

OPINION: Empowerment Zone Misdirection; Navigating Around Ballot Question #2

By Bruce Ditata

Apparently, the charter school wonks remain undaunted by voters' landslide rebuke of Ballot Question 2 and the attempt to lift the cap on charter schools because they have resorted to a version of a Tom Brady "trick play" known as the flea flicker.

Those still aspiring to the dream of privatizing public education, while avoiding the long wait and heavy lifting of another ballot referendum, hope the misdirection known as Empowerment/Innovation Zones will result in a touchdown pass over the heads of sixty- two percent of the electorate.

The ground game employing the likes of Governor Charlie Baker, Billionaires Boys Club entrepreneurs, including Eli Broad and Michael Bloomberg, tried to bulldoze the referendum with political capital and the weight of their deep pockets.

Having failed in that endeavor to sack traditional public schools, Baker and privatizers like Empower School's Chris Gabrieli have sought and gained the support of willing legislators- Representative Alice Peisch (D) Wellesley and Senator Eric Lesser (D) Longmeadow – to sponsor legislation to expand the Empowerment/Innovation Zones currently employed in the district of Springfield, MA and its series of under performing schools.

So how is the Empowerment/ Innovation Zone of Springfield doing?

According to the estimable researcher/ educational blogger

Jennifer Berkshire, who has traveled across the nation, tracking down “education reformers” like Gabrieli, the Springfield experiment is not moving the ball downfield.

Berkshire’s recent blog asked, “...Is the Empowerment Zone actually doing the thing that it was zoned to do: rapidly accelerate achievement, meaning test scores, at the EZ’s eight schools?”

And the surprising answer was “... There has been no rapid acceleration.” When Governor Baker cited “positive results” in his State of the State address he was venturing into the land of, if not alternative facts, extremely wishful thinking.

Also, as Gabrieli conceded in a letter he sent to “interested parties,” none of our schools reached our two-year goals...in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math.”

“Then there are the numbers that Gabrieli and Team EZ aren’t talking about at all: the eye-popping suspension numbers at the Empowerment Zone schools.”

Four of the eight EZ schools in Springfield- all middle schools- the John F. Kennedy (30.2%), John J. Duggan (25.7%), Van Sickle (31%), and Chestnut North (26.5%) have cracked the top ten of ALL schools in the Commonwealth, measuring the largest number of students suspended out of school.

Again, in culling through the statistics, according to the research done by Berkshire, “...it gets even worse when you dig down further and look at who is getting suspended. The Empowerment Zones schools (in Springfield) are suspending a higher percentage of students with disabilities and African American boys than virtually any other school in the state.”

Yet, Baker said in his State of the State message, “ These zones allow educators to make changes necessary to provide a better learning environment.”

Rep. Peisch, in an article published recently and written by Michael Jonas in Commonwealth Magazine, maintained that the proposed House legislation allows EZ, "to form clusters that operate independently of the district system and enjoy... flexibility..."

Her Senate colleague, Lesser, in the same article, added that EZ will, "move the needle beyond the charter school debate."

In the troika that comprises politicians, privatizers and media, the Boston Globe, has continued to do its part in the misdirection "trick play" represented by the Empowerment/Innovation Zone.

Columnist Scot Lehigh couldn't resist bashing his favorite whipping post- teachers unions- in a recent op-ed, that favored, "freeing (schools) from district directives and loosening some provisions of the districts' teachers' contracts."

Echoing Lehigh's vitriol in its Globe editorial, the EZ, "should prove less controversial than an increase in the number of charter schools, which have drawn the implacable opposition of the teachers unions, an influential Democratic constituency group."

So much for the will of the people who sacked the November 8 Ballot Question, burying the pro charter group 62-38%.

All the billionaires money and all the billionaires men failed to put the referendum question together again.

But these charter types continue to show a remarkable resilience and there's always a new version of the flea flicker.

Sincerely yours:
Bruce C. Ditata