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Charter requests total 21

By **James Vaznis**, Globe Staff | Jul 27, 2012 01:57 AM

Massachusetts education officials have received proposals to open four new independent charter schools in Boston and 17 others elsewhere, one of the highest numbers in recent years, as operators rush to snatch up a shrinking number of available seats, officials announced Thursday.

The competition to open new charter schools in Boston will be stiff. The four proposals, three pitched by existing charter schools, collectively seek to serve more than 1,300 students. That number could surge even higher next week, as three other popular charter schools in Boston are planning to file separate requests to expand their current enrollments, which could push the overall requests for seats to more than 1,800.

Yet the state may only have roughly 1,000 seats to give out in Boston, under a state law that restricts the number of students who can attend charter schools. Other cities — such as Lowell, New Bedford, and Springfield — are nearing their limits as well, fueling a drive by charter school supporters to change state law.

Mitchell Chester, the state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, said he was pleased that so many charter schools with strong academic track records are seeking to replicate.

“I’m always heartened by the interest of high-quality providers to take on schools in communities where kids are not currently succeeding,” Chester said.

But he said it is premature to raise the limits on charter school growth, noting that the state’s methodical approach to opening new charter schools has resulted in a prevalence of high-performing schools.

The 21 applications for independently run charter schools is the highest number since the 38 filed in

2010, when a change in state law allowed for double the number of students in school districts with the lowest test scores who could attend charter schools. Ultimately, 13 requests were approved.

The state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approves charter school applications each year in February, based on Chester's recommendations.

Boston charter schools seeking to open additional campuses are Edward Brooke, MATCH, and City on a Hill, which is also pursuing a school in New Bedford. There is also a proposal for a Heights Academy Charter School, an elementary school.

Erica Brown, executive director of City on a Hill, said she hopes her school will have an edge because their proposals are among only a few specifically for new high schools. But she said she would be equally pleased if her colleagues at other schools prevailed.

"The truth of it is, the more great seats for kids, everyone wins," Brown said. "We are in it for the kids. We are not a corporate entity that's in it trying to win."

The Massachusetts Public Charter School Association is planning to have legislation filed on Beacon Hill next year to raise the cap on charter schools.

Created under the 1993 Education Reform Act, the approximately 60 independently run charter schools across the state are supposed to provide innovative educational alternatives to traditional public schools because they operate with fewer restrictions and almost always employ nonunion teachers.

Many charter schools have among the best MCAS scores in the state, but others perform below school district averages, and the state has closed a few.

Charter schools have been a lightning rod, primarily because traditional school systems often oppose the way the state funds them. Students who attend a charter school take with them thousands of dollars in state aid from their school system. Boston lost about \$60 million last year to charter schools, even after receiving some state reimbursements.

Those financial reasons prompted the state to limit charter school enrollment. The state also allows school districts to open their own charter schools with state approval.

The Boston School Department operates five "in-district" charter schools and submitted a request to the state this week to create another one. Under that proposal, Boston is seeking to convert a low-performing school into a charter school that would be run by the nonprofit group Unlocking

Potential. The school has not yet been identified.

The partnership is similar to one the school system formed with the organization to convert a struggling South Boston middle school into UP Academy.

The state’s effort to expand charter schools garnered a nod from two high-profile Boston visitors Tuesday: the former president and first lady, George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, who visited the Edward Brooke Charter School in South Boston to promote the education agenda at the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

During their visit, they greeted teachers in a training session and students in summer school. In one classroom, the former president paused at Christopher Velasquez’s desk so he could inspect the fifth- grader’s attempt to add and subtract fractions. Putting on a pair of glasses, Bush leaned over the boy’s right shoulder and said, “Very strong. This guy must be a math whiz.”

Laura Bush asked the students what their goals were, and Geraldine Louis quickly chimed in, “To get in a good college.”

The Bushes held a round-table discussion with leaders of charter schools, business, and higher education on improving the quality of principals, a key initiative of the Bush Center.

Jon Clark — a codirector of Edward Brooke, which routinely scores high on state exams — recognizes that competition will be tight as the Brooke seeks to open its fourth charter school in Boston. “It speaks to the high quality of the Boston charter school sector,” he said.

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