

CHARTER SCHOOL GETS OK

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State education officials have approved a regional charter school to serve middle and high school students from Chelsea, Everett and Revere, despite opposition from area public school superintendents.

On Tuesday, the state Board of Education voted, 6 to 2, in favor of Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll's recommendation to grant a charter to the Pioneer Charter School of Science, whose mission is to offer a rigorous curriculum, focusing on math, science, and a foundation in the humanities.

Although the original proposal indicated that charter school officials wanted to open the school by this fall, the board approved the charter for the 2007-2008 school year.

The goal of the organizers is to begin with 120 seventh- and eighth-graders and ultimately have a maximum of 360 students in grades 7 to 12.

The mission of Pioneer Charter, as listed in its application, is "to prepare educationally under-resourced students for today's competitive world."

Founding board members included statistics from the state's 2004 spring Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test, listing Chelsea, Everett, and Revere as having a higher-than-average percentage of students in the "needs improvement" or "warning-failing" categories.

"We are happy it got granted," said Fehmi Damkaci, one of the charter school's founding board members. "We believe we put forth a really good application. There's a lot to be done."

The immediate priority, Damkaci said, is to hire a school director and to find a location for the school in Chelsea, Revere, or Everett. Currently, school officials are looking into a city-owned location in Everett, about three locations in Chelsea, and one location in Revere, Damkaci said. Revere Superintendent Paul Dakin, who attended the Board of Education meeting last Tuesday and was allowed to read a statement, said he is disappointed by the board's decision.

Dakin argued that the Pioneer Charter School of Science mirrors the missions of most charter schools, which he called "exclusionary" in their aim of attracting and catering to "an elite audience."

"They're going to be taking involved parents of average and above-average children from us," Dakin said. "They have a high-order mission of high-quality academics, so I see them as exclusionary. I don't see them attracting our students with autism, from our Life Skills school, or from our alternative schools."

Dakin said he is not opposed to charter schools that are "truly an alternative to education," such as the **Phoenix Charter Academy**, which he supported and which is scheduled to open for the 2006-2007 school year. Because that school aims to educate teenage parents who need different school hours, Dakin said he supported its mission. Revere public schools, he said, don't have funding or staff to remain open extra hours.

At the Board of Education meeting, Dakin said he told the members that Pioneer Charter would "end up duplicating services, with extra administrative costs and additional operating costs."

According to state law, the community where a charter school student lives must still pay for that child's estimated per-pupil cost.

"My teachers worked so hard. If these teachers are working this hard, how can I not go in there and say something on our behalf," Dakin said.

"It hurts our programs here. The money goes from us, but I still have to heat the buildings, I still

have to have teachers in the buildings. It's \$8,000 per kid."

As part of an ongoing battle on Beacon Hill, there are two bills being considered in the State House that would change the way charter schools are funded.

Chelsea Superintendent Thomas Kingston said he too "objected strongly" to the charter school. "My fear is this kind of charter school, which merely replicates what's already offered in public schools, threatens to create an underclass of students because they tend to draw the students who are high achievers," Kingston said. "They claim to be fulfilling a needed niche, like math and science, of course, but I think they're creating a kind of boutique school rather than a creative alternative."

Everett Superintendent Frederick Foresteire said he has no opposition to Pioneer Charter, but said he wished there was a requirement in place for new residents moving to the city to first meet with the local public school department before enrolling in a charter school.

"I don't see it as a threat," Foresteire said. "Our top students, they'll do as good or better here than they would at a charter school. I'm not really concerned that our top students will leave because it hasn't been that way in the history of charter schools."

Foresteire said that out of a total of 67 Everett students enrolled in charter schools, 57 of them were in kindergarten.

Damkaci said the charter school organizers will focus on hiring a director in the next couple of months, and then deans of students and academics by fall.

With an enrollment deadline of March 15, 2007, Damkaci said school officials will begin contacting parents at year's end.

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