

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL BOARD

Recent Washington Post coverage (editorial "Charters: Unsettled Issues", Thursday, May 21, and Close to Home letter by General Julius Becton "The Charter School Parade," Sunday, May 17) raise important questions about the emergence of charter schools in the District and their impact on our community. These questions deserve a balanced response.

Charter schools are *public* schools that operate in an autonomous manner, relatively free of the constraints frequently imposed by the centralized administrative bureaucracy. Enrollment is open to all District children, at no charge. Charter schools represent an important reform of public education that will lead to expanded educational opportunities and academic excellence for the benefit of citizens of the District.

Charter schools in the District must compete in a highly structured and rigorous application and review process to obtain their charter. The Public Charter School Board's recent competition, which included the involvement of expert review panels, resulted in only one-third of the applicants receiving charter approval.

Who, then, is the Public Charter School Board? Our Board was created by Congress. Its members were nominated by the U.S. Secretary of Education and appointed by the Mayor. These members bring a variety of skills to the table that are relevant to the educational, operational, facilities management, and business aspects of approving and monitoring charter schools. Our Board has conducted ten public hearings or information sessions and several other outreach programs since its inception in February 1997.

In its first year of operations, the D.C. Public Charter School Board has made major strides to help address chronically underserved educational needs in this city. The ten schools chartered by our Board include:

- Maya Angelou Public Charter High School- a school that offers court-involved youth hands-on job training opportunities and tutoring;
- Associates for Renewal in Education- a school specially tailored to meeting the educational needs of children that have been involved in the juvenile justice system;
- Cesar Chavez Public Policy High School- a multicultural leadership institute that benefits from strong community backing;
- Friendship Public Charter School- a collaborative effort sponsored by Friendship House, one of the city's oldest and most respected community service organizations, and the nationally-known Edison Project;
- Hospitality Public Charter High School- a school dedicated to producing skilled graduates for employment in the region's burgeoning hotel, restaurant and tourism industry;
- Robert Louis Johnson Academy- a partnership that couples parents and community leaders in the Marshall Heights neighborhood with Advantage Schools, Inc., an experienced school management firm;

- Rosario International Public Charter School- an institution that addresses the needs of drop-outs pursuing a high school equivalency degree, as well as training in literacy, English, and citizenship targeted to the city's Hispanic and Asian immigrant population;
- School for Arts In Learning ("SAIL")- an arts-infused program for young children with learning disabilities;
- The SEED Foundation- a residential college preparatory program targeted to at-risk children whose current residential settings are disruptive to their education; and
- Washington Mathematics Science Technology High School- a conversion to charter status requested by the teachers of the highly successful Ballou High School program.

In large part, these programs will fill critical gaps that are simply not being addressed by the city's current school system.

Under existing law, the Public Charter School Board and the elected Board of Education (as a chartering authority) operate independent of one another and of the Emergency Board of Trustees. This does not mean that our Board is not accountable; we are required by law to report to the Mayor, the City Council, the Secretary of Education and Congress. Further, the Public Charter School Board does not engage in competition with the elected School Board. We have consistently endeavored - in the interest of the children - to function in a highly cooperative manner with both the Trustees and the Board of Education.

Regarding some common misperceptions about charter schools and the chartering process:

- The budget threat allegedly posed by funding charter schools is overstated. Initial indications are that total charter school funding for school year 1998-99 will be approximately \$25 million - a fraction of the public schools budget; indeed, a fraction of the public schools' recent administrative cost budget overrun.
- The per pupil funding formula approved by the D.C. City Council for charter schools is the same as - *not* more favorable than - that used by the school system. Conversely, charter schools must use these funds to pay for significant costs that the traditional schools are not required to fund with their per pupil allocations, including facilities rental costs and retirement system payments.
- The Public Charter School Board does not solicit applications from existing public schools, or for that matter, from any individuals or institutions. The recent conversion of Ballou Senior High School's Math, Science and Technology Academy was self-initiated.
- Suggestions that "certain entrepreneurs" will feed at the charter school trough do a disservice to the many dedicated professionals that are making significant efforts to improve educational opportunities for students in the District. While two of the ten

schools our Board has chartered represent alliances between community organizations and private management firms, these teams are establishing schools in extraordinarily challenging educational environments. This is no get-rich-quick scheme.

- As to standards for charter school accountability, all schools chartered by our Board are required by law to achieve accreditation - a status which few of the city's public schools have accomplished. Further, all charter schools will be subject to *at least* the minimum standards established for the public schools, including the Stanford 9 testing regimen. Our Board is developing an accountability and monitoring program that we believe has the potential to serve as a national best-practice standard for charter schools.

Alarms are being sounded about a perceived lack of accountability by charter schools. It is precisely such a lack of accountability within the public school system that has served as the impetus for the charter school movement in this city. Let's all rally behind our new public charter schools.

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(The authors are the Chair and Vice Chair, respectively, of the D.C. Public Charter School Board.)