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School-choice advocates target portrait of 19th-century governor

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Governor Baker, take down that portrait.

That's the message from the right-leaning Pioneer Institute, which is on a quixotic quest to get the official portrait of 19th-century Massachusetts Know-Nothing Governor Henry Gardner removed from its prominent place on a wall just outside the House of Representatives' chamber and shuttled off to a more obscure location in the State House.

Their gripe: Gardner's nativist Know-Nothings were behind an anti-Catholic amendment to the state Constitution that barred public dollars from going to schools run by "any religious sect."

That amendment was superseded by another in 1917 that broadened the ban to all sorts of charitable institutions that aren't under public control — leveling the playing field or compounding the injury, depending on your perspective.

There is, of course, a separation-of-church-and-state argument to be made for the constitutional provisions, whatever their origins.

But for Pioneer, they are an unjust bar on vouchers for parochial education.

"The amendment was conceived in bigotry, in a pretty dark time in the history of the Commonwealth," said Jamie Gass, director of the Center for School Reform at Pioneer. "Today, that amendment and the subsequent amendment really serve as a barrier to school choice."

Of course, highlighting the ugly history probably helps the cause. And Pioneer will do just that with a forum at the State House Monday morning.

Among the panelists: an analyst from the libertarian Cato Institute, a fellow from the conservative American Enterprise Institute, and a prominent local supporter of Catholic causes, former Boston Mayor Ray Flynn.