

NAACP OFFICIAL WILL CHAIR CAMPAIGN AGAINST CHARTER SCHOOL EXPANSION

By Michael P. Norton
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STATE HOUSE, BOSTON, MARCH 15, 2016....With proponents already investing heavily in a ballot campaign to knock down barriers to more charter schools, opponents of that proposal plan to launch their own ballot committee on Wednesday.

Parents, educators, students and others aligned with The Campaign to Save Our Public Schools will gather outside the State House on Wednesday to make the case that adding more charters will harm education in school districts that they say are already losing too much money to public charter schools.

Charter opponents argue that charters are not as accountable to local communities as traditional public schools that are overseen by school committees and claim that the amount of money diverted to charters will rise by \$100 million, to \$500 million, if the ballot question is adopted.

Organizers of Wednesday's press conference say the campaign's launch will be outlined by campaign chair Juan Cofield, president of the New England Area Conference of the NAACP; Lisa Guisbond, executive director of Citizens for Public Schools; Marlana Rose, coordinator for the Boston Education Justice Alliance; and Donna Grady, a kindergarten teacher from Franklin.

Gov. Charlie Baker and other proponents of charter schools have framed the issue as one based in expanding educational opportunities and choices. They say thousands of children wait-listed for entry into public charter schools, often in urban areas with underperforming schools, deserve more choices.

Baker joined 80 Latino leaders last week in East Boston at a press conference to promote charter school expansion. In a March 8 letter to the Legislature, the Latino officials from cities such as Boston, Lawrence and Chelsea said "giving parents the right to choose a quality public school is a matter of social justice."

"In Massachusetts today, we really have two school systems: a world-class system for affluent, mostly white families who live in the suburbs, and another for low-income students of color who live in our cities," the Latino officials wrote.

Both charter proponents and opponents have pledged they'll prevail in a ballot battle. Barring legislative intervention, the campaign is likely to prove divisive and expensive as both sides are locked in on their positions and showing few if any signs of wanting to compromise.

Democrats who control the Massachusetts Legislature and often are on the same policy page have been unable to reach an agreement on a plan to facilitate more charter schools. The House appears amenable to again agreeing to a bill to allow more charters. Senate Democrats rejected a charter expansion bill last session and are working behind the scenes on a bill that they say will address myriad issues pertaining to charter schools, including the concerns of expansion opponents.

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