



**Remarks of Mayor Jon Mitchell
City of New Bedford**

**Joint Committee on Education
Hearing Room A-1, State House, Boston
Tuesday, March 9, 2019**

[remarks as prepared]

Thank you, Chairman Lewis and Chairwoman Peisch, and members of the Committee for this opportunity to appear before you.

I also wish to thank Representative Tony Cabral of New Bedford for his leadership on the legislation being considered today. Representative Cabral recognizes the need for a fresh approach to state education finance policy and I am grateful for his efforts.

I am here to express my strong support for House 418, An Act Relative To Transparency and Accountability in Charter School Finance, because I believe the state's funding approach to charter schools is fundamentally unfair to municipalities, and particularly unfair to cities like New Bedford that have undertaken ambitious reforms of their public schools.

Not only does the current the state funding mechanism perpetuate gross inequities at a time when educational opportunities for our children are becoming more and more uneven in Massachusetts, the current charter school funding law unfairly diverts resources and makes it that much harder for communities that are trying to do the right thing for their schools.

In New Bedford we have been hard at work for more than six years on a top-to-bottom overhaul of our schools. We now have a school system that is clear in its academic goals, manages taxpayer dollars reliably, and has raised the standards for academic instruction. There have been long-needed changes to collective bargaining agreements, a revamped curriculum, performance accountability, and major facilities upgrades.

The results are undeniable. Across an array of metrics, New Bedford schools are once again moving in the right direction. Last month we learned that our high school graduation rate has climbed to its highest level since the state began tracking it; 15 percentage points higher than in 2010.

When the state ended its district monitoring a year and a half ago, it stated explicitly that the New Bedford Public Schools have “made a huge, huge step forward.”

My point is not to laud these achievements. I am here to make the case that New Bedford has made its progress despite—and certainly not because of—the way that Massachusetts finances its charter schools.

New Bedford’s push to improve its schools has been hamstrung by the state’s charter school funding mechanism, and it continues to be.

For six years, New Bedford has struggled to direct scarce resources to its most urgent education priorities, including services for English Learners, student counseling and wrap-around services, curriculum upgrades, and Special Education.

Meanwhile, the net fiscal impact of charter schools over that same time period doubled, rising from a \$7 million net cost when I took office in 2012 to a \$14

million net cost today. A copy of a chart that depicts this growing impact over time is included in my written remarks.

Now consider how much faster and more aggressively we could have pursued our local reform agenda (let alone maintain municipal services) without a 100% cost increase and the burden of finding \$7 million just to cover our charter school obligations.

This must change.

House 418 represents a powerful change in the right direction because it recognizes that school costs are not reduced uniformly when a student leaves a local public school to attend a charter school and that the current system of charter school finance reduces funding for students in local schools.

Here is how House 418 would, and would not, alter current charter school finance policy:

First, the measure would cap the assessment on cities, towns, and regional school districts used to finance charter school tuition payments.

It would not change how tuition payments are calculated for individual charter schools and would not reduce tuition payments.

Second, it would limit the local contribution to charter schools and provide for state payment of the balance, subject to appropriation.

It would not change the statute governing reimbursements.

More specifically, the proposal would amend charter school finance law (section 89 of Chapter 71 of the General Laws) to create a local share and a state share of charter school tuition payments.

The proposal would cap the local share of the basic “per pupil foundation

budget component” at the statewide average Required Local Contribution (RLC) per student. This amount is roughly \$6,600 per pupil based on Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (DESE’s) fiscal 2019 projection.

In the case of New Bedford, House 418 would be a game-changer:

The basic charter school assessment would be reduced substantially for each of the charter schools that local students attend. For example, the assessment would be reduced by about \$5,000 per student attending the Global Learning Charter School, the city’s largest.

The cap on the “above foundation” part of the assessment would not benefit New Bedford this year but could in future years when the reduced basic assessment results in more spending on City public schools and a higher “above foundation” amount.

In total, the measure would reduce the New Bedford assessment amount from \$15 million to \$8.8 million, based on DESE’s preliminary estimate for fiscal 2019. This would be a \$6.2 million reduction.

Again, I would encourage the members of the Committee to just consider the good that could be accomplished in my city, if New Bedford were not struggling to comply with a \$15 million charter school obligation.

I believe the thoughtfully crafted legislation proposed by Representative Cabral and supported by the Massachusetts Municipal Association is the right fix, not just for New Bedford, but for cities and towns throughout Commonwealth.

Thank you.

New Bedford's Charter School Funding Gap 2011-2019

