \$408 million to charter schools statewide.

Over the last three years in Lynn, Cahill said, more than 100 students have left charter schools to come back to traditional public schools.

"Charter schools will tell you that they have a 100 percent graduation rate and they have a 0 percent dropout rate," Cahill said. "Well, isn't that confusing? Isn't

that confusing when 100 plus kids leave? Well, of course you have those statistics and they're lies. We're left in the public schools to pick up the pieces for those students and educate them at a loss. All we're asking for is a level playing field. That's all we're asking for and we're not getting it, and until we get that, we can't afford any more charter schools."

But **Caleb Dolan**, executive director of **KIPP Massachusetts**, said **KIPP Academy** in Lynn, the city's only charter school, has 1,000 students on its wait list, made up of families who have made the choice to attend the school and should have the ability to do so.

"There's nobody who wouldn't want more choice for their own child," Dolan said. "I think it's a pretty simple proposition for us that this helps give families the choices they want and deserve."

Cahill joined others opposing the ballot initiative including **Councilor-at-Large Brian LaPierre**, state **Rep. Brendan Crighton** (D-Lynn) and **Brant Duncan**, president of the **Lynn Teachers Union**, last week for a "No on 2" and "Save Union Hospital" rally at **Union Hospital** to denounce a \$100,000 contribution from **Partners HealthCare** to the "Yes on 2" campaign, or **Great Schools Massachusetts**, a staunch supporter of charter school expansion.

Officials questioned why Partners is donating to the charter school initiative when they have argued that they can no longer financially support Union Hospital.

Over the summer, the **Public Health Council** of the state **Department of Public Health** unanimously approved a \$180 million expansion of North Shore Medical Center that will close Union and move the beds to a new Salem campus in 2019. The medical facilities in Lynn and **Salem** are part of Partners HealthCare.

"What a shame," said LaPierre of the donation. "You know, I call it educational malpractice because what they're doing is quite simply, they're following all of the dark money patterns that we've seen throughout this campaign."

Rich Copp, a spokesperson for Partners HealthCare said the company supports a wide range of efforts that create educational and economic opportunity in all of the communities it serves.

"We have committed hundreds of thousands of dollars to support students in the **Lynn Public School** system through school-based health services, job training and summer jobs," Copp said. "These investments in public education help ensure that the students of today have the skills and training needed to care for the patients of tomorrow. Our one-time contribution to the ballot initiative is aimed at creating even more educational opportunity and choice for young people."

On Sunday, the “No on 2” campaign rallied near **Gov. Charlie Baker’s Swampscott** home on Monument Avenue. Baker is a supporter of the ballot initiative and did not make an appearance for the rally.

“Gov. Baker is proud to be part of a broad and bipartisan coalition of elected leaders, educators and families that supports expanding access to high quality public education for all children by lifting the cap on public charter schools in Massachusetts,” said **William Pitman**, his press secretary, in an email.

Natasha Megie-Maddrey, a Lynn resident and **2015 School Committee** candidate, said two of her children attend KIPP. Her daughter attends private school, but previously attended the charter school, and although her youngest son goes to **Cobbet Elementary School**, she plans on sending him to KIPP next year when he reaches fifth grade.

Megie-Maddrey said that the communication is totally different at charter schools. She likes the longer school days and feels that public schools failed one of her sons. She said he also went to Cobbet from grades K to 4 and when he reached KIPP in fifth grade, he was only at a first grade reading level.

She said her son has special needs and has an individualized education program. He is now in the eighth grade and is reading at a seventh grade level, which Megie-Maddrey attributes to his charter school education.

“Lifting the cap will give the 33,000 kids that on the waiting list (statewide) hope so they too can have options and a great education,” she said. “I want other people to have the opportunity I’ve had.”

But Lynn public school educators are not swayed, including **Superintendent Dr. Catherine Latham**.

Latham said the most common objection involves funding. If a student leaves the traditional public school system to go to charter schools, state funding follows that student. Another issue, she argued, is to gain support for charter schools, advocates have repeatedly attempted to demean the reputation and destroy public confidence in local public schools.

Despite standardized test scores that may be a bit lower than suburban communities, which may qualify Lynn as a district that would receive new charter schools, Latham said, “we educate all, turn away none, have a spectacular teaching and support staff and meet the needs of all of our students.”

“I would guarantee that the experiences and the educational opportunities provided to all of our students, including the over 300 who have returned to us from charter schools in the past five years, far surpass any that may be available

in any charter school in the Commonwealth,” Latham said.

Sheila O’Neil, a teacher at **Shoemaker Elementary School**, opposes the ballot initiative and said that the funding that goes towards charter schools could be better spent on programming. At **Lynn English High School**, she said, some Advanced Placement (AP) classes have been cut.

“If this passes, I could see schools closing,” she said. “Five years down the line, I could see us with 40 kids in a class.”

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