

Charter school advocate picked for education chief



HANDOUT

James A. Peyser

By Michael Levenson | GLOBE STAFF DECEMBER 23, 2014

Governor-elect Charlie Baker on Tuesday named James A. Peyser — a close confidant, fellow Weld administration veteran, and nationally known charter school advocate — to be the state’s top education official.

As a former education adviser to governors William F. Weld, Jane Swift, and Mitt Romney, and as a former chairman of the state Board of Education, Peyser has been credited with, and criticized for, helping to launch the MCAS test and promote the expansion of charter schools in Massachusetts.

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Most recently, he has served as a managing director of NewSchools Venture Fund, a nonprofit organization that awards grants to charter school operators and other “education entrepreneurs.”

As secretary of education, Peyser will have a wide-ranging role in helping to oversee education policy at all levels, from prekindergarten to college.

He takes over at a time of uncertainty, as the state phases out the MCAS test, moves to a new curriculum standard, and faces a backlash from an increasingly vocal movement of parents and teachers opposed to what they call overtesting in the schools.

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Peyser played key role in

charter, MCAS debates

James A. Peyser has been a high-ranking education official under four Republican governors in Massachusetts.

In a brief interview Tuesday, he said he wants to help close the persistent achievement gap between poor and higher-income students, strengthen vocational and technical education, and make college more affordable.

“We need to do whatever we can to do create great schools and one of the ways, though not the only way,” is through charter schools, Peyser said.

Those who know Peyser, 58, describe him as low key and cerebral, characteristics that belie his longtime involvement in the often caustic debates over standardized testing and charter schools, which are taxpayer-funded but operate outside of local control and tend not to be unionized.

“I like the way Jim approaches issues — not as an ideologue, but as a thoughtful reformer,” said Paul S. Reville, who was education secretary under Governor Deval Patrick from 2008 to 2013 and has known Peyser for years. “He has his convictions, but he’s a listener and a doer.”

A veteran figure from the conservative policy establishment, Peyser has close ties to Baker, having served most recently as head of the governor-elect’s transition team.

Peyser said he has known Baker for 33 years, since they were introduced by Peyser’s wife, Mindy D’Arbeloff, a longtime Baker family friend who was recently named to a position in the Baker administration leading the community relations and constituent services offices.

Peyser and Baker also served together on the Board of Education. Peyser was chairman of the board from 1999 until 2005; Baker was a board member from 1999 to 2003.

“I saw firsthand Jim’s experience and leadership improving public education throughout his career and during our time together on the state Board of Education,” Baker said in a statement. “I look forward to the innovation and devotion Jim will bring to our administration as we work to give our children and their parents a greater voice in their education.”

Abigail Thernstrom, who served on the board with Peyser, called it a “thrilling appointment, but not unexpected.”

“He and Charlie are very old friends,” she said.

She said she persuaded the late Paul Cellucci, the former governor, to appoint Peyser chairman of the Board of Education over Boston University president John Silber, because she felt Peyser knew more about elementary and secondary education and was more of a consensus-builder than the famously irascible Silber.

Peyser “will be very careful and very judicious,” Thernstrom said. “He doesn’t alienate people.”

Peyser grew up in Westchester County, N.Y. His father, Peter, was the mayor of Irvington, and a Republican member of Congress from 1971 to 1977 before he switched parties and was elected as a Democratic member of Congress from 1979 to 1983.

James Peyser, a graduate of Colgate University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, said he first became interested in education while serving as a tutor at the now-defunct Boston High School in the 1980s.

From 1993 to 2001, he was executive director of the Pioneer Institute, a conservative think tank that helped persuade Massachusetts policy makers to embrace charter schools. He now serves on the boards of three charter school organizations and on the board of the National Association of Charter School Authorizers.

As education secretary, Peyser will oversee the state’s transition to the Common Core, a contentious set of education standards recently adopted in Massachusetts, and a new online testing system, known as PARCC, that is slated to replace the MCAS.

Peyser will also help Baker fulfill his vow to allow at least 50 more charter schools over the next four years, beyond the 80 operating in Massachusetts. That could set up a clash with the Democrat-led Legislature, which has resisted recent attempts to allow more charters.

Peyser may also spar with teachers' unions, which have denounced charter schools and standardized testing as attempts to privatize public schools. Responding to Peyser's appointment, Barbara Madeloni, the president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, said: "Vigorous disagreement should be welcome in the debate over public education."

"Our goal is to make sure that Jim Peyser — and other education officials who are appointed to join the new administration — will respond to the views of educators, parents, and communities concerning all policy decisions they make," she said.

In the interview, Peyser pointed to Lawrence as one potential model to improve urban schools.

The state took over that city's schools three years ago and MCAS scores have risen there, albeit slowly. The changes in Lawrence have included partnerships with charter school operators and other education nonprofits, slashing the size of central offices, letting go of half the school principals and 10 percent of the teaching force, and granting schools greater freedom to choose their academic programs.

Charlie Baker's cabinet appointments

Governor-elect Charlie Baker has begun appointing members of his administration. **Click the boxes** to learn more about the positions that have been filled and which ones are still open.

POSITIONS APPOINTED

NOT YET APPOINTED

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