

Politicians Spending Capital on Questionable Innovation/Empowerment Zones

By Bruce Ditata

Fiscally conservative Massachusetts Governor, Charlie Baker, finds himself on another shopping spree, spending his political capital, promoting the questionable Empowerment Zone model to the legislature.

His efforts at education "reform" are reminiscent of the ill-fated, charter school cap lift back in 2016.

Who could EVER forget Baker, unabashedly, shilling for the equally questionable charter school genre, going door to door, en route to its defeat by a 62-38% margin.

But Baker and his charter school cronies continue to be a resilient group, along with their legislative allies, in an attempt to resurrect via House Bill 304 an old canard-creating "innovation partnership zones," an effort to bypass voter rejection of tired, charter school claims of being "inclusive, innovative and laboratories of achievement."

The local riff on Gov. Baker's legislative initiative is that New Bedford mayor, Jon Mitchell, is in favor and teachers union president, Lou St. John, is against it.

"It was extremely disturbing to hear Mayor Jon Mitchell portray teachers as roadblocks when it comes to making changes in our schools for the benefit of students. Far from obstructing change at the middle schools, teachers instead were instrumental in devising plans now in place to address the needs of students attending those schools. And each school has a plan unique to its needs," said St. John in a recent

Facebook post.

St. John added a poignant, incisive question as well, that cuts through much of the fluffer nutter sandwich charter school trolls are attempting to serve.

“When it comes to designing education plans, who better to involve than educators?”

Like his gubernatorial cohort, Baker, the mayor of New Bedford, Mitchell, believes a better choice to run the city schools are private contractors like Chris Gabrieli in the city of Springfield, managing the so-called Empowerment Zones.



In a news article appearing in Southcoast Today on September 5 by Jennette Barnes, she wrote “Mayor Jon Mitchell blamed the city’s inability to create a so-called “innovation zone” at the middle schools squarely on the teachers’ union in testimony before the Joint Committee on Education.

“At a hearing in Boston, he spoke in favor of a bill that would make it easier for a school district to establish an innovation zone for Level 3 schools despite union objections. Mitchell said the three middle schools urgently needed to improve, but because none had sunk to Level 4 status, the district could not force the issue last year when it was

exploring a zone.”

“In the absence of the statutory leverage that comes with the Level 4 designation, the teacher’s union could simply say no,” Mitchell said in prepared remarks. “And that’s exactly what it did.”

Had House bill No. 304 been law, “we wouldn’t have had to accept no for an answer,” he said.

What is known about the experiment in Empowerment/Innovation Zone in Springfield is that the projection of marked achievement gains in the district has not materialized in the eight under-performing schools there.

What is, also, known is that 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.

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

In a Boston Herald article by Kathleen McKiernan on September 13, she wrote that “ Billy Pitman, Baker’s spokesperson said the Governor backs, “empowerment zones appropriate as an effective tool for schools, administrators and teachers to create the best learning environment for their students.”

State Education Commissioner, James Peyser, added, “ ... school districts need the same authority and autonomy that charter schools have to compete effectively... We’re trying to build what works... empowering schools works.”

St. John’s reaction to the concept of what the governor, New Bedford’s mayor, the education commissioner and members of the

legislature, pushing empowerment zone takeovers?

“Welcome to the privatizing of our public schools. Even though voters overwhelmingly rejected an expansion of charter schools at the polls last year, those who want to restrict teachers’ autonomy and allow private interests to operate public schools think they have found a new means of accomplishing that.”

In this latest attempt to bypass the will of the electorate with a law authorizing Innovation Partnership Zones- just another wolf in charter school clothing- failure could further erode Baker’s image as a candidate of the people.