



State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

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Gina M. Raimondo
Governor

July 13, 2016

TO THE HONORABLE, THE PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE:

I am transmitting to the Secretary of State, with my signature, 2016 – S 3075, Substitute A, as Amended “An Act Relating to Education – Establishment of Charter Public Schools.”

Our parents and families deserve the right to choose the best public school option for their children, and many of the charter schools of this state have provided innovative and high quality options for many students. A strong system of public education requires high-quality schools of all types and sizes to meet the varying needs of our students – traditional, charter, career and technical, etc. Accordingly, I have said repeatedly since my first few months in office that I could not in good faith agree to any legislation that substantially reduced choice in our public school system or made it harder for our high-quality charter schools to expand seats for the thousands of students currently on charter school waiting lists.

I am signing this act because it is a reasonable compromise that addresses the legitimate concerns raised by some municipalities and school districts, but also preserves parent choice. Further, it will not substantially change the state’s ability to continue to authorize high-quality charter schools.

First, this act establishes an additional application requirement for new network charter schools. As defined by the act, a network charter school is a charter organization that seeks to open an elementary and secondary school, or more than one elementary or secondary school, under the same charter. Going forward, as part of the application process for a new network charter school, the application must include a supportive resolution from the town council, or each town council, for which the network intends to accept students.

When making this decision, the act appropriately requires the town council to hold a public hearing to consider the benefits a potential new network charter may bring to their community and balance those benefits against potential impacts the new schools may or may not have on their school district. Notably, the legislation includes a further safeguard ensuring that a town council does not have the ability to exercise a veto over the overall application. Every community who wishes to participate in the network charter school will be allowed to do so without regard to the decisions of another town council.

Fairness dictates that we do not change the rules on our existing network charters. Importantly, this act maintains that all network charter schools in existence as of the effective date of this act will continue to be allowed to apply to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education (“Council”) for expansion without needing to fulfill this new, additional requirement.

Second, this act also allows the Council to consider additional information in the charter application and expansion application processes. Historically, and appropriately, when reviewing applications, the Council has placed substantial weight on the academic, financial, and programmatic potential of charter school applicants. This can and will remain a core tenant of the charter authorization process. Going forward, this act adds that the Council can and should also substantially weigh the fiscal, programmatic, and academic impact a charter school may have on the sending school district and city/town, in addition to the rigorous evaluation process and standards the state already upholds. This will allow Council members to consider the needs of all involved when they make decisions to approve and expand charter schools.

Third, this act clarifies the locally elected officials who are authorized to sign on to a mayoral academy charter school application. As compared to both charter and traditional public schools, mayoral academies are among our highest performing schools in the state, and by law, they serve some of our most economically disadvantaged students. This act maintains that a mayor or elected town administrator continues to have the authority to open new mayoral academies. The act clarifies that where a city or town does not have an elected mayor or town administrator, the city or town council is the locally elected authority that is empowered to agree to participate in the mayoral academy.

The time has come to move beyond the “district versus charter” mentality that has, for too long, dominated our discourse on public education in this state. My hope is that signing this bill will stop the “district versus charter school” conflict and therefore allow us to focus on measures designed to improve all public schools. We can, and must, keep our attention on what is truly important – ensuring that every child in Rhode Island receives a high quality education, regardless of the type of public school he or she attends. That is where I will continue to focus my efforts and, with the signing of this act, I urge educators, districts, and charters to come together to do the same.

Sincerely,



Gina M. Raimondo
Governor