

PHOTOGRAPH/MATT WEBER



At the Ballot Box, a Test for Bay State Charters

“WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH NEWTON?” That’s the question Richard Whitmire posed about my Massachusetts hometown in early October on the education-focused website *The 74*. His query was provoked by reports of rising opposition in Newton and other affluent Boston suburbs to Question 2, a ballot measure to lift the cap on the number of charter-school seats in many of the state’s urban centers.

With K–12 education policy barely registering as an issue at the presidential level this election cycle, Question 2 has given Massachusetts voters a unique chance to weigh in on the future of school choice in their state. Approval of the measure would allow up to 12 new charter schools to open in Massachusetts each year and would eliminate the state’s cap on the share of each district’s revenue that can be sent to charters. With tens of thousands of students on charter waiting lists and multiple high-quality operators poised to expand, opponents and proponents of Question 2 agree that the stakes are high.

The contest, which has attracted tens of millions of dollars in outside spending on both sides, marks an important moment for the charter movement nationally. Results from the 2016 *Education Next* survey, reported in this issue, show that support for the creation of charter schools has remained steady, with 58 percent of respondents in favor and only 28 percent opposed. But there are also signs of a growing partisan divide on the issue, with Republicans 15 percentage points more likely than Democrats to express support.

Question 2 offers the clearest test to date of whether it is possible to build popular support for robust charter-school growth in a deeply blue state. In Massachusetts, strong authorizing policies and a healthy supply of teacher talent have combined to produce a set of urban charter schools with stellar track records. If support for expansion cannot be won here, it seems hard to imagine success elsewhere.

Whitmire’s concern about skepticism toward Question 2 in the Boston suburbs appears to be well-founded. Polls continue to suggest a close contest on the measure, but opposition has grown in recent weeks. Thanks to the efforts of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, yard signs urging a “No on 2” vote far outnumber those in favor in my neighborhood. Days after Whitmire’s article appeared, the Newton School Committee added its voice to the more than 150 school

committees statewide that have voted to officially oppose Question 2.

One wonders whether the committee members have fully thought through what is at stake. The current cap on charter schools in Massachusetts is binding only in urban districts like Boston, Holyoke, Chelsea, and Lawrence, where a sizable fraction of students already attend charters. The limit has no implications for well-heeled communities like Newton, which, 23 years after the state first permitted the creation of charter schools, has exactly none. Clearly, the charter growth that would result from a “yes” vote would be concentrated in the cities where the charter presence is already strong. In fact, the measure requires that the state board of education give preference to charter applications in districts where student performance falls in the bottom quartile in the state and where parental demand is greatest.

If the urban cap remains in place, however, just where does the committee think the state’s ever-ambitious charter-school operators will turn next? Faced with few prospects for expanding in the cities, some of them will probably look elsewhere. They might even consider a place like Newton, where, despite the school district’s vaunted reputation, tutoring centers like the Russian School of Mathematics, Kumon Learning, and a growing number of science-focused afterschool programs do a thriving business catering to competitive parents disappointed with the district’s offerings in math and science.

Could a charter middle school with high academic expectations and an emphasis on project-based STEM learning find footing in the district? The thought is almost enough to make this Newton resident—the father of two children in its elementary schools—rethink his support for Question 2.

By the time this essay appears in print, Question 2 will be settled. Approval of the measure would be a significant boost for education reform in Massachusetts, while a “no” vote would clearly be a setback. It is unfortunate that voters who have exercised school choice through the housing market are in a position to deny new options to families of lesser means.

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MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
